

FROM
HATE TO
HALLOWS



REFRAMING
BLACK CHURCH ARSON

Todne Thomas

FROM HATE TO HALLOWS



BUY

F R O M

H A T E T O

H A L L O W S



R E F R A M I N G

B L A C K

C H U R C H

A R S O N

DUKE

Todne Thomas

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This book is dedicated to my mother,
PASTOR DORIS BREWSTER THOMAS;

my recently departed brother,
TIMOTHY MAURICE THOMAS;

my East Tennessee matriline;

the members of the College Hill Seventh-Day
Adventist Church;

and to the following, God's grace be upon them:

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Introduction

THE BURNED BLACK CHURCH AND MATRIFOCAI METHODOLOGY

The first time I drove up the steep hill to attend the predominantly Black College Hill Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, was on June 25, 2016. I realized in retrospect that I also engaged in another first that day: attending a Sabbath-day service on a Saturday morning. I walked inside ten minutes before the start of the 11 a.m. worship service, in time to hear a white woman elder teach about the importance of sharing your testimony as a tool for evangelism. The tall windows that bathed the sanctuary space in noonday light also offered a stunning hilltop view of downtown Knoxville and of the stream of cars that drove by on Western Avenue located at the back side of the church. The sanctuary itself had about twenty pews on each side, and at the beginning of the service about twenty-five members were present, the overwhelming majority of whom were Black (African and African American). An Asian American member and three white congregants (two men and one woman) were present. As the liturgy unfolded, more members trickled in.

So much happened during that service. It began with a mellow organ interlude and a congregational hymn. A teenager with an African accent read scripture, and the pastor opened the service with prayer. Two second-generation Kenyan boys played a hymn as a piano duet with practiced precision, and a young Black woman with dreadlocks gave me goosebumps by singing "To God Be the Glory." A children's message and offering, a special piano solo, and the church-wide offering followed. Another scripture was read. The passage was taken from Revelation, the text from which the church's pastor would preach that day. Lasting a little less than an hour, the sermon discussed the significance of

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prophecy and some of the thick symbolism present in the book. The message reminded believers of the coming of Christ, the imperative to make ready for Christ's coming by following Christian truths, and the need to be a witness, helping to bring people to Christ. Using his "sanctified imagination," Pastor Geoffrey Lang set the scene for a meeting of the biblical figures Stephen and Saul—a martyred Christian and a Christian persecutor—who would meet each other at the throne of God.¹ This future encounter between the oppressed and oppressor reminded listeners of the reckonings that would take place at the end of the world, reckonings that beckoned congregants to be accountable for their actions in the here and now. This sermon was also relevant for those who had weathered a church burning and the arsonists who perpetrated them. It suggested the inevitability of coming face-to-face with those one has harmed and what one has done, in the world to come if not in this one.

Yet I was most taken by another form of communal crafting, which took place after the service. In the fellowship hall, after exchanging greetings, I sat and listened to the pastor introduce the upcoming series of Bible boot camp sessions, set to commence the following Wednesday. As he talked about how to witness, recruit, and teach new Christians, a group of young women (ranging in age from the late teens to mid-twenties) gathered around a young woman and helped her to undo her braids. Talking quietly and handling her hair gently, the group of women made quick work of a task that would have taken her hours to complete alone. There was something so beautiful in watching women pitch in to help her with the task, to do together what she could not easily or quickly have done alone, to repurpose a fellowship space to conduct a task associated with the "domestic sphere." This very intimate task of collectively handling hair stayed with me as a demonstration of how Black congregations are made, outside the spatial confines of the sanctuary, and beyond settings of public worship.

This scene that I was so privileged to witness is but one example of all that is threatened by the burning of Black churches.

A little over one year prior to this, on June 22, 2015, the College Hill Seventh-Day Adventist Church (CHSDAC) was burned. Someone left bales of hay in front of the church and set them ablaze. While the church building suffered minor damage, a side door and surrounding wing of the church were affected by fire and smoke. And the church van was set on fire. The local police classified the burning as an act of vandalism, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigated the arson in

relation to a number of Black church burnings and fires that occurred in the summer of 2015 in places like Macon, Georgia; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Warrentonville, South Carolina. It was a hot summer, indeed. In fact, the CHSDAC arson occurred a mere five days after Dylann Roof murdered nine Black congregants in the Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina. No suspect was ever apprehended for this attack on College Hill's house of worship and community, a lacuna prompting community members to craft their own understandings of this arson. This prompts us to ask: What is at stake in their deliberations? What is revealed through this congregation's search for meaning? What can the burning of a single church illuminate about the workings of religion, race, and place in the contemporary United States?

The central claim organizing this book is this: The CHSDAC arson as it emerged in Knoxville, Tennessee, is more than a brick-and-mortar occurrence or a bracketed event that should be narrated chronologically, from beginning to middle to end. Instead, informed by research I conducted between 2016 and 2022, I argue that the arson is an ongoing interpretive phenomenon, one that transcends the event of the burning. My ethnographic research reveals and plumbs four *emic* explanations for the fire, and I take up each of these here. The first is white supremacist terrorism; the second, the intramural figure of the Black arsonist; the third, gentrification and urban displacement; and the fourth, the social degeneration that Adventist eschatology anticipates. The book also suggests another public interpretive space by which Black church arson is contemplated and debated: the museum.

Throughout, I investigate the individual and collective processes of interpretation, explanation, and narration that emerge in the wake of this unattributed arson. The study of Black church arson, particularly as narrated by Black church congregants and community members, entails a broader study of contemporary religious, racial, and spatial processes in the United States. To regard it in this way enables a more comprehensive landscape of local community dynamics to emerge, revealing connections between occurrences of anti-Black violence across space and time, debated in the pews and on the streets. All this offers a picture of the United States built upon the objectifications of racial and religious difference, modalities of blame and denial, and an ongoing search for meaning. The burned Black church is an icon, and it has its own story of America to tell.

Paper Hearts: Black Church Nurturance Threatened by Arson

While the physical edifice owned by a Black congregation might seem to be the most imperiled target of a Black church burning, my ethnographic research has highlighted the threats arson poses to the communal life that is connected to these sanctuaries. Since the rise of the independent Black church movement, these congregations have been centers for Black autonomy and self-determination, sites of Black property ownership and maintenance, and also the primary loci for Black therapeutic possibilities (Gilkes 1980). The CHSDAC epitomizes these characteristics. Many CHSDAC members spoke with great pride about how they and their family members worked to build the church on the hill into a fount of care—spiritual and physical. During my fieldwork, I witnessed the operation of the care and therapeutic spaces mediated by community life when I volunteered as a teacher’s assistant for Vacation Bible School (VBS) in the summer of 2019. One evening, I attended a VBS prayer session at which the teacher, a trim Kenyan church deaconess with a calm demeanor, taught a lesson about “following the leader.” Then, each child received a paper heart from the teacher. On it, there were instructions to write the name of at least one person for whom they wanted to pray. The red hearts were then taped to a wooden cross in the little classroom to be prayed over later by CHSDAC members. Two children (who looked like siblings) asked if they could finish the project at home. “Why not do it here while you have the time?” I replied. One child asked for another heart because one side of her heart had writing on it. It read, “You’re amazing just the way you are.” I gave her a blank heart so she could complete the task. “How do you spell *grandaddy*?” asked one girl. Once hesitant, she’d now found a new investment in the project. After the teacher taped the hearts to the cross, the children played a game of follow the leader for the remainder of the time. A paper heart with a written affirmation, an invitation to pray for a grandfather, the promise of future prayer, a space of play, an extension of care and nurturance—all this was part of this brief interaction.

The burning of CHSDAC endangered aspects of collective life like this. Black church arsons and other forms of anti-Black religious violence, then, do not just target buildings: They also target processes of Black Christian agency and rehumanization.

The history of Black church arson is too voluminous to be summarized in this study. Nonetheless, chapter 1 discusses a few incidents of arson across historical stages to illustrate its integration into the US religious, racial, and political landscapes both epochally and culturally. This includes discussions of church burnings that occurred during race riots like the Memphis Massacre of 1866, the 16th Street Baptist Church burning during the civil rights movement, a rash of arsons that occurred in the 1990s, and contemporary burnings like the CHSDAC arson, which took place in the wake of the 2015 Emanuel AME shooting. The recurring nature of this fiery terrorism waged against Black congregations across space and time illumines both the willful persistence of Black communities and the obstinate racism of those who benefit from foundational structures of anti-Blackness in the United States. What frameworks can help us better understand contemporary occurrences of Black church arson? And, perhaps most importantly, what stories about arson and the place of the church in community life are still waiting to be told?

Black Church Arson as Interpretive Phenomenon

In the contemporary US public sphere, Black church arsons are commonly depicted in relation to hate crime jurisprudence. But hate crime designations for Black church arsons are rare. Arsons destroy material evidence that can signpost bias-related motives, and ascribing bias-related intent without such material markers is difficult. Hate crime designations are also contingent upon local, state, and federal precedents, the broad discretionary power given to police in hate crime designations, and the negative impact on cities' reputations of reporting such hate crimes (Bell 2002). Thus, the legal significance of church arson is often adjudicated by political stakeholders outside the community.

Popular, white-dominated public imaginaries depict Black church burnings as an aberration to a tolerant US multicultural present, a relic of white supremacist violence. According to race scholar Matthew Houdek (2018), public rhetoric that frames Black church arsons as episodic frequently dismisses racialized violence, disarticulates violent events from social structures, and locates the anti-Black racism of Black church burning far afield from white liberal realities. Black church arsons are thus considered accidental and unfortunate, but also an

inaccurate reflection of US racial inequality. Public accounts of Black church arson in relation to anti-Black racial and religious bias or liberal multicultural aspirations typically do not investigate critically why Black church arsons are a feature of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century US society (Houdek 2018).

Government and media representatives have often cast in conspiratorial terms the perspectives of Black congregants and community members who have navigated Black church burnings. In the 1990s, federal investigators and local government officials regarded with suspicion African Americans' perspectives on how arsons affected their communities. They dismissed as ungrounded machinations Black clergy's, laity's, and residents' efforts to connect local arsons to possible collective and premeditated white supremacist action and anti-Black structural inequality (Jackson 1997). Moreover, white conservatives framed Black church arsons as fraudulent attempts to collect insurance money or to generate a fake crisis that would propel a Democratic presidential election (Strain 2008). No wonder that Black congregants' and community members' narratives of their experiences with arson in relation to the landscape of their lived experiences have often been muted.

From Hate to Hallows reverses such habitual responses by centering the experiences and perspectives of Black congregants and residents. In focusing on the CHSDAC arson—a Black church burning that was never attributed to an arsonist—this ethnography is built around a deep, sustained listening to local voices. Rather than relying on an explanatory framework dictated by the norms of bias-related crime or the racial erasures and polarities of normatized public-sphere discourse, I give preference to Black meaning-making. My work is structured around local frames, which Erving Goffman defines as “definitions of a situation . . . built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them” (1986, 10–11). What results is a complete reframing of Black church arson.

Instead of the equally limiting and limited authenticating frameworks of hate crime law, my account uncovers emic burdens of proof and accounts of harm by the people who have been wronged. Even as my investigation is grounded in the CHSDAC context, this book sees past the disarticulating frameworks that portray Black church burnings as singular and sporadic exceptions in an otherwise innocent nation. Through such reframing, I transform Black church arson from being considered as an episodic phenomenon to an iterative narrative portal

that presents local *and* societal perspectives about racial, religious, and spatial processes. I foreground Black church arson as central to the American story and position African Americans as apt narrators of the constitutive and obliterative force of the burning and the articulating forces of anti-Black racism, intraracial and sectarian friction, urban transition, and artistic deliberations that accompany arson.

Theoretical Influences

This project distills theoretical insights from anthropology, African American studies, and religious studies about the materiality of religious violence and representation. Violence, according to American religious historian Jon Pahl (2010), is all too often associated with physical events, to the exclusion of other, equally potent transgressions. By using a maximalist definition of violence that combines religious and verbal violence with a cultural-linguistic approach to religion, Pahl defines religious violence as the “condens[ation] and displace[ment]” of “material desires into transcendent authority across institutional sites, particularly in relation to collective identities and practices in association with nation and markets” (34). Pahl’s definition illuminates the entanglements of American religion with imperial and economic projects (both of which are often fueled by racial animus). Such work makes room for the material (e.g., racial, economic, physical/spatial) as well as the transcendent (e.g., theology, hallowed imaginations of space, and eschatology) framings of church arson that CHSDAC members and Knoxvilleans proposed. My book reveals Black church congregants and community members who do not accept the objectifying narratives that fuel the anti-Black violence of church arson. They do not tolerate misrepresentations quietly. After all, Black churches have hosted fiery rebukes of white supremacist Christianity and acted as renarration centers for Black people navigating the limiting structures of racism. As CHSDAC children sing every week during the Sabbath-day children’s message, “I am a promise with a capital P / I am a great big bundle of potentiality.” The doors of the church are open; so, too, frameworks for Black flourishing.

The burning of CHSDAC illuminates the intermeshing of religious violence and neoliberal dispossession. A look at neighborhood spatial processes reveals that events like the CHSDAC arson are conditioned by modes of accumulation by dispossession that themselves depend

on privatization, government deregulation, and financialization (Harvey 2007, 167). In this, I am particularly influenced by the sociologist Randolph Hohle's argument that neoliberalism, as it emerged in the US South, is a racial (and, I would add, a moral) phenomenon. The rationale for privatization, according to Hohle (2015), resulted from a racial association of African Americans with the public sphere following the civil rights movement. I propose that racial and neoliberal demoralizations of public assistance, as well as the operation of the Black church as a quasi-public institution, have motivated materially inflected anti-Black affects, misrepresentations, and violence toward Black congregations since the 1990s. So too, have polarizations of wealth, increased competition for resources, and the economization of nonmarket spheres of life germane to neoliberalism.

I also build upon scholarly investigations of semiotics and representational economies, like those conducted by Charles Long (1999), Webb Keane (2003), and J. Lorand Matory (2018), investigations that draw our attention to which voices and perspectives are centered or marginalized, are granted jurisdiction, or are dismissed as conspiratorial. Such work also trains our attention to the reality that the racial and hegemonic volumizing and muting of voices and the systems of representation in which they are located have material implications for Black religious agents as practitioners and speakers. And as J. Lorand Matory (2018) demonstrates in his study of Marxist and Freudian framings of the African fetish, the converse is also true. Communities' relationships to capital shape their positioning within representational economies. Material and economic haves and have-nots are often co-occurring constituencies.

While Long (1999), Keane (2003), and Matory (2018) tend to emphasize historical content in their theoretical analyses, the study of a local and contemporary Black church arson is a reflection of a particular "hermeneutical situation" that is America (Long 1999, 141). This means that the study of the representations of Black church arson takes place in a political and social context in which certain communities navigating arsons may receive public and ecumenical support (and others do not). Thus, the study of church arson and its narration is a study not only of the material bases of violence but also of representation.

Finally, this project builds upon a contemporary methodological moment in critical Black studies in which the anti-Black "epistemic violence" of social scientific representations and their material implications take center stage (Sharpe 2016, 13). By *epistemic violence*, I mean

the modes of silencing produced by dominant knowledge systems that marginalize the perspectives of minoritized groups. When paired with the representational structures of anti-Blackness, this creates a testimonial inequality in public receptions and interpretations of Black story. Central to this project is a concern with juridical, media, white supremacist, and religious perceptions of Black congregant accounts and experiences of Black church arson.

I am guided by an ethical ethnographic imperative to *trust* Black people and Black story. According to English and Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe, the anti-Black constrictions of academic renditions of Black collectivities often force Black scholars “into [epistemic] positions that run counter to what we know” (2016, 13). Pertinent to this project is an inherited epistemological skepticism in relation to Black perspectives on arson that I and all of us are challenged to unlearn, as well as my own partial personal experiences and knowledge (as an African American from Knoxville) that Black Knoxvillians *have to know* in order to *survive*.

I also consider how social science treats Black people’s explanatory frameworks and material concerns. Gender studies and Black geographies scholar Katherine McKittrick outlines how these social science epistemologies generate racial logics (or we might say *logos* here) based on “normatively negative conceptions of blackness” and “the primacy of evidentiary and insular normalcies” (2021, 3, 4). This includes social scientific, juridical, and media accounts that marginalize Black stories and assume “Black objecthood” (49), a move toward objectification that Black Christian communities like CHSDAC have long resisted by creating spaces for the crafting and reception of testimonies—of witness. As an ethnographer, I learn much from Black church testimonial sensibilities about how to practice the feminist and decolonial methods proposed by scholars like McKittrick in order to acknowledge that “the materiality of black story matters” (11). In the case of Black church arson, Black stories matter not only for their descriptive power but also for the spaces they create and the worlds they hold.

Historian Saidiya Hartman (2019) also critiques the social scientific representations of Black social life that rendered Black women in terms of statistics and social scientists’ research agenda. Missing were acknowledgments of “what they wanted to say [that] had little to do with [the sociologist’s] questions” and the broader society’s “acknowledging its debt [and] owning its crimes” of anti-Black racism, heteropatriarchy, and impoverishment (105).

Reparative Ethnography

This project is instead based on the premise that anthropology owes material and narrative reparations to African American communities. Ancestors' bones should be returned to their descendants. Anthropologists' institutional capital should be offered in service of Black communities. Ethnographies and practices of reparation and redistribution in Black communities are due. And we should continue to struggle with the weighted histories and play with the narrative horizons of the stories we cocreate.

The approach I apply in this text is reparative. By *reparative ethnography*, I mean reparations for Black people who have been miscast and dispossessed. Ethnography has long promoted community-facing work. Nonetheless, the coloniality, racism, and patriarchy of anthropology and other social science epistemes create contexts in which the mining of local voices often reproduces settler colonial frameworks and disciplinary positionings (or intellectual turns). Anthropology is often informed by anti-Black intellectual genealogies that have often cast Black communities as problems to be solved rather than reveling in the questions they ask and the theoretical frameworks Black people develop to navigate, value, and extend Black lives. We desperately need forms of redress that foreground Black study and modes of knowing.

As a book that sits with emic interpretations of church arson, my project's reparative ethnographic approach is designed to address modes of discursive and epistemic violence that silence Black perspectives on arson. The result is a voice-led text that centers local explanations, and that traces the racist, moral, class, and spatial economies that attempt to dispossess CHSDAC congregants and Black Knoxvilleans of their spaces of worship, residence, and stories. For instance, CHSDAC members not only navigated the attempted displacement of their sanctuary space via arson. They also discussed weathering a narrative displacement of their church's history, as relayed in chapter 2. Instead of College Hill being acknowledged as the city's first Adventist congregation, the city's predominantly white First Adventist Church assumed that mantle. Some CHSDAC members believe this to be a purposeful anachronism that undermines CHSDAC's longevity and legacy. A reparative method does not take lightly such concerns about renarration. Rather, it explores dispossession as a physical and discursive phenomenon.

I am also guided by the work of literary scholar Eve Sedgwick (2003). Sedgwick discusses the prospects of producing writing amid contexts of suspicion instigated by violence against minoritized communities. She proposes a reparative reading approach that rearranges interpretive fragments and part-objects into new wholes. In our present case, this interrupts the circulation of deterministic frameworks. Frameworks that assume Black criminality, responsibility, violence, and fetishistic engagement with religious material culture need to be questioned. And local perspectives of sociality, the sacred, and meaning-making need to be heard. An ethnography influenced by reparative reading encourages movements like those made in this book. Such a reading moves from examinations of perpetrator to survivor affects, from contexts of anti-Black removal to religious and historical processes of remaining, from contemplations of intraracial estrangement to prescriptions for community suture, from the production of art sourced from burned Black church(es) to its interpretive publics. This recontextualizes Black church arson as both ordinary and exceptional violence, as mundanity and apocalypse.

The notion of repair has often been criticized. One notable critic, Patricia Stuelke, pens in *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique*. Stuelke argues that academics used reparative criticism as a “respite from history” in the late 1970s and 1980s (2021, 9). Nonetheless, the affective and relational structures of repair proposed by scholars reinforced US imperial and neoliberal infrastructures. Academic liberatory visions for repair eventually precluded more material and historical critical forms (16). I conduct an ethnography that emphasizes repair because I have witnessed a congregation rebuild, and I believe that the extension of a vision however flawed is more important than just producing a work that describes a problem immaculately.

I also understand reparations in financial terms. Some reparations efforts have already been initiated in the Appalachian region. In July 2020, the city of Asheville, North Carolina, voted to create community reparations for Black residents to combat some of the financial harms caused by racism (City of Asheville 2025). In December 2020, local government officials in Knoxville passed a resolution that apologized for slavery and enacted urban renewal programs (City of Knoxville 2020). The town created an African American Equity Restoration Task Force to develop policy initiatives. Some Black Knoxvilleans were appropriately skeptical of such measures for their actual redistributive

potential. One research collaborator opined that most measures would likely benefit middle-class residents rather than help ameliorate poverty.

Even so, the need for visions and practices of repair persists. And Black churches could be central vectors for reparations efforts in the United States to redress harms like slavery and urban renewal. Black churches also should be beneficiaries of such efforts, as white supremacist and racial capitalist forms of violence and displacement disproportionately affected Black churches in terms of arsons and closings. I am inspired by and indebted to the work of Dorinne Kondo in *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* for outlining the still-vibrant potential of reparative creativity for minoritized subjects navigating ongoing forms of affective violence. This includes the kinds of affective violence Black congregants navigate in the wake of Black church arson and structures of anti-Black racism that deny victimhood, that hinder intramural forms of solidarity, and that justify urban displacements. These affects have material implications. They fuel anti-Black engagements with state resources; charge public discourse; and impact the construction, damage, and demolition of sanctuary bodies, buildings, and spaces. Kondo compels us to consider that “only when one has not been granted public existence or when that publicity results in affective violence can one comprehend the desire for that existence”—we might add however affective and relational (2018, 27). Kondo observes that potential for transformation is held in spaces when notions of race can be made, unmade, and remade amid creative processes (2018). I extend these insights to include the sacred counterpublics or hallows created by Black Knoxvillians that house their sanctuaries, their theological commitment to love, their moral visions of community, and their neighborly forms of relation that motivate processes building and renovation, repair, and redistribution.

As an ethnographer, I add this book’s project of interpretive repair to the work of the community members of Knoxville with whom I spoke, who, as the years go by after the CHSDAC arson, are interested in long-standing and contemporary processes of Black community repair. In *From Hate to Hallows*, I engage in a reparative witness of turning my attention to the stories people want, or even need, to tell. This leads me to write outward from the arson event, conceptually and literally following Black community members’ leads about this arson and other Black church arsons. I follow them beyond the bounds of my own questioning to alternative explanations, concerns, and renditions of space. Importantly,

this results in a move away from more commonly occurring discussions of hate in relation to church arson, to tell other stories, including their experiences with other forms of racial and spatial violence, their take on the present, their prophecies and dreams for the future, as well as their visions and re/creations of hallowed ground.

Hallows

While uncovering multiple interpretations of Black church burning, my book also plots local visions of what I identify as *hallows*. By *hallows*, I mean the creation and recognition of sacred places made by CHSDAC members and other Black Knoxvillians through acts of renarration, re-constitution, revision, and remaining. The notion of *hallows* is probably most often cited currently in relation to the *Harry Potter* franchise and the final *Deathly Hallows* that dramatically ends the series. Not so here, readers! My usage of three definitions of *hallows* here is more archaic and less entertaining, but hopefully at least useful. The first notion of *hallow* I apply from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* relates to the figure of the saint. All Hallows' Eve is a Christian holiday that was used to revere deceased and uncanonized saints. In the case of Knoxville, this notion of sainthood refers to revered ancestors. And like the more common US application of the term *hallowed ground*, *hallows* here also references important historical landmarks, cemeteries, and places where the deceased and former church sites exist. The second definition from the same dictionary designates *hallow* as a verb, meaning specifically "[to] make or regard as holy, consecrate, bless." CHSDAC members, other Black Christians, and community residents in Knoxville hallow spaces on and beyond their church grounds, sometimes in ways that confound capitalist regimes of value. The third definition of *hallows* I apply is from the *Dictionary of American Family Names*. It identifies *hallows* as a variation of the topographic surname Hale, which in Old English derives from the word *halh*, meaning "hollow, nook, spot." This spatial designation notes a place within a place, a space of respite and protection. In that regard, this definition of *hallows* correlates strongly with the hush arbor—the outdoor spaces selected by enslaved people to gather and worship. This notion of sacred space, ancestral, sacralized, and a step away, holds several analogues in the spatial imaginaries and ritual lives of CHSDAC members and Knoxville residents.

Among the local hallows we find are narrative and monumental forms of arson remembrance; multiple visions of Black churches and open-door sanctuary; historical and contemporary reconstructions of Black belonging; critical, elegiac, and embodied responses to the material archive of Black church arsons; and geographic and theological worldviews that envision Black church endurance, even until the end of earth history. In addition to local hallows discussed across the text, the hallows—as a vector to acknowledge Black spatial and sacred agency—reminds us that white supremacist violence does not own the story or the cartographies of Black sanctuary making. The hallows is my way of aligning my work with the sensibility of CHSDAC members that hate is not and can never be an ending point.

Matrifocality and Methodology

Kinship creates modes of personhood, belonging, and ethical relationship. It also hosts hierarchies, disenchantments, alienations, and other forms of ambivalence. While kinship relationships may be an object of anthropological study, how else might kin relations enter into ethnographic knowledge production? My relationship with my mother has powerfully affected my ethnographic study of Black church arson. My location in a matrifocal kinship network has oriented my relationship to storytelling, and motivated and supported the project, all while mediating my relationship to home and field site. Thus, matrifocality has had a narrative, infrastructural, spatial, and ethical influence on the project.

The anthropological investigation that is distilled in *From Hate to Hallows* has been shaped by this constructive maternal imprint, as well as the tensions, power relations, and interpretive gaps that attend *both* ethnographic knowledge production and the constitution of kinship relationships.

Story Collecting from the Mother's House and Affrilachian Views of Knoxville, Tennessee

Matrifocality, the centerpiece of this book's method, has been defined by Raymond T. Smith as "a property of kinship systems where the complex affective ties among mother and children assumes a structural prominence because of the diminution (but not disappearance) of male

authority in domestic relations” (2001, 822). While Smith’s definition describes a social form of kinship that occurs in many Afro-diasporic contexts, a contextually and historically grounded conception that moves away from presumptions of dysfunctional matriarchy, Smith’s definition misses the power of the mother in shaping orientations to narrative work and familial and religious solidarities.

In my mother’s house are many stories. I grew up listening to those stories being told at the dining room table presided over by her and my father. My mother, a native of Sweetwater, Tennessee (a small town forty-five minutes south of Knoxville), was and remains a legendary cook. Because of her talent and reputation for cooking and feeding people and because of our home’s location in East Knoxville—the side of the city where the majority of Black churches are located—our house was often *the* house for weekend gatherings. My father, though a man of few words in everyday life, came to life on those occasions as a skilled storyteller. I have many memories of seeing my parents and their best friends gathered around the dining room table, happy after consuming well-cooked food, listening to him talk about his set of childhood friends, their colorful nicknames, and the local wildlife in his small rural town of Oak Hill, Florida. And in the round of their dining room storytelling, people peppered the company with their questions, and sprinkled in their own stories as well. It was here that I learned about the power of story told by people in their own voice. It was my first training ground in anthropology.

The stories that were given space for expression in her house are not the only ones that my mother hosted. This book is a direct outgrowth of my mother’s injunction and sponsorship. After both the murder of the Emanuel Nine and the burning of the CHSDAC community occurred in June 2015, my mother and I discussed the events in her kitchen. When we expressed our frustrations and cynicism about how the arson would be investigated, my mother encouraged me to “look into it.” I responded that the arson could be studied by scholars who lived in the area and that my academic commitments at the time leaned elsewhere. I was an early career professor at the University of Vermont writing my first book on Black evangelicalism. My mother quipped, “Why become a religion professor if you can’t help your own people?” I could find no response better befitting her pointed question than this book.

Even more notable than the maternal call to conduct ethnographic research has been the support my mother has given to me to make this

project possible. My mother lodged my son and me, cooked food for us, and, along with my niece, provided childcare for me while I conducted research during evenings and over weekends. This is more than the mere matter often pithily discussed on an acknowledgments page. This is provision of vital, though often invisibilized, labor that frequently supports ethnographic research—a research pursuit that often requires a researcher with great command of their time. After all, to make yourself available to collaborators, you must operate on their time and not your own. This can make the simultaneous execution of everyday parental and domestic responsibilities plus research and writing tasks difficult for researchers with family. Moreover, these family responsibilities have racial, gendered, and class inequalities that affect researchers’ availability to pursue ethnographic research. Put simply, my mother subsidized my ethnographic labor with her own, and in doing so, she made this book possible. Her labor does not only merit mentioning; it also prompts us to consider the in/accessibilities of ethnographic research and its privatized or more hidden buttresses and sponsors. There are familial and community supports to contemporary ethnographic enterprises that force us to ask questions about who (if anyone) owns ethnographic research. This discussion of motherhood and labor supports conversations about decolonizing anthropological research and the need to recognize the cultural influences and support, beyond the academy, that shape ethnographic knowledge production.

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Ethics, Affrilachia, and Symbolism My matrifocal methodology is not just an outgrowth of the spaces my mother cultivated, but also about how my relationship to my mother and maternalism informs my subject position, my solidarities, and how I apprehend the world. This includes Black church arson and anti-Black religious violence. For, at times, a maternal story also mediates them. As an ethnographer, I am influenced by Black feminist and womanist methodologies that explore the modes of knowing created by and around women. I am equally shaped by the accent they place on the creative dimensions of religious women’s lives. For example, in their outline of a womanist ethical and ethnographic approach, Thelathia N. Young and Shannon J. Miller include “autoethnographic strateg[ies]” by which “they deepen their own lenses of analysis by privileging introspection, experiential epistemologies, and multiple audiences for their work” (2015, 298). In addition to an attention to natal

communities, reflexivity, and authorial flexibility, womanist approaches also foreground the lived experiences and ethical insights of Black women. Thus, within Black feminist and womanist epistemologies, the own-people ethnography requested by a churchgoing mother from her anthropologist daughter, as well as the narrative and ethical sensibilities indexed by their shared history and relationship, are important sites for methodological formation and deliberation. My maternal story asserts that people deserve to have spaces for their stories, a table set for their narrative; it assumes that the ties that bind can be tugged to create accountability to home. This book descends from such a sensibility.

In thinking matrifocal methodology as ethics, I do not mean to reproduce a simplistic rendering of mother-daughter relationships or to evoke the cultural norms of maternal service and daughterly obedience. I am aware that one cannot presume that maternal desires can be fully known and realized by daughters. With Maggie Nelson in *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*, I can say that “even if one wanted to make work that pleased others (or mothers), one would have to presume to know, in advance, what those others (or mothers) liked or needed, a presumption that comes with its own set of ethical thorns” (2021, 45). Though I can conduct work at my mother’s behest, I may not necessarily have generated a book that she deems worthy of merit. And, of course, there is the potential to generate a book that is displeasing to one’s mother or her peers in the community. This means acknowledging that it is not only my reputation at stake in this project, but hers as well.

This proves all the more important because of the smaller size and close proximities of Knoxville itself. As pejoratively characterized by an upper-level administrator at Knoxville College, who was a transplant from New York, “Knoxville is a town posing as a city.” With a population of roughly 190,000 people, Knoxville, Tennessee, is the largest city in Eastern Tennessee and the third-largest city in Tennessee (“QuickFacts”, n.d.). The Black population of the city is roughly 16.9 percent as opposed to a white majority population of 75.6 percent, a Latinx population of 5.4 percent, an Asian population of 1.7 percent, and a Native population of 0.3 percent. Located in the Appalachian region of the United States, Knoxville was inhabited by a Cherokee Indigenous majority before it was “founded” by white settler colonials like James White in 1786 (City of Knoxville, n.d.).

As elsewhere in the region during the antebellum period, Knoxville was a site for enslavement. Nonetheless, the city also had a different

relationship to the dominant plantation order than what was typically associated with the South. According to local historian Robert Booker, a small enslaved population, a general distaste for slavery in the region, and enslaved labor such that “housework and contact jobs enhanced intimate relationships” characterized slavery in Knoxville (1993, 11). Historian Carter G. Woodson (1916) makes a similar observation, also noting the potential for interracial religious contact in the region. “In Appalachian America the races still maintain a sort of social contact,” he writes. “White and black men work side by side, visit each other in their homes, and often attend the same church to listen with delight to the word spoken by either a colored or white ‘preacher’” (40). Resident in East Tennessee at least since the 1830s, my own Scruggs-Davis-Brewster maternal lineages partook in some of the loosened racial constructs of the region to become landowners and business owners in the twentieth century. Yet incidents and social processes like the 1919 race riot in Knoxville, long-standing segregation, and repetitive processes of Black displacement via urban renewal and gentrification challenge the progressive narrative of Knoxville interracialism.

The relationship between discourse and material conditions is not only pertinent to understanding Black church arson but also to the complex positioning of Black Knoxvilleans. The smaller demographic presence of Blacks locally and the different relationship to the plantation order have led to an analytical neglect of Black Appalachian experiences. According to historian Nell Irvin Painter, “Black Appalachians, whose experiences have not conformed to stereotypes of black life, are, for that reason, an invisible people. Southern and Afro-American studies, the two fields of inquiry that ought to have noticed black Appalachians, have traditionally described a generalized black-belt plantation South and have divided southerners into two categories: planters and their descendants (the powerful, the oppressors) and slaves and their progeny (the powerless, the oppressed)” (1985, xi).

The absence of a more typical plantation regime did not translate into an easy incorporation of Black residents into the postbellum economy. Robert Booker (1993) significantly outlines a vibrant Black institutional landscape constituted by Black Knoxvilleans, community investment in Black schools like the historical Black college Knoxville College located right next to the CHSDAC grounds. Black Knoxvilleans also built cultural organizations and a vibrant historical church landscape with Baptist, Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), and Presbyte-

rian churches having the longest presence and highest concentrations locally (Booker 1993). But this self-determining Black institutional landscape was also partially the product of a racial and class-based segregation and state disinvestment.

Anne Thornton, a Baptist minister in her fifties, outlined the racial and class geography of the city succinctly during an interview:

I think Knoxville is still very segregated, and when I say “segregated,” I don’t just mean the constant black-and-white line. You have sections. You have north, east, west, and south. So you have west: You have upper-class white. In general, money. You have east: You have African Americans. You have south: You have lower-income whites. And then you have north: sort of that mixed, in-between, middle-income, um, whites and maybe some sprinkling of middle-income Blacks, so just sort of sprinkled in there probably. And then you have the core of downtown Knoxville, which, because of the development that has happened there, has brought a new generation, and I think these are sort of many of your millennials, your up-and-coming money.

In addition to the spatialization of race, the structures of the local economy marginalize Black Knoxvilleans. The partial integration of Knoxville into modern industrial processes and New South progressive culture limited economic sectors in the city (Wheeler 2005). According to John H. Stanfield, “The geographic isolation of Knoxville and its light industrial base have perpetuated the low economic and political status of Knoxville’s stable black populations” (1985, 135). This is only exacerbated by what Stanfield identifies as a folkloric approach to Black Appalachian experiences that has focused on cultural attributes of Black culture regionally rather than attending to the material conditions of Black people. This book endeavors to strike such a balance.

Poet Frank X. Walker coined the term *Affrilachian* to describe the paradoxes of being Black and Appalachian in a Southern subregion that is popularly but falsely imagined as being demographically and culturally white, but paradoxes remain. Though there is now a word coined for the type of regional identity I inhabit, it does not resolve the tensions I experience in relationship to place, tensions that have come with moving farther and farther away from home through successive movements for educational attainment and professional opportunities in the

academy. Describing myself as a Knoxville native was often not enough to earn research collaborators' trust. People wanted to know what high school I attended, what side of town I was from, my street of residence, who my people were, and where they were from. At times, my relationship to place and my mother's name opened doors for me. In other instances, the time spent away from home, my geographic residence in New England, and even my educational attainments marked me as suspect to Knoxville residents whom I approached about the project. Once, after I requested an interview, an African American woman community leader chided me for leaving home. She wondered why so many young, bright Black people chose to make a life elsewhere rather than share their gifts with their home community. I had no answer for her question in that moment. (Although, much earlier in my career when I was eager to return home, I sought after a local appointment that never materialized. My East Knoxville origins were a source of disdain for a senior colleague.) And even now, I must acknowledge that my path away from home to work at schools like Harvard and Yale does reproduce the brain drain that has long characterized the coloniality of higher education.

In addition to the indictments of my social location that can be made by local community members, I am aware that this project may be met with suspicions about the lack of distance between myself and interlocutors as a hometown ethnographer presumably conducting "mesearch" in her place of origin. Aimee Villarreal (2022) artfully notes this impasse for ethnographers of color in her book chapter "*Anthropolocura* as Homeplace Ethnography." "We are advised to leave in order to come back because the institutions where we earned our degrees do not value or hire homegrown scholars," she writes (196). Nonetheless, says Villarreal, "Home holds us accountable to its failures and possibilities—a place of healing, a place to be nurtured, cultivated, and revitalized through homework" (200). Home can be a place of ambivalence—of distance and belonging, of estrangement, and embrace.

For me, the prospect of writing about home creates a layer of accountability to my mother, our community, our interlocutors, and our ancestors. Though I cannot know whether the resulting text will please them, I hold a great deal of personal concern about the local reception and perception of this work.² Nonetheless, I write out of an acknowledgment that I owe them for their kindness and their endurance. Thus, in my mother's house are many stories *and* obligations, a maternal call

and response, an expectation of a return on the familial and communal investments that were poured into me and my growing up. Those matri-focal ethics and the acknowledgment that this project is a process, not a product—an outgrowth of a debt that I owe that I can never repay, of a learning how, rather than a finished project—undergird my ethnography in this text.

My discussion of a matrifocal methodology, though acknowledging spaces of narrative reception, does not sidestep the material realities of anti-Blackness. In fact, Black maternity is increasingly cast as a complex site for rendering anti-Black racism—in particular, the mourning of anti-Black police violence and Black women’s disproportionate risks in childbearing mortality. As illuminated by Jennifer Nash in *Birthing Black Mothers*, “Black mothers in the United States have become spectacularly and dangerously visible through a frame of crisis, one that insists on their spatial and temporal location in a death-world. . . . [They] are cast as suffering rather than pathological, as traumatized rather than deviant” (2021, 4). Nash vigilantly draws our attention to the discursive use of “the Black mother” as an avenue to extend symbolic support to the issues of medical racism and anti-Black policing and to accrue leftist political currency and visibility (6). *From Hate to Hallows* extends insights about the symbolic and social processes of violence in which Black maternity is enmeshed. By exploring the ecclesiological and matrifocal constructions of Black church ways, this book explores another site mediated by Black maternity: Black church arson. Yet it also renders emic rather than etic symbolism, religious rather than leftist discursive constructs, and mediations of endangered Black lifeworlds rather than a singular emphasis of Black death.

Black Maternal Ties: Ecclesiology and Arson

I propose that Black church arsons attack an archetypal institution that I would designate as “the Black Mother Church.” And I propose that Black church arson is a gendered form of violence that uniquely targets Black women as religious participants and a Black religious sociality that is highly mediated by Black maternal symbolism, presence, and institutional labor.

In interviews conducted with local Knoxvilleans about the CHSDAC arson that occurred in 2015, the Emanuel AME shooting that occurred five days prior emerges as a foundational narrative event. It foreshadows

the arson and precipitates changed perspectives on religion, race, space, sanctuary, and security that the Knoxville church burning only exacerbates. The news of the shooting of nine congregants engaged in a Wednesday night Bible study at Mother Emanuel AME found me at a writers' retreat in Costa Rica. I hurriedly wrote a blog for my department website in which, influenced by a conversation between Fred Moten and Robin D. G. Kelley, I described the Emanuel AME shooting as an attempted execution of a Black social life defined as an insurgent sociality (Chipumuro 2015).

But the truth of the matter was that the Emanuel AME shooting generated very personal and direct concerns for my mother's safety. She fit the profile of the victims—the faithful, elder Black woman who attended not only Sunday services but midweek Bible study. And I carried that fear for days until I returned to Knoxville, and have ever since. The College Hill arson happened soon after my return to Tennessee and exacerbated that dread. One member of the CHSDAC community was a former VBS teacher of mine. The arson was not faceless or impersonal for me. I associated the burning with a mentor, a Black woman of faith I knew and for whom I cared. I have written this book for her, my mother, women like her, communities of Black Christians, and the kin that worry for their safety. I have written this book to archive the lived vulnerabilities a number of us experienced in the wake of the events of 2015.

Though personal, my association of motherhood and the church is not coincidental. A number of ecclesial, genealogical, and institutional dynamics generate connections between churches and motherhood. The Christian Church is classically constructed as a mother—a site of nurturance for Christian believers. Moreover, the term *mother* is also used to identify a founding church in a denominational subsection. Established in 1791, Mother Emanuel was originally founded as the First African Church (later AME) in Charleston, South Carolina (“South Carolina” 2021). It was also the site of a rebellion organized by carpenter and church leader Denmark Vesey in 1822 and was burned during the rebellion of the same year, now over two hundred years ago. Like many Black churches, Emanuel AME was maternal in three ways: as an ecclesial site of nurturance, as a site of origin, and as a place for organized struggle against anti-Black racism.

Moreover, Black church attendance and membership themselves can be matrifocal. For instance, Brown (1994) in outlining the influence of matrifocality in Black Baptist churches notes that matrifocality often

influences religious socialization. Patterns in church attendance often replicate those of mothers. Children are likely to attend their mother's churches.

Finally, the connections between motherhood and Black church ways are also created through the figure of the church mother. My mother, like her mother before her, and like Emanuel AME members Susie Jackson (aged eighty-seven), the younger Bible study teacher Myra Thompson (aged fifty-nine), and Ethel Lee Lance (aged seventy), all tended to the spiritual, curricular, and material needs of the church community. In doing so, these women have engaged in vital nurturance and sustenance of community life and acted as mothers of their churches. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes aptly profiles the characteristics and work of church mothers in African American church landscapes, noting that "these mothers serve effectively for a very long time and accumulate great prestige and in many cases very real authority. Not only are they role models, power brokers, and venerable elders, but the actuarial realities of black life are such that elderly black women provide the continuity necessary to promote unity in the face of ever-changing historical conditions" (1986, 44). Gilkes (1986) expands this definition by noting that church mothers promote unity in the face of changes in charismatic authority and wield power in the world of women and men. In her ethnography of COOLJC (Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith) women, Judith Casselberry (2017) also notes that the intimate labor of altar work—of bringing souls to Christ, work that church mothers likened to midwifery—is like a process of spiritual birth overseen by devout senior church women trained through years of helping people experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Women like Myra Thompson, Susie Jackson, and Ethel Lee Lance might have engaged in similar kinds of maternal labors for the church. But their work in and for the church to stabilize and reproduce the community also made them vulnerable on that fateful evening of June 17, 2015. As we contemplate ongoing acts of violence in places of worship in which Black women tend to constitute demographic majorities, such work continues to make them vulnerable. As I revisit the question, What are white supremacists trying to destroy when they enact violence against Black church communities whether by fire or bullet?, I return to my original insights about Black sociality with a qualification: that the target is Black sociality, but it is one that is highly mediated by an institutional, culturally reproductive Black maternity.

This claim may seem tenuous. Anti-Black violence is often associated with Black male casualties in the public sphere. The #SayHerName campaign formed in 2014 by the African American Policy Forum and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies has highlighted and addressed this representational inequality (AAPF, n.d.). And yet, even the events at Mother Emanuel AME on June 17, 2015, might be read via a masculinist frame. When asked by Tywanza Sanders, the twenty-six-year-old Emanuel member he would eventually murder, why he was committing the shooting, Dylann Roof was reported to have responded, “I have to do this because y’all raping our women and taking over the world” (Shapiro 2022). Roof’s response reflects white supremacist worldviews that interconnect white nationalism and populism—the idea of a pure white nation state that is under siege, threatened by a ravaging Black procreativity. The long-standing symbol of this threat is the racial scapegoat of the Black rapist. This trope has resulted in vigilante violence against not only Black men but Black community members more broadly. But the majority of those whom Roof murdered were Black women, and thus, a gendered analysis is needed that can account for the significance of the loss of Black church women’s lives.

In *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*, Jared Sexton (2008) traces how assumed bastions of racial Blackness are maligned in favor of multiracialism. Pertinent here, Sexton moves beyond the Black rapist trope and identifies another specter haunting anti-Black racist imaginaries: Black maternity. Sexton writes, “But far more frightening than the specter of a menacing hypermasculine black rapist committing acts ‘just as real and demeaning as sexual rape’ is the trope of an irresistible cosmic black maternal body: a region of distorted space-time with a field of gravitational attraction so intense that its escape velocity exceeds the speed of light” (81). I propose that Mother Emanuel AME church, and the Black maternity embedded in many Black church ways, are examples of “the irresistible cosmic black maternal body” feared and ultimately targeted by the anti-Black racists and the violence they wield against Black churches (81). And, whether he voiced it or not, it *was* the reproductive work of that maternal body that Roof also targeted.

In a manifesto that is attributed to him, Roof writes, “I was not raised in a racist home or environment,” and he contrasts that upbringing with that of Black people (Morgan 2015). He continues, “Black people are racially aware almost from birth, but White people on average don’t think

about race in their daily lives. And that is our problem. We need to and have to” (Morgan 2015). That Roof associates Black racial consciousness with a moment “almost from birth” characterizes Black identity not quite as innate or inherited but certainly socialized (Morgan 2015). Birth invokes the mother, or Sexton’s “cosmic black maternal body” reproductive of Black people and Black racial consciousness. Emanuel AME congregant Tywanza Sanders received Roof’s anti-Black masculinist indictment of attempted rape before Roof murdered him. But it is important to note that Sanders was attending Bible study in a mother church (Mother Emanuel) with his mother, Felicia, when he was murdered. In her testimony, Felicia Sanders said, “I watched my son come into this world, and I watched my son leave the world” (Shapiro 2022). The mother church and the birth mother witnessed Tywanza Sanders’s murder, but Roof threatened both of them with obliteration, literally and figuratively. And of the eight other members Roof murdered, six of them were women who lay slain on the ground.

My intention here is not to essentialize Black maternalism in a way that naturalizes the extractions of Black mothers’ labor, appropriates them without their consent into narratives of crisis, or objectifies them in ways that contribute to anti-Black and gendered violence. Instead, I hope to have excavated a mother root to Black church belonging and anti-Black church violence that will be interrogated and investigated in future work.

“My Mother Was a Warrior”: CHSDAC, Matrilocality, and Arson

Maternal affect was also present in CHSDAC members’ narratives of sanctuary space and their own life stories. I recount their mother church memories—and their associations of motherhood and church belonging in the wake of the College Hill church burning in 2015. In an interview, Deaconess Eula Wright discussed her conversion to Adventism in the 1980s and mentions senior church women who helped mentor her in the faith and encouraged her as a mother to her small children.

WRIGHT: I think of the memories when we first came here, right after the church was completed. I had two babies in my arms. One was two, one was one. We didn’t have the pews here; we had folding chairs. And I remember sitting right back in the area. Maybe

about three pews up from where Elder Campbell is now. And sitting next to some—some old mothers, that now are gone. And they just embraced us and made us feel comfortable. And then the memories of how my children walk all of these corridors—and sit on these pews—for thirty some years, almost thirty years. And, uh—and the—and the—the older ladies that helped mold and helped shape my life—as a young mother. And that now, as I look at the pews, whenever I run into a missing member in the community, I would say, “Your place is—is vacant. We miss you.”

THOMAS: Hmm.

WRIGHT: “We miss you.”

THOMAS: So, it’s a way of noticing who’s present and who’s absent?

WRIGHT: Mm-hmm.

For Wright, the CHSDAC sanctuary held the memories of her interactions with church mothers. Attending church was a means of recalling her time with the elder women who helped her and her family. Black church arson threatens this spatial and affective experience of a sacred maternal exchange.

Maternal memories also inform Black church solidarities that exceed the boundaries of local church membership. In the summer of 2019, after a Wednesday evening Bible study at College Hill, I met a tall, vital septuagenarian church elder named Michael Gathers. Gathers discussed growing up amid the racist segregation of mid-twentieth-century Knoxville. He expressed a love and admiration for his mother, who fiercely protected him with her gun, her willingness to fight (including a fight with a school bus driver who threatened him), and her training him up in the Lord “from the ground up.” He said that he often contemplated taking his mother’s name along with his father’s name—a testament, I suppose, to his love for her and all she did for him. “My mother was a warrior,” he said, smiling quietly to himself. “And she gave me everything I needed to make it.”

After talking about his mother’s violent protection, he segued immediately into discussing the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963. Gathers told me that as soon as he heard the news about the 16th Street

church and the murder of four girls attending Sunday school there, he was deeply affected. Though he was in the Air Force and stationed abroad, the news felt close and personal to him. He began protesting in uniform while stationed in Greece. He told me officers warned him that he would be imprisoned and dishonorably discharged if he kept protesting in uniform, but for him it was worth the risk. The narrative connection Gathers made between his mother's religious instruction and unqualified love and his own compulsion to engage in a public demonstration around the bombing in Birmingham illustrates the workings of matrilocality as a bridge of genealogical, religious, and political connection. Gathers felt the tragedy of anti-Black and gendered religious violence enacted upon the 16th Street Baptist Church and the loss of Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley in a heart space that was somehow adjacent to his love for his mother. And, in so doing, he illustrated the hallowed character of matrilocality at CHSDAC—that though threatened by arson, the deeply cherished frameworks of remembering maternal care and maternally motivated unrest in the face of anti-Black religious violence oriented and sustained him.

Research Setting and Methods

This book comes out of yearslong engagement with the membership of the College Hill Seventh-Day Adventist community—a predominantly Black Adventist church located in the historically Black neighborhood of Mechanicsville in the center of Knoxville. Though the church anniversary booklet does not list a specific year for its founding, the College Hill church was preceded by the predominantly Black University Avenue Seventh-Day Adventist Church, which was also located in the Mechanicsville community. The church sits on a hill on Brandau Street facing the busy street of Western Avenue. Though it can be hard to see from the busy thoroughfare, its white steeple with red crown-like base is visible, even from one of the city's busiest roads.

In the summer of 2021, I arrived at the church on a weekday to connect with the pastor. As I sat outside waiting, I snapped a photo of the church from the church grounds. From a western view of the edifice, the CHSDAC building was shrouded in shadows cast by the afternoon



INTRO.1 · The College Hill Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Photo taken by author, 2021.

sun. I observed the church’s modest one-story size from where I stood, as well as its distinctive steeple.

The church is situated at a seam between the city and nature—between the buzz of traffic and bees, the chirp of birds and the quiet crunch of stray gravel under car wheels. Though I had attended the church since 2016, I heard and saw the landscape differently years later. The pastor directed my attention to the rich views of the cityscape that were visible from the CHSDAC church grounds. “If you look closely, you can see the mountains outlining the view of the city,” he said. Grateful for his assistance in teaching me how to see, I can now appreciate how the view from the church reflected dimensions of the unique geography and position of Knoxville as a mountain city.

The CHSDAC has an official membership of over one hundred people and has an African American majority, as well as first- and second-generation African members, and Caribbean and Caribbean American members. There are also a few white members of the CHSDAC community. The church’s most active membership is composed of a majority of middle-aged and senior members. Younger adult members tend to be the children of senior members who were raised in the church.



INTRO.2 · A view of the Knoxville city landscape from the CHSDAC grounds facing Brandau Street. Photo taken by author, 2021.

Nonetheless, the church was the site of an Adventist school that served the broader community until 2015. The community also hosts a well-attended vbs program during the summers and commits resources to a sustained Adventist Youth Society (AYS) program.

Beginning in 2021, CHSDAC sponsored community outreach ministries that focused on job readiness, food assistance, and the provision of school supplies. A change in pastoral leadership in 2018 contributed to an increasing number of young adult attendees and new modes of Black community engagement. These included pastoral engagement with the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a prayer walk in the wake of the local police shooting of Anthony Thompson Jr. at Austin-East High School in April 2021. As they engaged in the collective work of building religious community, CHSDAC members participated in a weekly prayer service, provided emotional and material support for members, attended weekly Sabbath-day services and meals, exchanged health-related resources and information, labored in local evangelistic efforts to lead new souls to Christ and recruit new members, and of course, experienced the love, laughter, and care of fellowship—including the gentle unbraiding of hair.

Semistructured Interviews

Between 2016 and 2021, I employed three primary methods in the construction of this ethnography. First, I conducted semistructured interviews with CHSDAC church clergy, leaders, and laity; other local Black clergy; and church leaders, community organizers, and culture workers who ranged in age from their early thirties to eighty-plus. Interviews took place in church spaces, church members' homes, and in coffee shops and restaurants. When possible, I always tried to treat respondents to a meal in an effort to engage in a spirit of reciprocity, of offering something for their story, of showing my appreciation for what they would teach me. But perhaps my urge to share a meal was an extension of matrifocal ethics, another extension of my mother's table, an attempt to establish a space from which to tell difficult stories. In most instances, discussions were contemplative and affable. On a few occasions, collaborator responses were impassioned. In a small number of instances, research collaborators were emotionally affected by remembering the incident. In those instances, I would suggest a word of prayer or spend time after the interview winding down. This included initiating a conversation about life in the present tense, receiving stories and pictures of kids and grandkids, visions for new community programs, or discussions of current events. At times, I was also significantly affected by the information I received. The work of telling and listening can be heavy.

The interview tool solicited basic demographic information, information about research collaborators' religious histories and their current religious involvements. The interview also solicited their perspectives on the church arson, including how they received news of the arson, their initial reactions, their relationship to the CHSDAC community, their take on who or what social forces were responsible for the burning, and their perspective on the broader significance of the arson to local and national religious, racial, and political dynamics.

As discussed above, research collaborator responses clustered around explanations that centered white supremacy, Black vandalism, gentrification, and Adventist eschatology. But why and how did I listen to local theories about an unattributed arson? I am influenced by a number of experiential, conceptual, and methodological orientations. When I researched the explanations church members and residents offered, I found rich sites of information that connected their explanations to long-standing religious, racial, and spatial dynamics. Black congregants

were blamed for the anti-Black religious violence enacted upon their churches in Knoxville and beyond. Connections between Black church arson and the spatial violence of segregation, urban renewal, and gentrification are made in a broader archive of Black church arson incidents. Black churches are burned by Black arsonists, and Black church arson exists alongside everyday acts of vandalism against Black churches. To be sure, Black congregants and community members do not need me to confirm their worldviews, and this book does not attempt this. But as an activist once told me at a bar when she heard about my project, “You really can study America from Knoxville.” I wholeheartedly agree with her observation.

Second, scholarly approaches that explore contexts of rumor and suspicion have influenced me. In *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture*, Patricia A. Turner (1993) explores rumors in African American communities, like the connections between the Klan, high-profile assassinations of social justice leaders, and control of corporate enterprises. Though I am not identifying the emic frames of local residents as rumor, Turner’s method and insights are instructive. Turner follows the lead of her respondents and researches their claims. Turner also observes that African American rumor traditions are etiological; she writes, “In seeking to fill in the gaps between what is known about these events and what remains a mystery, the folk will rely on their sense of black history to construct motifs consistent with past experiences but applicable to the issues at hand” (29). Similarly, CHSDAC members and city residents make sense of the arson in terms of what is known, in terms of direct and immediate material conditions that are structural but also via Adventist conceptions of time.

In addition to being theoretically inspired by the work of Eve Sedgwick, I am also guided by her work methodologically. My own reparative approach, like hers, emerges amid a “methodological centrality of suspicion” (in her case, paranoia that grew out of antihomophobic theory) (2003, 125). She proposes a reparative reading approach that interrupts the circulation of deterministic metanarrative frameworks and emphasizes an “ecology of knowing” born of a respectful interest in the explanatory power of local theory (145). The result is a text that moves from event to context; from an incident to moral, intramural, and capitalist representations that reframe events; from a common narrative of hate to considerations of what the sacred really is (testimonial monuments,

open-door churches, the search for empathy, and kudzu-draped landscapes). This book will not be what readers expect, but it holds difficult, beautiful, and necessary surprises for us all.

Third, I also pick up a tradition of ethnography that writes past the silencing and marginalization of Black voices to center Black perspectives for their explanatory power. In *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*, John Gwaltney observes, “It is evident that black people are building theory on every conceivable level” in their “analyses of the heavens, nature, and humanity” (1993, xxvi). Black religious world-making supports Black meaning-making. The stakes of these interpretive processes are high. Human survival is based on the ability to know. This proves even more true for a community navigating long-standing structures of racialized violence. As an ethnographer, I have written this book through a practice of witnessing, of listening and co-occupying spaces of testimony, and of putting ethnography to work to generate scenes of religious and racial communion and debate, even, and especially, when these folks cannot be found in the same rooms. In doing so, I hope that the work also constitutes an example of what Wanda S. Pillow identifies as “faithful epistemic witnessing,” a “theoretical praxis” that a “capacity to witness and support survivance” informs (2019, 129). This book is an attempt to draw attention to the material stakes involved in narrative explanations.

Sometimes a witness holds their peace. Even as I write the book to illuminate emic explanations for the arson, I also hold secrets that will not appear here. At times survival is contingent upon opacity. Black churches are still being burned, and the CHSDAC burning was never solved. Without previewing specifics here, let me say that certain information can potentially endanger. Though I cannot control the use of this text, I also hold some tough stories, religious changes, and information that I will not share. For I do not intend to fan the flames of the dangerous or perverse interests that inform arsons. Moreover, some of the most tender hues of Black people’s expressions of their vulnerability are beautiful but are not a spectacle to be viewed. I made the conscious choice not to include photos of the CHSDAC arson in this work but to include photos and representations of the church amid recovery, expansion, and even a kind of futurity. As noted by Katherine McKittrick, “(And some things we can keep to ourselves. They cannot have everything. Stop her autopsy.) They cannot have everything” (2021, 7). This work is critically and partially revelatory.

Participant Observation

I conducted participant observation with the CHSDAC community. The majority of this research took place during the summers of 2016, 2019, and 2021 (though I also traveled there during spring breaks and to participate in special events, like the church homecoming and anniversary service). Typical research settings included attending Sabbath-day services, Sabbath dinners, Sabbath-day service activities, and evening meetings of AYS. At times, my participation included serving as a VBS teacher, giving a guest lecture about policing, talking about college preparation during AYS, or facilitating a public discussion about critical race theory. In other instances, it meant helping with church renovations, gathering for meals, talking over drinks, and even singing karaoke.

My position as a Knoxville native and non-Adventist Christian helped me gain access to the community. Nonetheless, at times, church members noted my lack of familiarity with Adventist conventions. For instance, a middle school-aged girl complimented my nail color but noted that her mother forbade her from wearing nail polish. It was a lesson in Adventist norms.

Notably, with the passing of each year, the arson event was brought up less frequently in formal church settings. Nonetheless, participation in community life was a much-needed reminder that community life goes on, even as the stories revealed by research collaborators as well as my experiences with them narrated the ongoing racialization of space and religion in the city—legacies that were told in and through arson discussions.

Archival Research

I also conducted archival research with the Burned Churches Project records at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Opened to the public in July 2021, the records contain files of funding requests to the Burned Churches Fund established by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in 1996 (Wittrig 2021). As soon as these materials became available, I began making trips to Philadelphia and digging carefully through boxes of records, which detail the mean and mundane qualities of religious violence. These archival materials have been helpful in exploring the great number of cases that

erupted in the 1990s, accessing discussions of the arsons in the public sphere, and providing an important comparison point to this book's analysis of Black church burnings set in the twenty-first century.

A Note on Research During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted common modes of face-to-face interaction in the United States. My ethnographic research was no exception. While I navigated a two-year interruption of in-person research, I instead conducted a small number of Zoom and phone interviews between 2020 and 2021. Because the pandemic continued even after my return in the summer of 2021, with a few other church leaders and members I attended filmed church services. Such services were a good opportunity to hear updates about community life, to hear a sermon be preached, to participate in community life, and even just to be in a church again. There was still so much laughter and joy in those settings, even if attendees were fewer in number. The effects of the pandemic on projects like mine and countless others are still a matter of contemplation. One productive consequence of these scholarly obstacles, the turn to archival sources, was a concerted choice to help remediate the lost time and missed stories precipitated by the pandemic.

The pandemic also changed the way I engaged church spaces and ethnographic writing. I spent more time outside surveying church grounds and sightlines, listening to birds, looking at overgrown grass, and watching clouds go by. I walked with respondents, sat on porches, enjoyed summer ice cream, and experienced an outdooing of my research experience. Spending so much time beyond the walls of the CHSDAC sanctuary gave me a richer sense of the church's role in its broader geography. From this new vantage point, I came to see with greater clarity the ways in which the church's focal presence evokes a sense of the hallows, interfaces between sites of the sacred and their surrounding publics. Still, it is a different experience to inhabit a quiet and mostly uninhabited church, a different kind of hallows—eerie but beautiful.

Having to spend more time away from my mother's house than I had in my entire life, writing this book became a kind of sanctuary space for me, an opportunity to connect with home and to try to ameliorate my homesickness, a way to connect with a matrifocal project even if un-

able to find my way to my mother's house and arms. Like my research collaborators, I experienced the power of story as a site of habitation and placemaking for myself. I am grateful for the voices that provided opportunities for this type of reconnection during such a difficult time. I remain indebted.

Book Outline

The interlude "All They Did Was Just Open Up a Can of Love" depicts CHSDAC theologies of love and religious worldviews forged in relation to the 2015 burning and the concurrent racial and political context.

Part I: Moral, Religious, and Black Cultural Frames explores racial and intraracial attributions of the CHSDAC burning. It also provides some historical context to Black church arson and catalogs other modes of anti-Black violence, white supremacist rallies, other burnings, acts of vandalism, and economic disenfranchisement. In addition, it charts different sanctifications of Black church ecclesiology and explanations of Black impoverishment.

In chapter 1, "The White Supremacist: Black Church Arson, Hate Crime, and Moral Dispossession," I show that the white supremacy of Black church arson extends past a white supremacist perpetrator of Black church arson into governmental and public-sphere investigations and deliberations of arson events. Drawing on archival and ethnographic research, chapter 1 compares the social dynamics surrounding two Knoxville church arsons—the firebombing of the predominantly Black Inner City Church (pastored by the late NFL player Reggie White) in 1996 and the burning of the predominantly Black CHSDAC community in 2015. Black church congregants' and community members' experiences with church arson and hate crime investigations reveal that governmental and public-square moralities can also be white supremacist and colored by anti-Black suspicions. I argue that both arsons reveal the workings of an anti-Black moral dispossession in governmental and public-sphere deliberations of Black church arson. This moral dispossession denies victimhood to Black congregants and community members, subjects them to suspicion and disbelief, and extends discourses of blame for the violence they experience. The chapter also demonstrates how the racial and moral disenfranchisements of welfare statism in the 1990s and the paradigm of risk management and securitization that

make Black congregations responsible for their own safety inform these processes of moral dispossession.

The interlude “A Smoldering Remains” discusses some of the lingering emotions that emerge in the wake of a Black church burning, its investigation, and its public-sphere deliberation.

Chapter 2, “A Black Arsonist? Bias, Class, and Intramural Religious Violence,” explores congregants’ and community members’ supposition that the arson could have been committed by Black community members. Unlike right-wing pundits, external to communities weathering arsons, who have claimed that Black arsonists burn Black churches in acts of insurance fraud or to feign victimization, the figure of a Black arsonist present in the imagination of many of my informants exposes intraracial schisms in the local African American community. Three intramural tensions repeatedly arose in my conversations with congregants and community members: (1) anti-Adventist bias, (2) the polarization of wealth and socioeconomic class, and (3) the presumed antipathy between Black church clergy, laity, and Black activists. The chapter explores the narrative of the Black arsonist culprit mindfully and carefully. I do so with an awareness that a number of differently situated media and criminological accounts have used the notion of the Black church arsonist (together with other long-standing constructions of Black criminality) to advance policies and electoral politics that buttress white social, political, and economic advantages. In contrast to these racist accounts, my informants’ theories of intramural violence generate different renditions of “the iconic Black church” as a metainstitution of Black social life, an institution whose limited interface with the urban poor may decrease its cultural sanctity and whose privatized infrastructure holds redistributive potential.

The interlude “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me” is set during a CHSDAC homecoming service. In this interlude a local jazz singer, who had recently navigated the death of her mother, sings the gospel standard. The context demonstrates the therapeutic outgrowths of Black church attendance for nonmembers and its position as a local crossroads for healing.

Part II: Economic and Material Cultural Frames undertakes ethnographic and conceptual analysis of local processes of urban development and neoliberal capitalism that co-occur in the Mechanicsville neighborhood in which CHSDAC is set. It also explores public deliberations of Black church arson and Black material religion via responses

to the sculpture *Anti-Mass* (made from the remains of a burned Black church) by Cornelia Parker.

In chapter 3, “The Developer: Black Church Arson, Born-Again Redevelopment, and Hallowed Geography,” I explore congregants’ and residents’ discussion of the arson in relation to processes of urban development and constructions of sacred space in Mechanicsville—the historically Black neighborhood in which the CHSDAC is located. This chapter explores local theories that the arson might have been committed by someone with commercial interest in the valuable property on which the CHSDAC congregation stood. In addition to querying the salvific tenor of urban redevelopment language, I argue that the recurring relation of Black church arson to urban development processes like urban renewal, HOPE VI redevelopment, and gentrification denote the CHSDAC burning as one of many racialized displacements weathered by Black residents. In contrast to the redemptive discourses used to legitimate neoliberal displacement, congregants and residents generate hallowed geographies in and around the CHSDAC edifice, grounds, and neighborhood in relation to historical markers, affective narratives of habitation, and renditions of natural geography. Most importantly, these hallowed geographies foreground interactions with space and place that counter capitalist and bourgeois constructions of property and value.

The interlude “The Remnant” explores Seventh-day Adventist notions of eschatology. Specifically, it explores Adventist notions of the remnant—the faithful who persevere through the religious persecution prophesied to attend the end of earth history. It relates this idealized community with the CHSDAC Adventists who endure the recurrent apocalypses of anti-Black violence like Black church burning.

Chapter 4, “The Icon: Black Sacred Matter/s,” interrogates artistic representations of Black church arson. By exploring the exhibition of *Anti-Mass*, a sculpture made from the remains of a burned Black church by Cornelia Parker in the de Young Museum in San Francisco, I examine a venue in which the public receives a material artifact of Black church arson in order to illuminate two public interpretations of the iconic burned Black church. The first interpretation is a dissident popular culture interpretation that critiques the appropriation of Black sacred materiality in the museum. The second is an ascendant multicultural interpretation that analogizes US multiculturalism with Christian notions of resurrection. Finally, I document my own autoethnographic reaction

to the artwork and propose a *lump corpoethetics* as a methodology that acknowledges the embodied dimensions of fieldwork, the witness work involved in writing about anti-Black religious violence, and the material circuit between art and body, between representation and material conditions.

The interlude “(Do) People Still Burn Black Churches(?)” writes against the consignment of Black church burning in the past and discusses the occurrence of Black church burnings after the CHSDAC burning in 2015.

The interlude “A Libation and Reparation: An Opening of Genre” outlines a case for speculative fiction as a mode of experimental reparation that applies social scientific, Adventist, and Black feminist epistemologies.

In the Afterwor(l)d, I apply Seventh-day Adventist apocalyptic imaginaries and notions of the remnant to imagine the sanctity and social surroundings of a burned Black church at the end of the world. Curry Hackett’s AI artwork enhances this speculative ending.

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N O T E S

Introduction

- 1 I use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of research collaborators.
- 2 For an ethnographer, this is the danger of writing to and from home. In her novel *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor presents a cautionary tale for the hometown ethnographer:

Look what happened when Reema's boy—the one with the pear-shaped head—came hauling himself back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder and a funny way of curling up his lip and clicking his teeth, all excited and determined to put Willow Springs on the map. . . . There weren't nothing to do but take pity on him as he rattled on about "ethnography," "unique speech patterns," "cultural preservation," and whatever else he seemed to be getting so much pleasure out of while talking into his little gray machine. He was all over the place—What 18 & 23 mean? What 18 & 23 mean? And we told him the God-honest truth: it was just our way of saying something. . . . And he sent everybody he'd talk to copies of the book he wrote, bound all nice with our name and his signed on the first page. We couldn't hold Reema down, she was so proud. It was a good thing she didn't read it. None of us made it much through the introduction, but that said it all: you see he had come to the conclusion after "extensive field work" . . . but he done still made it to the conclusion that 18 & 23 wasn't 18 & 23 at all—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on a map. And we were just so damned dumb that we turned the whole thing around. (Naylor 1993, 6–8).

I have tried to avoid the path of Reema's boy and to sit with local explanations and associations residents make with Black church

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arson, to acknowledge the connections between Black life, knowing, and theory making.

Interlude: “All They Did Was Just Open Up a Can of Love”

- 1 This expression derives from the Bible verse 1 John 4:18. As interpreted by the New International Version, it reads, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”
- 2 This expression derives from the Bible verse 2 Timothy 1:7. As interpreted by the New International Version, it reads, “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”

Chapter 1: The White Supremacist

- 1 I thank Christopher Strain for his work on Black church arson in the 1990s and for a set of scholarly exchanges we had during a Radcliffe Institute Accelerator Workshop on Religion, Race, and Violence from September 30 to October 1, 2021, that led to my use of the term *moral dispossession*, which I flesh out here.
- 2 The Burned Churches Project Records overseen by the Presbyterian Historical Society hold phone interview surveys about arson incidents that occurred across the country in the 1990s. In some instances, clergy and church leaders interviewed by the NCC Burned Churches Fund staff reported acts of vandalism against their churches prior to the arson, including recurring gunshots into church buildings, theft of church property, phone threats, damage of clergy property, and even a reported murder of a pastor’s pets.
- 3 The report mentions Speedville, Tennessee. It is possible this is an error, and the location is Sneedville, Tennessee.
- 4 Over a century separates the Memphis Massacre of 1866 and the three Boligee, Alabama, arsons in 1996. There are differences in political context. The Fourteenth Amendment provided African Americans with equal protection under the law in 1868. The FBI wasn’t founded until 1908, and the ATF wasn’t established until 1972. The comparison between churches attacked during the Memphis Massacre of 1866 and the Boligee arsons 130 years later is not an attempt to minimize the differences of context. Less is known about the churches affected by the massacre in 1866—due to local silencing of the traumatic event—so religious comparisons