

# Kincraft

*The Making of Black  
Evangelical Sociality*  
TODNE THOMAS



Kincraft

BUY

RELIGIOUS CULTURES OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN DIASPORA PEOPLE

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*The Making of Black Evangelical Sociality*

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TODNE THOMAS

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*This book is dedicated to my mother, father, and son.*

To my mother, Doris, who raised me as her daughter without ever clipping my wings. Thank you for being the kind of mother that stays up to keep me company during late-night writing sessions. You have given me the most fundamental lessons in family love. You have taught me that you never regret the love you pour into your kin. I enjoy watching you continue to grow into your gifts and watching you share them with others.

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## Introduction

When describing what it means to be part of a Christian community, Sister Clara Sutton—a sixty-two-year-old Afro-Trinidadian nurse and evangelical church member—concluded that Christians’ embodiment of the Holy Spirit fostered a special kinship:

It’s a unique relationship really that you meet people in another country from another place, and you have this one common bond. And they don’t really have to know you or know anything about you. But yet the Holy Spirit has made you all kin, and you know it. And that’s unique really. It doesn’t have to take long to form [a bond with other Christians] at all.

Sutton identified the Holy Spirit as a relating agent that connects Christians across space. This mutual recognition of a shared spiritual relationship tugs them *toward* and ties them *to* one another.

Brother Edward Warrington—an Afro-Jamaican elder—described Christian community as facilitating loving and special relationships grounded in their mutual salvation:

I’m comfortable with the saints. All of them. Male and female. I love the children. I just think it’s a wonderful relationship. I tell people when they’re grumbling, “I don’t know why you’re grumbling, or what you’re grumbling about. Look at all the people here who you get to have a relationship with.” But uh . . . people of God are very special. They occupy a very special place. You have been brought into the family of God. There’s a common acceptance of Jesus Christ.

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This book takes Sister Sutton, Brother Warrington, and some of their black evangelical spiritual kin at their word, and digs deep to understand how they conceptualize and enact their spiritual relationships.

*Kincraft: The Making of Black Evangelical Sociality* is an ethnographic exploration of the community created by the members of a black evangelical church association in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Set in two Afro-Caribbean and African American evangelical congregations named Dixon Bible Chapel (DBC) and Corinthian Bible Chapel (CBC), this project examines church members' spiritual definitions and enactments of family.<sup>1</sup> The black evangelicals of CBC and DBC enjoy a multi-layered religious belonging through spiritual kinship. This they manifest through discourse and practices of relatedness produced as "brothers and sisters in Christ," "spiritual mothers," "spiritual fathers," "spiritual children," and "prayer partners." The study of DBC and CBC evangelicals also reveals that black evangelicals are not the passive subjects of evangelical heteronormative family discourse. Rather, black evangelicals use their spiritual relationships as a mode of *kincraft* that speaks to their religious aspirations for Christian relationships and their lived material experiences with racialization, spatial mobility, and social mobility.

This book is the product of thirteen months of fieldwork in the Atlanta metropolitan area conducted from 2007 to 2008 and subsequent years of data analysis and deliberation. I conducted the majority of my research at DBC, in Lithonia, Georgia, a majority Afro-Caribbean and minority African American congregation. While there I interviewed about a third of the church congregation's membership and engaged in sustained participant observation in institutional and everyday community life. I also conducted a smaller number of interviews with members of CBC: a sister church located in downtown Atlanta, with an African American majority and Afro-Caribbean minority.

In many ways, the process by which I made my way to the DBC and CBC communities mirrors my navigation of the Atlanta metropolitan area's decentralized topography: slow (traffic-laden), roundabout (like the city's infamous circular Interstate 285), and made possible by the guiding voices of local residents. I first heard about the existence of DBC in the summer of 2006 while I was conducting preliminary summer research. Ann Marume, an Afro-Jamaican migrant and social worker who had moved to Atlanta during the 1980s, called it "a local West Indian church." She said that DBC's reputation among local Afro-Caribbean residents was of a church community that sensitively attended to the needs of Caribbean immigrants new to the area. Their quick incorporation of me into their church community as a young, single African American woman with no local relatives verified Marume's claim. I learned about its ethos of community

life as both a witness and a subject of local forms of religious belonging. Family was not just something that congregants did away from church in their homes with spouses and children. Family was also a community praxis, a collective spirituality that privileged and made space for Christian connections.

I learned that church members expressed their devotion to their chapel constituency in a variety of ways. Some demonstrated their commitment by regularly gathering with their fellow church members. They frequently attended Sunday church services as well as other weekly church programs such as the Tuesday-night prayer meeting, the Thursday-night Bible study, the Friday-night young adult gathering, or Sunday-evening cell-group meetings. In other instances, church members expressed their devotion to their community by undertaking the nuts-and-bolts leadership and work that kept the chapel running, such as leading Sunday Bible classes and youth educational programs, organizing meals for special events, and developing local and international outreach efforts. Other members conveyed their devotion to their church community by tightening the connections mediating religious fellowship. Through visits and hosting visitors, prayers, Bible studies, and the offering of material aid and advice, these church participants ensured that church membership was not solely a matter of affiliation but also of belonging.

Spiritual kinship was not only a matter of showing up but a conceptual project as well. The CBC and DBC evangelicals cognize their relationships to one another in a number of ways. Congregants expressed the belief that brothers and sisters in Christ should treat one another in the same ways as birth siblings. This was reflected in the common rejoinder to some of my questioning: “Family is family.” Through such ethical imaginaries, they closed the gap between the presumably “real” family relationships of biology and those of spiritual kin. The DBC and CBC members also depicted their spiritual family membership in terms of a universal Christian kinship or “family of God.” They held the belief that all Christians were sisters and brothers in Christ, regardless of the religious barriers or norms created by racial lines. Both evangelical church communities also understood their spiritual kinship with each other as perforating ethnic boundaries. They knew that familial church belonging bridged or elided the ethnic distinctions between Caribbean Americans and African Americans, and sustained fellowship beyond ethnic conflicts. These members evolved kinship worldviews that modeled alternatives to the racial/ethnic barriers and norms of US congregational life and that added expansive spiritual lexicons of family to a reified heteronormative family grammar.

In the realm of collective religious practices, church members enacted their relationships with one another through biblical, domestic, and reflective

practices. Through the common ritual of Bible study, church members produced a shared institutional identity as “Bible believers.” As individuals, all church members study the Bible frequently, but church-wide biblical exegesis during worship settings generated a special and exclusionary connection and understanding among churchmen. This institutionalized fraternalism coexisted with everyday spiritual communion among spiritual parents, spiritual children, and prayer partners. Through mundane practices of feeding, kitchen-table talk, prayer, and mentorship, these church members, and especially churchwomen, forged close spiritual connections that deepened and tightened the bonds of congregational life. The black evangelicals of this Atlanta constituency also created confessional intimacies to air their anxieties about marriage and child rearing. They used the close, emotional bonds of spiritual kinship and, in some instances, the context of the interview setting to demonstrate their reflexive engagement with traditional heteronormative family ideals.

This book illustrates that CBC and DBC members were evangelical Christians as a matter of faith but also a matter of relationship, and that they inhabited their evangelicalism thoughtfully. It also demonstrates that religion, kinship, and race descend from genealogical inheritances and collective practices of intention. By documenting the contexts in which black evangelicals reproduced the heteronormative family as well as the instances in which they mobilized spiritual kinship as a counterpoint to nuclear familial and congregational memberships, I illustrate black evangelicals’ complex relationship with evangelicalism and evangelical family values. In particular, I illuminate how black evangelicals create sacred solidarities and moralize them in relation to the alienations they associate with the boundaries of ethnicity, race, congregationalism, and the nuclear family in the United States. I illustrate how black evangelicals conscripted spiritual kinship to attend collectively to the moral and pragmatic demands of familial and religious life, as well as the material vulnerabilities that derived from antiblack racism, migration, and neoliberalism. Thus, the stream of evangelicalism they founded might be best considered an institutional and ideological response to popular sensibilities associated with mainstream US evangelicalism, black Church Christianity, urban ethnocongregationalism, and a project of collective spiritual alterity in its own right.

In addition to providing an ethnographic portrait of the social surroundings that constitute an Afro-diasporic evangelical community, this book responds to a double bind that hinders the study of black evangelicalism. The first aspect of this bind is a racial and religious mapping of US Christianity that locates black evangelicals between a white evangelicalism and a “Black Church” Christianity and obscures their unique perspectives. The second is a narrow analytical

focus on the heteronormative family, at times reproduced by DBC and CBC members themselves through their subscription to heteronormative family ideals, that obscures the broader social terrain of black evangelical religiosity.

I propose that black evangelical spiritual kinship is best studied as a manifestation of a phenomenon that I identify as *kincraft*: the collective relational ethos and community fashioning that undergirds black evangelical religiosity. Although my perspectives on kincraft emerge from my ethnographic collaborations with black evangelicals, I locate their origins within the broader field of the African Diaspora. This includes the mobilities, intersubjectivities, and sacred imaginaries that have shaped modes of collective black Christian social life and are not wholly reducible to the definitions popularly associated with dominant Anglo-American, bourgeois, and Christian constructs of nuclear kinship and denominationalism.

### A Note on Terminology

Definitions and terminology matter. I use the term *Afro-Caribbean* to refer to people, primarily of African descent, born in the countries of the anglophone Caribbean. In general, scholars of ethnicity and race consider Afro-Caribbean immigrants to be a distinctive black ethnic group. I employ the term *African American* to designate people of African descent born in the United States, including the second-generation children of Afro-Caribbean immigrants.<sup>2</sup> I understand African Americans to be a black ethnic group that is distinctive from Afro-Caribbean immigrants. I use the terms *black* and *Afro-diasporic* to refer to Afro-Caribbean and African American evangelical congregants collectively and to denote their shared racial locations in a US political landscape and their overlapping connections to African ancestry and New World histories of slavery and colonialism. Although I use the aforementioned terms, when possible I discuss church members' own use and contestations of ethnic and racial terminology to denote ethno-national and religious identities.

Members of the DBC and CBC most commonly refer to themselves as "Bible-believing" Christians. I use the term *evangelical* rather than *Bible-believing*<sup>3</sup> or *fundamentalist*<sup>4</sup> to locate church members more precisely within US and Caribbean religious landscapes. By *evangelical*, I refer to modes of religious expression that descend from nineteenth-century Anglo-American revivalist Protestant Christianity. In particular, the DBC and CBC communities are influenced by the evangelicalism of Plymouth Brethrenism—a nonconformist religious movement that began in Ireland in the 1820s and emphasized the unity of Christ, anticlericalism, antisectarianism, and the weekly observance of Communion (Hempton 2002). This movement subsequently spread to the anglophone

Caribbean in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Aymer 2016, 104), and was disseminated to African Americans in the South in the 1950s as a result of Afro-Caribbean evangelism.

Among the key ideas that emerged from this trans-Atlantic context is an emphasis on a born-again conversion experience, a common belief in the Bible as the literal word of God, the belief that spiritual convictions should be manifest in the realm of lived experience (or an attention to moral orthodoxy), and a strong disposition toward the expansion of the Christian community through missionary work (Bebbington 1989; Noll 2001, 13).

I use the term *black evangelical* to identify African American and Afro-Caribbean Christians who hold the key tenets associated with evangelicalism; who have personal or institutional connections with black Bible camps, Bible schools, and conservative churches that emerged in the post-World War II era (Miller 2000); and who differ from mainline African American Protestant Christians and black Pentecostals because of their independence from established black denominational structures (Potter 1979).<sup>5</sup>

I describe neo-evangelicalism in the United States as emerging with the establishment of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1940 and with the rise of the Moral Majority evangelical political coalition that coalesced around conservative family values in the 1970s. It is this strain of neo-evangelicalism that I identify as US mainstream evangelicalism and that I depict as a hegemonic, white religious project. The black evangelicalism in this ethnographic setting illuminates tense distinctions between the civic and religious projects of the “Black Church” and a mainstream white neo-evangelicalism.

The point of this work is not to undermine the historical legacy of the “black Church” (Savage 2008) as a vital institution of African American social life and a site for spiritual, liberatory, and redemptive imaginations; as a theological concept (R. Smith 2014);<sup>6</sup> or even as an important symbolic and material site of black social life in the twenty-first century. Rather, this book illustrates the ways in which blackness and Christianity (and the various means by which people craft affects and affinities in relationship to those constructs), as social facts, cannot be taken for granted in a US religious landscape molded by immigration, ethnic identity politics, “post-racial” racism, and projects of social mobility.

Ideas of family are socially constituted, culturally varied, and made through shared idioms and practices of relatedness (Carsten 2000; Franklin and McKinnon 2002). I use the term *the family* to refer to the heteropatriarchal family that is the dominant definition of family within US religious and secular social milieus. Within US evangelical culture, “the family” refers to an idealized unit that is associated with a hierarchy organized around patriarchal



familial leadership, wifely submission to male authority, and children's submission to parental authority, all of which some evangelicals understand to be divinely ordained and ordered (Gallagher 2003). Although my identification of the patriarchal nuclear family as "the family" marks its position as a dominant definition of family in the US, this book does not take "the family" to be the beginning and end of black evangelical reckonings of kinship. Rather, *kincraft* refers to a family beyond "the family" and invites us to the study of spiritually grounded notions of family that should be liberated from a narrower, dominant heteropatriarchal definition of kinship.

Finally, in identifying evangelical traditions I use the term *US* in lieu of *America* or *American* to avoid the imperialist equation of "Americans" as solely those within the United States while erasing the Caribbean, Central American, and South American composition of the Americas (Kaplan and Pease 1993).

### Locating Black Evangelicals in the US Religious Landscape

In *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction*, Mark Noll writes that "the relationship of African-American churches to evangelical traditions is complex" (2001, 14). There are many reasons that it is difficult to locate black evangelical experiences within the broader landscape of US Christianity. Christianities in the US are multiple, varied, coexistent, and contested.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the designation *evangelical* can be defined in historical, missiological, soteriological, scriptural, and political terms.<sup>8</sup>

I propose that the challenge of locating black evangelicals within the US congregational landscape is not merely a question of defining what constitutes an evangelical but that it is the result of the racing of religion in the US. Race and religion in the United States are conjoined social phenomena; and in the case of evangelical Christianity, they can even be co-essentialized. Black evangelicalism falls between popular racial and religious models that distinguish a "conservative white evangelicalism" and a "liberal black Church Christianity." To discuss the position of black evangelicals in the religious landscape of the US requires one to address their seeming illegibility as minoritized racial subjects on the one hand or as black Christian outliers on the other.

#### BLACK EVANGELICALS AND THE RACIAL HEGEMONY OF WHITE EVANGELICALS

Black evangelicals are a diverse group of people who have planted, adapted, critiqued, and reformed evangelical Protestantism in the Americas. They have participated in the religious contexts generated by the First and Second Great

Awakenings, the evangelicalism of the violently antiblack postbellum era, and the neo-evangelicalism that emerged in the post–World War II era.

To trace the history of black evangelicalism, a history that is still under construction, is beyond the scope of this project. Yet there is a need to continue turning North American evangelical studies inside out to denote the nuanced positioning and socioreligious work conducted by black evangelicals. There is also a need to understand the symbiotic relationship of predominantly white evangelical Christian groups to antiblack racism.

The mainstream neo-evangelicalism in the United States that emerged in the mid-twentieth century and that has only more recently been qualified in racial terms has operated as a hegemonic, white religious movement. The 1950s witnessed a neo-evangelicalism that retreated from a previous orientation of social engagement to a deep emphasis on personal conversion, salvation, and an aversion to discussing political matters. By the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, this white neo-evangelical mainstream began to have conversations about racial equality and rebuked racism as sin (Mullin 2014).

T. Michael Flowers, the Bahamian evangelist who in the 1950s founded the southeastern church network of which CBC and DBC are a part, participated in the changing evangelical landscape of the 1960s by collaborating with black evangelical luminaries such as Tom Skinner to create integrated religious revivals. Flowers also partnered with white evangelicals; inserted himself into a southern, white US evangelicalism; and advocated for a more inclusive evangelical Christianity that included black Christians as religious agents. As an evangelist, Flowers authored theologies of interracialism and universal Christian relatedness. And in imagining transcendent Christian kinship, which included a family of God with black evangelicals, Flowers pushed against the theological and organizational dominance of white framers of neo-evangelicalism.<sup>9</sup> As Flowers founded the southeastern evangelical church association of which CBC and DBC were a part, he also called out white evangelical complicity in racial segregation and fostered contexts of interracial religious collaboration.

The 1960s and 1970s saw progressive and black evangelicals express their disenchantment with anti-systemic approaches to race articulated by mainstream evangelical organizations such as the National Evangelical Association, evangelical periodicals such as *Christianity Today*, and the broader coalescence of the Christian Right. These included an ongoing framing of racism as a matter of individual sinfulness and an aversion to patterns of wealth inequality (Gasaway 2014; Rah 2019). In time, such critiques of a mainstream anti-systemic framing of race gave birth to intra-religious evangelical organizations such as the National Black Evangelical Association in 1963 and the Sojourners community in 1971.

The 1990s witnessed the “religious race bridging project” of the evangelical racial reconciliation movement (Wadsworth 2014, 83). Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith attribute this movement to black Christian leaders such as John Perkins, Tom Skinner, and the Jamaican minister Samuel Hines. These African American and Afro-Caribbean evangelists were willing to collaborate with white evangelicals and, unlike many of their black Protestant contemporaries, were “all willing to use the term *evangelical*” (Emerson and Smith 2000, 54). Framers of the movement, such as Perkins, Skinner, and Hines, outlined interracial reconciliation as a spiritual and material project. This conciliatory para-church crusade generated a spiritual-relational frame that fostered ritualized scenes of interracial repentance on the part of whites and forgiveness on the part of blacks, and, in some instances, contexts of cross-racial worship and congregationalism (Wadsworth 2014). The racial reconciliation project was also “a radical democratic project” that issued a “call for changing unjust structures of society” through material redistribution, such as the community development and antipoverty work conducted by John Perkins’s Christian Community Development Association (Alumkal 2004, 199). The efforts of this reconciliation movement embodied in organizations such as Promise Keepers and the move toward multiracial congregationalism has largely been considered meaningful and symbolic but as having little impact on ameliorating racial inequality in terms of redistributive efforts (Edwards 2014; Wadsworth 2014).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the whiteness of US evangelicalism persists. This whiteness is partially demographic in character. According to the Pew Research Center, evangelicals constitute 25 percent of the Christian population in the United States. Within that constituency, whites constitute 76 percent of the total national evangelical community, followed by Latinos at 11 percent, blacks at 6 percent, and Asians at 2 percent.<sup>10</sup> The whiteness of evangelicalism is also a product of racial hegemony. And the workings of that hegemony—the intellectual and moral touchstones that shape the commonsense understandings of a dominant population—is not merely a matter of numbers but of power. The whiteness of US neo-evangelicalism exists as a constellation of interpersonal and corporate notions of race that reproduce white racial and representational privilege and obscure the unique social locations, perspectives, and institutional loci of religious practitioners such as black evangelicals (Blum 2014).<sup>11</sup> Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann argue that mainstream US evangelicalism possesses a racialized religious culture and an emphasis on individualism responsible for “normalizing the very cultural practices, beliefs, and norms that privilege white Americans over others” (2008, 342). The effect of centralizing white privilege has been to “marginaliz[e]

and exclud[e] the African American experience” within US evangelical settings (Tranby and Hartmann 2008, 347).

Antony Alummkal explains in greater detail contemporary evangelicalism as a white racial project:

The spread of the mainstream racial project among white Americans could be interpreted as a response to the crisis of white identity. Defining racism as a spiritual problem that is immune to secular solutions gives whites license to oppose affirmative action, welfare, and other divisive government programs. Furthermore, whites who are nostalgic for a sense of ethnic attachment can treat evangelical Christianity as a quasi-ethnic identity, a move that is encouraged by evangelicals’ sense of themselves as an embattled religious minority in the United States. Finally, whites can respond to their history as “oppressors” by cathartic acts of repentance, as well as by assertions that Christian identity transcends race, while fully retaining the fruits of white privilege. (2004, 205)

US evangelicalism provides venues for the validation of white moral and material supremacy. White evangelicals tend to deride redistributive efforts to ameliorate the effects of racism as worldly political measures. They diffuse the reality of white privilege through the religious subjection of white identity or claims of moral minoritization. As a result, white evangelical schemas of material and representational privilege remain intact. In such a racio-religious context, “the evangelical” is popularly imagined and studied as white. There is a tendency to typify black evangelicals as tropic outsiders without the means of representational and institutional production to render themselves as insiders.

Nonetheless, this book is neither a reflection on mainstream white evangelicalism nor an effort to use black evangelical religious experiences to deduce the racialization processes of white neo-evangelicalism. Rather, it is an effort to locate black evangelicals at the center of their own religious story. The brief outlines of black evangelicalism’s coexistence with white evangelicalism listed above disturb characterizations of black evangelicals as a Christian model minority interested in assimilating white evangelical religious culture. As I will show, black evangelicals not only participate in a white mainstream US evangelicalism but also challenge the racial orientations of its hegemonic whiteness at the level of ideas and independent institutions. In addition to dealing with racial difference within the broader crosscurrents of US evangelicalism, DBC and CBC members also navigate plurality within their own ranks. This book’s centering of black evangelicals therefore shows them not only in relation to a

metanarrative of US evangelical interracialism but also engaged in the work of building social bridges among themselves and diasporic networks of relatedness that move beyond the racial axis of reconciliation.

#### BLACK EVANGELICALS AND THE CIVIC RELIGION OF “THE BLACK CHURCH”

Scholars have called for greater attention to the plural institutional, political, theological, and multiethnic strands that make up the “Black Church.” An examination of the relationship of black evangelicals to the broader field of African American Christianity tempers some of the institutional orientations ascribed to Black Church Christianity in the United States.

Scholars of African American Christianity have explored how the construct of the “Black Church” led to reductive depictions of African American and Afro-diasporic Christians as a unified racial, religious, and civic block. Curtis J. Evans (2008) notes the irony that it was African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois who helped to create the generalizing trope of the Negro Church in employing a methodology that emphasized the significance of local particularities. Evans comments on one of the limitations of the Negro Church construct coined by black social scientists such as Du Bois in the early twentieth century: “The construction of the Negro Church (and its now common appellation, the black Church) has obscured the very real differences among African Americans that Du Bois himself detected, and it has rendered invisible or regressive those black religious groups and practices that do not fit into such categories as progressive or prophetic” (2008, 165).

Evans acknowledges that the invention of the Black Church was a pragmatic move on the part of black social scientists and activists to promote a common agenda for black social reform and political empowerment during a nadir in US race relations. He further argues that the moniker the “Black Church” suggests a uniformity in African American Christian practice that does not hold up when read against historical or contemporary accounts of black religious communities.<sup>12</sup> Anthropologist Marla Frederick also observes that “within the larger corpus of black church studies, we researchers often operate with a bias toward black ‘progressive’ religion, the tradition of sit-ins, boycotts, and struggles for justice” (2016, 6). The articulation of a black evangelical or conservative politics cannot be equated with deracination, nor does it preclude DBC and CBC members’ constructions of significant reflections on blackness and black Christian expressions.

Black evangelicals tend to be understood as ideologues who prioritize separate evangelical religious values over a religious culture of the Black Church,

characterized by independent institutions; critical, countercultural theologies; forms of exilic consciousness; charismatic leadership; and civic activism (McGlathery and Griffin 2007). Black evangelicals could be cast as race traitors of sorts who are associated with a conservative, individualistic, values-oriented paradigm that benefits a white evangelical majority over a redistributive political orientation popularly associated with the Black Church and black social progress—as people who value ideology over material conditions.

Such a posture is well illustrated by the ideological leanings of Sister Dolores Regent, a former African American member of DBC who asserted that her vocal support of the Republican candidate George Bush Jr. in the elections of 2000 and 2004 estranged her from family members and other black Christians who questioned her prioritization of moral values over a set of liberal political leanings typically associated with US blacks.

Nonetheless, my research disturbs this reading of black evangelicals as religious subjects who privilege their religious over their racial locations. DBC and CBC members voiced a variety of political leanings during my primary year of fieldwork in 2008, a presidential election year in which the nation elected its first black president. For example, during a Tuesday-night prayer meeting in which a group of eight women arranged their chairs into a circle for a prayer session, Sister Anita Edmondson (a Jamaican woman in her sixties) offered a last-minute prayer request: that women pray for the upcoming presidential election because “the country was in need of change”: a veiled reference in support of Democratic contender Barack Obama. In her turn, Sister Ethel Roxbury (also a Jamaican sexagenarian woman), a long-time friend and prayer partner of Edmondson, politely countered that as Christians they should pray and support leaders who emphasize “godly values,” a coded statement that signaled her backing of Republican nominee John McCain.

The exchange between Sister Edmondson and Sister Roxbury reveals the diversity of black evangelical political leanings and the inadequacies of unilaterally equating black evangelicals with the Christian Right voting bloc.<sup>13</sup> Black evangelicals cannot be neatly mapped onto the political axis of the Right, nor can black Christians in the US be located on the Left, or depicted as prioritizing a single set of “racial” or “religious” sentiments or positions in the election process. The coexistence of black evangelical identities with Republican political orientations and the desire of some black evangelicals to identify with a more universalized Christian identity rather than a black Christian religious community may not seem consonant with political sensibilities popularly associated with African American Protestant traditions that are authored around an intentional and self-identified blackness.

Afro-Caribbean evangelicals also hold political solidarities conditioned by transnational, postcolonial, and material locations that cannot be neatly inserted into the amorphous political slot of “African American” or the conservative or liberal poles of US political partnership or Christian civil religions. Yet the black Christian communities forged by black immigrant populations and communities outside of the Afro-Protestant mainline are nonetheless often folded into the monolithic construct of the “Black Church” rather than being engaged as juxtaposed, co-occurring, or even very different from more-mainstream formations.

This tendency to assimilate black Christian traditions within the racial, institutional, and civic construct of the “Black Church” also proves problematic in understanding the intraracial and intra-religious distinctions made by DBC and CBC members. The black evangelicals of DBC and CBC contrast their religious project with a negative stereotype they hold about black churches as misguided by charismatic, hierarchical leadership and the absence of sound biblical teaching. Congregants locate themselves against a “Black Church” trope that they create and use to authenticate their own religious project, in particular their emphasis on Bible study and biblical literalism. Thus, the black evangelicalism practiced by DBC and CBC members is very much animated by textual concerns and not just the civic and material interests that stem from the antiblack racism that is associated with a progressive Afro-Protestant mainline.

This book questions and maps the plural expressions of African American Christianity in North America that emerge across fields of religious practice, sociopolitical aspirations, and cultural imaginations. By applying contemporary scholarship, I take seriously the ways in which religion and race interface to create modes of difference, privilege, and disenfranchisement. By applying a critical perspective on religious and racial representation, I expose how morally constituted polarities of Right and Left, liberal and conservative, civil Christianity and Christ-focused evangelicalism, political and the personal, white and black—and if we acknowledge local categories, between black Bible believers and black church followers—can obscure modes of life, religious practice, and relationalities that exist between and across US social divides.

### The Craft of Black Evangelical Spiritual Kinship

Although scholars may inquire about the locations of black evangelicals within a US religious landscape, the social contexts that concern black evangelical religious practitioners are often quite different. My time spent with DBC and CBC congregants exposed me to the generative project of their collective religious

participation: their production of a multi-layered sense of belonging mediated by their spiritual kinship relationships. As a researcher, I held space for their stories of relationship, and I served as a witness to the language and practices of relationship they used to make themselves into a familial community. Their socio-religious networks comprise ties that bind spirit to spirit, member to member, and kin to kin. We might imagine some of these ties that bind as being composed of cords that are smooth to the touch. They bring pleasure when touched. They are a joy to discuss. Eyes light up with pleasure when discussing their beauty. Other ties are strong and durable. They invite compliments about their strength, meditations on their durability. Other ties are long. They reach far and connect people across great distances; some are trans-local, some extend across distances that surprise and are difficult to conceive. And we can imagine that some ties are rough. They are held together by knots, tied with determined hands despite the fibers unraveling. Such ties are still holding on, still a testament to a tense and textured story. And there are yet others, ones that dissolved, that did not turn out as anticipated, that are coated in silence, sighs, or whispers.

Brother Bernard Stewart, an Afro-Trinidadian member of DBC who later became my spiritual father, presented a compelling imagery of such ties—such spiritual intersubjectivity—during an interview:

In that church family, I consider that you have church kin. Those who are near and dear to you like Todne—church kin you know? When I say Todne, I feel a sense of closeness. It's like I can almost feel myself wrapping myself around Todne or ummm . . . church kin. Sister Hamilton is church kin. I can feel myself wrapping around Sister Hamilton. I can sit down and talk to Sister Hamilton for hours and never get bored. You get where I'm coming from? [As] church family, once you're bought by the blood of Jesus Christ and you're a Christian, you're one of His. You're a part of church family but not necessarily church kin. You get where I'm coming from. There's a closeness. . . . There's a binding, right?

In Stewart's opinion, Christians inherited "church family" after "being bought by the blood of Jesus Christ." Yet Stewart drew my attention to another dimension of relatedness that stemmed from a closeness that came from deep communion and affinity. Church kinship, by his estimation, was a binding that was also pleasurable to experience and renew, that was not derivative of membership but that ignited the joys of speaking of a "we" or an "us."

Such DBC and CBC evangelicals as Brother Bernard Stewart imagine, produce, and narrate spiritually defined relationships. By inhabiting the social field



of spiritual kinship, they connect religious doctrine with lived experience, join spiritual ideals with material conditions, and participate in an Afro-diasporic religious phenomenon I define as kincraft. Such DBC and CBC members inhabit a broader tradition in which Afro-diasporic religious practitioners have conscripted kinship discourse and practices that adjoin religious and spiritual worldviews.

Church members engage in the language and work of kincraft—of making one another spiritual kin—between a rock and a hard place. As Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans, church members inhabit broader political landscapes that have depicted black family ways negatively as pathological. As evangelical Christians, DBC and CBC congregants also possess a religious subculture that prioritizes the formation of heteronormative family households as an expression of religious piety.

My discussion of black evangelical kincraft is not intended to reproduce notions of black family pathology or to mute black aspirations for heteronormative family arrangements. Instead, by denoting black evangelical spiritual kinship as kincraft, I acknowledge the craftsmanship and collective labor that undergird black evangelical sociality. In the words of poet Elizabeth Alexander, I write out of a “veneration of the sweat of the craft” (2004, 52). My work is grounded in a profound appreciation of the dynamic tapestry of relationships patterned by ideological designs and collective intentions in contexts of teaching and learning, confiding correction and giving, a warp and weft fashioned by hands, starts, repetitions, do-overs, and repairs, a tapestry that I was able to see in sections, that although already a relic (for it has now become something else), I attempt to narrate here.

#### THE REALITIES AND HIERARCHIES OF KINSHIP LABORS

In discussing kinship in terms of craft, I draw upon important changes in the field of kinship studies. Conventionally, anthropologists have defined kinship in terms of marriage and biological relationships of descent. Such scholars have also designated nonbiological kinship relationships, such as spiritual relationships, as “fictive” kinship (Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody 1994; Dill 1993; Ibsen and Klobus 1972; Nelson 2013). Yet to call nonbiological reckonings of kinship “fictive” presumes the singular authenticity of biological and genealogical kinship. It assumes that family is fundamentally a construct of biogenetic descent.<sup>14</sup> But what crowds around the margins of the “real”? What rests in the shadow of the “fictive” and therefore remains unseen or is misrecognized?

My work builds upon reconstituted kinship studies that emerged from a critique of anthropologists’ ethnocentric use of the Western genealogical categories

for cross-cultural kinship studies (Schneider 1984). In particular, my work draws upon a feminist and queer anthropological approach to the study of kinship that examines local idioms, categories, and intentional practices of kinship (Carsten 2000; Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Weston 1991). Central to this feminist approach is Janet Carsten's definition of *relatedness*—the lived experience of being related as conveyed in terms of local statements and practices, particularly of sentiment, substance, and nurturance. Her definition has allowed me to take seriously church members' idioms of spiritual kinship (2000, 2, 3, 22).

I also build on cultural definitions of kinship like those that Marshall Sahlins outlines. He argues against the analytical use of “the going biologism” encoded in dominant Anglo-American reckonings of family (2013, 66). Instead, Sahlins calls for an examination of kinship that gives credence to how people construct “mutuality of being” and “participat[e] in one another's existence” (2013, 2, 18). This intersubjectivity recalls Brother Bernard Stewart's description of “church kin” as feeling oneself wrapped around another self. Sahlins's outline of kinship also calls attention to cultural modes of relating that stem from the collective participation in shared existence, whether it be the talking that Brother Stewart described as creating closeness or the prayer, mentorship, or biblical study that creates opportunities for people to invest deeply in one another's lives.

My identification of black evangelical spiritual kinship as a craft is not interested in assessing whether these relationships are “fictive” or “real.” Instead, I offer *kincraft* as an aperture through which to view a spiritual relatedness that emerges locally through shared utterances and performances of relationship both inside and beyond church walls. This encourages a more open-ended conceptual journey into the interiority of black social life.

My study extends feminist scholars' observations that the family is a site from which to view the oppression of women and broader workings of power. As Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney argue, social bonds and identities that are “ascribed a nonhuman basis, whether in biology, nature, or god . . . legitimize hierarchies of difference in which power relations are embedded. In short, all naturalize power” (1995, 20). Notions of family, whether grounded in biology or spirit, can be used as discursive and ontological justification for patriarchal power. Patricia Hill Collins similarly asserts that “‘family values’ . . . lay the foundation for many social hierarchies. In particular, hierarchies of gender, wealth, age, and sexuality” (1998, 64). The study of the family is therefore a study of the ideological constructions not only of complementarity but also inequality.

I consciously use *kincraft* (and by extension the notion of craftsmanship) to illuminate the positioning of black Christian women within broader crosscurrents of gendered kinship labor. According to theologian Dolores S. Williams,

black women have been forced to serve as substitute sexual partners to white men, as mothers to white children, as managers of white plantation households, as masculine laborers, and as protectors of black households (1993). Williams also notes that black Christian women have been exposed to popular theologies that associate surrogacy with redemption: a messiah who substitutes his death for the salvation of humanity. Christian notions of salvation have thus been associated with sanctifying and even coercing black women's reproductive and familial labor.

The relationship between salvation and black women's kinwork is not merely conceptual. As Judith Casselberry discusses in her study of African American women members of the Pentecostal Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith (COOLJC) denomination, "doctrinal notions of black religious female personhood" motivate their institutional, physical, and emotional labors in church auxiliary organizations that support the church's male leadership (2017, 79–80). Although women become adept at managing their multiple commitments, Casselberry notes that "these women's work as spiritual mother, natural mother, and wife demands more time than they actually have" (2017, 101). The overlap of household and church work generates a heavier work burden for women than for men. The realities of kincraft are manifested in the disproportionate and unequal labors of black evangelical women (compared to men).

There is no such thing as craft without labor. I offer my ethnographic rendition of black evangelical kincraft with the awareness that all labor is not treated equally, that craftsmanship, like public sphere labor, is often made possible via differentiated and differently valued craftswomanship and women's private sphere labors. The exegetical and textual labor that frames familial ideology holds different currency than the everyday labor of churchwomen in practices of feeding, care, mentorship, and prayer, labor that I identify as a sacrament. This book's analytical lens is situated critically amid the local hierarchies of visibility and recognition that surround the production of spiritual kinship. Although patriarchal power can condition unequal hierarchies of visibility inside and outside of the DBC and CBC communities, it does not preclude the extra-institutional workings of women's spiritual authority, critique, and ingenuity.

FROM KINLESSNESS TO KIN POSSIBILITIES:  
VIEWS FROM THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

This project is an ethnographic story of the black evangelicals of CBC and DBC who constructed themselves intersubjectively as spiritual kin. It is also a study of a broader collection of stories of black people mobilizing, revising, and reinventing

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a discourse that they did not own in order to lay claim to themselves and one another as kin. On occasion, blacks used kincraft to profess their relationality with enslaved blacks who were, at one time, literally deemed to be the property of others and marked not only as chattel but also as kinless (Spillers 1987, 74).<sup>15</sup> This meant that Afro-diasporic people inhabited (and to an extent still inhabit) conditions of “genealogical unfreedom” that existed “outside the precincts of protected human kinship” (Bentley 2009, 273, 276). Black families, like black people, were not free.

Yet unfreedom should not be equated with nonexistence. In her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers concludes that kinship had “no decisive social or legal efficacy” (1987, 75). Yet Spillers also depicts the social worlds that would have been inhabited by enslaved black people in the following manner: “The captive person developed, time and again, certain ethical and sentimental features that tied her and him, *across* the landscape to others, often sold from hand to hand, of the same and different blood in a common fabric of memory and inspiration” (1987, 75).

Spillers acknowledges that slavery did not preclude blacks’ symbolic constructions of kinship. Instead, from her perspective, ethics, sentiment, ties across landscape, same and different blood, memory, and inspiration all constituted the etchings of black kin-making during enslavement. Blacks’ nonownership of a propertied kinship discourse did not prevent them from naming and claiming their kin.

Kinship in the late British and Caribbean postcolonial world and the pre- and post-civil rights US remained and remains a racialized system. Family normality, and its attendant moral capital, belonged overwhelmingly to people of European descent. The families of people of African descent were essentialized as dysfunctional. In particular, female-headed households were deemed to be epistemic of black family pathology rather than an outgrowth of socioeconomic disenfranchisement, migration, or public policy that prioritized mother-centered families for support (Moynihan 1965).

Black churches in the Caribbean and the US also popularized heteronormative family arrangements. They provided land settlements that fostered the creation of Baptist villages and approximations of bourgeois property-holding familial units, and offered other forms of material support to families navigating the social and economic disruptions of domestic and international migration (Besson 2002; Drake and Cayton 2015 [1945]; Du Bois 1995 [1899]). They also became sites for moral adjudication and political organizing around a respectability politics: the advocacy of approximating heteronormative gender, sexual, and family arrangements as a means of combating racist assumptions

about black morality and sexuality (Higginbotham 1993). The yearning for normativity conditioned by racialized notions of black pathology reproduced desire and created religious projects for blacks to be born again as bourgeois kin.

Heteronormative familial aspirations and familial reckonings of black collective identity are not universally embraced. Indeed, Paul Gilroy roundly critiques the grounding of black public sphere identities within familial metaphors and imaginaries. He insists that centering the family generates a black “biopolitics” that defines community “as a radical localism and ‘a simple accumulation of symmetrical units’” (1994, 58–59). This familial localism and the reproduction of racialized scripts of gender differences as a gloss for racial authenticity “narrows the horizon of any lingering aspiration towards social change” (1994, 59, 66). Given the ways in which white heteronormativity has been constructed in relation to black sexual pathology—(think of the Moynihan Report’s damaging representations of black female-headed households as the source of black family dysfunction)—Tiffany Lethabo King has even provocatively called for the abolition of “the family” as a framework for black social life (2018).

I maintain that black evangelical spiritual kinship can offer us theoretical insights into the constructed character of the seemingly natural heteropatriarchal family and the alternative ethos of familial connections forged via collective experiences with disenfranchisement, spiritual imagination, and migration. In short, kincraft holds deconstructive and constructive bases. When located within the broader history of the African Diaspora, kincraft descends from a critical consciousness about the contexts and frames of conventional Western heteronormative notions of kinship. The spiritual kinship created by black evangelicals holds a *beyond* that is dually conditioned by Christian notions of transcendence but also by diasporic conditions that have required productions of kinship in and beyond normative frames. The diasporic effect on kincraft is the creation of kinship as a frame beyond a frame. This “beyond” of Afro-diasporic religious sociality is found in Spillers’s depiction of the kinship created by captives that “tied him and her *across* the landscape to others” (1987, 75). Kin ties, even when not owned by enslaved people of African descent, created lateral connections across space and persons.

My research demonstrates that beyond CBC and DBC spiritual kinship, congregants not only make relationships; they also inherit a tradition of Afro-diasporic semiotic audacity (even against the literalism and orthodoxy of heteronormativity and evangelical biblicism): an audacity of black people making ways out of no ways, of the across, of creating pathways to one another amid forced displacements, of forging hybrid discourses to name those relationships within dominant nonrecognitions of black kinship. Even as they engage in

auspicious modes of conformity to the heteronormative ideals of evangelical family values, CBC and DBC members are also inheritors and practitioners of this co-occurring kincraft. Consequently, they foster broad forms of connection and reflexive awareness of the enclosures created by nuclear family, ethnicity/race, and congregational membership. In so doing they themselves relativize normative kinship arrangements.

## Research Setting and Methods

I came to this research as a southern African American religious subject who has a proximity to evangelical Christian religious ways. My formative religious years were spent in an African American Presbyterian church. I attended a predominately white evangelical Baptist primary school called Knoxville Baptist Christian School from kindergarten through middle school. From ages five to thirteen, I became intimately acquainted with the worldviews and scriptural readings of a neo-evangelicalism associated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Placing me in an evangelical school was a way for my parents to opt out of a segregated school system that underfunded black schools in my neighborhood relative to predominantly white schools across town. My Christian school, which emphasized biblical teaching, was known for promoting strong literacy skills and discipline. This appealed to my parents. But their decision to enroll me in an evangelical school was mostly a pragmatic response to racial segregation; it was not informed by a desire for the inculcation of evangelical religiosity.

I lived between two religious worlds, and although I inhabited both, I was raised with the idea that the Christianity at school was somehow not quite for me. When I tried to reconcile the school and church Christianity, I received tacit messages over the years that Monday-to-Friday school evangelicalism and home church religion were separate, different, and should be kept that way.

Thus, my own religious and educational history is located on the fault lines of religion and race and of liberal and conservative Protestantism. An examination of how CBC and DBC evangelicals navigate their ethno-racial and religious identities in contexts that somehow presume their incommensurability can teach us all much about our own hidden scripts about religious identities and boundaries.

My performance of a Christian identity through my familiarity with biblical and ritual knowledge, religious hymns, and Christian discourse greatly helped me participate in DBC religious life and provided a helpful footing for important research collaborations. My religious identity added another layer to members' emic categorizations of me as a curious student: it allowed them

to see me as “Sister Todne.” Thus, DBC respondents entrusted their points of view to an anthropologist with a Christian background, expecting that on some level their perspectives would be understood.

Despite the important common ground that we shared, there were some salient differences that shaped my locations within the DBC and CBC communities. As an African American, I came from a different ethnic background than the churches’ Afro-Caribbean membership. My gender also shaped the field of my interactions, often providing deep views into women’s everyday spirituality and little to no first-hand views of male homosocial spiritual connections. I also found myself philosophically at odds with church teachings about divinely mandated heteropatriarchal sexual and gender hierarchies. Also, as a participant in the Black Church tradition and a pan-Africanist in my political orientation, I was more amenable to the study of spiritual kinship (popularly known in Black Church vernacular as “church family”) and less disposed to analyze fully members’ claims of universal Christian connection. This is a tendency I have worked hard to correct since conducting fieldwork and one that has raised important representational questions for me about how to write about universal religious aspirations in the wake of religious and ethno-racial differences. Despite our differences, members’ entrustment to me of their life stories and their overwhelming hospitality perhaps provides another powerful illustration of the ways in which they not only believed but also sought to practice their ideals of universal and transcendent connection. As I acquainted myself with their theology, I began to see these differences not as a barrier but as an opportunity that made me a teachable subject. It was not an evangelicalism I knew, but it was an evangelicalism that they eagerly taught me.

Over the course of fieldwork I employed three primary methods of data collection: interviews, archival research, and participant observation. First, I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty-seven evangelical respondents individually and, at times, with married couples; it depended on participants’ preferences.<sup>16</sup> I designed the interview questions to elicit the following classes of information: general demographic information, migration information, religious experience and church participation data, perspectives on church and family relationships, and participants’ self-selected testimonies about church community.

Collectively, the group of participants with whom I collaborated represented a broad variety of cultural backgrounds and religious experiences. I interviewed twenty women and seventeen men. The large majority of participants were between the ages of fifty and sixty-nine. Ten interview respondents were born in the United States. Twenty-seven research collaborators were born in the Caribbean. They came from several countries of origin, including the Bahamas,

Trinidad, and Barbados.<sup>17</sup> The largest Afro-Caribbean population was Jamaican. They participated in a variety of non-Brethren religious traditions prior to their membership at DBC, including Baptist, Catholic, Anglican, and Pentecostal traditions, as well as having no prior religious affiliation. Congregants also listed family connections, employment and education, and difference in environment as motivating their international and domestic migrations to the Atlanta cityscape. The participants whom I interviewed resided in suburbs throughout the Atlanta metropolitan area, with church members being loosely concentrated in the Stone Mountain, Lithonia, and Decatur communities within and around DeKalb County.

Second, I analyzed church anniversary booklets, oral history archives, and the historical perspectives offered by founding church members in their recollections of the emergence of CBC and DBC. I also read the writings of Brethren theologians recommended by church leaders to learn more about the history and central ideas of Plymouth Brethrenism. Finally, I read independent scholarship about Brethrenism and the particular Brethren church network of which DBC and CBC are a part, as well as scholarship published by other Christian and academic organizations.

Third, I used participant observation to develop a firsthand understanding of the relationships, scope, and operation of church community in the religious worlds of DBC members (and, less frequently, those of the CBC). Because my participant observation took place among a group of religious participants who were serious Christians and were for the most part devoted to their church community, I attended a lot of church events inside and beyond the chapel walls. Sunday church gatherings involved at least a five-hour commitment from the beginning of the earliest service to the end of the last one. I regularly attended four Bible studies per week at church and inside members' homes. I also traveled with members to other Brethren church events in the Atlanta metropolitan area and throughout the Southeast, and attended church-sponsored conferences, retreats, and banquets. Finally, I participated in some of the impromptu gatherings of church members that were not centered on a particular religious practice but organized for the pure enjoyment of communion. Some of the scenes of my research could be as conventional as me sitting in the sanctuary during a Sunday morning service, chatting informally with church members on a weekday evening in the parking lot amid Georgia humidity and mosquito nibbling, eating the tasty foodstuffs of church banquets, working as a Vacation Bible School instructor, offering and receiving the prayer requests and praise reports of others, and speaking about the challenges of faith over a cup of tea and biscuits in church members' homes.



I was also “adopted” by two married couples at DBC with whom I spent a great deal of time. They taught me experientially about the meanings, ideals, and performances of spiritual kinship. They generously shared their life stories and knowledge, and they made space for me to do the same. More than anything else, they modeled for me the kinds of intimacies that spiritual kinship makes possible. They were indispensable to the research process.

A small number of members expressed their community solidarities by voicing their questions, desires, and concerns about how their church would be represented in my work. During the first season of my research at DBC, Sister Yvette Goode, a young mother of two, implored, “Please don’t write anything bad about my church!” In a very different yet no less adamant request, a senior brother at the church challenged me to “Write it all—the good and the bad. If we’re Christians, we’re supposed to be concerned with the truth.” Perhaps somewhere between church members’ expectations of a scathingly negative image or useful critical portrait of church life was an alternative interpretation of the project as an evangelistic tool that could potentially show readers the value of being a Christian and knowing the Lord.

In recognition of the myriad concerns of church members, whose commitment to their faith and their church have earned my deepest respect, and of my own research agenda, I have endeavored to write an ethnography that demonstrates the complexities of church members’ multi-layered religious attachments as well as their sincere dedication to community. Nonetheless, the images of community you will find in the chapters that follow originate from my complex placement in the webs of socio-spiritual relationships as an observer who is some parts “stranger,” “friend,” and “kin.” I attempted to balance the competing and unresolvable demands of distance and rapport typically associated with social scientific research as well as my personal loyalties as a situated DBC community participant (Thomas 2016).

## Outline of Chapters

Part I, “Contextualizing the Social Dimensions of a Black Evangelical Religious Movement,” examines the ideological, historical, and ethno-racial settings in which CBC and DBC members author and mobilize their claims of spiritual kinship. In particular, the first section conducts a genealogy of the diasporic, religious, and material conditions that precipitate DBC members’ spiritual kinship ideals, and it examines the critical racial consciousness and boundary-crossing aspirations of church members’ reckonings of spiritual kinship. It offers a view of the ethnographic setting and the broader diasporic, historical,

and local urban context in which church members render their spiritual kinship claims and aspirations.

Chapter 1, “On ‘Godly Family’ and ‘Family Roots’: Creating Kinship Worlds,” explores the evangelical and diasporic sources of Afro-Caribbean and African American evangelicals’ genealogical constructions of spiritual kinship. It also examines how black evangelicals often construct their kinship networks and imaginaries through the combination of multiple kinship sensibilities.

Chapter 2, “Moving against the Grain: The Evangelism of T. Michael Flowers in the Segregated US South,” traces the history of the CBC and DBC communities back to their founder, Afro-Bahamian missionary T. Michael Flowers. Motivated by a critique of white evangelical racism and black Christian textual and leadership practices, this chapter provides a history of how Flowers—in conjunction with several Afro-Caribbean and African American evangelists and white evangelical donors—established from the 1950s through the 1980s a network of “black Bible-believing churches” across the Southeast, of which CBC and DBC are a part. It also examines the reformist, universalistic, and democratic theological foundations of spiritual kinship, framed by Flowers, during the context of racial segregation that would later be inherited and re-adapted by CBC and DBC congregants in the early twenty-first century.

Chapter 3, “Black Like Me? Or Christian Like Me? Black Evangelicals, Ethnicity, and Church Family,” investigates how contemporary CBC and DBC evangelicals narrate the US religious landscape and their own evangelical religious subjectivities in ethnic and racial terms. It also analyzes how black evangelical congregants mobilize spiritual kinship as a tool to construct a nonethnic familial identity and a diasporic alterity that they imagine as alternatives to the ethnic and racial estrangements they attribute to US ethno-congregationalism.

Part 2, “Scenes of Black Evangelical Spiritual Kinship in Practice,” turns inward and presents ethnographic portraits of the workings of spiritual kinship among the membership of DBC.<sup>18</sup> It is set in the black evangelical religious worlds constructed inside congregants’ churches, homes, and the spaces in between. In particular, the final chapters illuminate how black evangelical spiritual kinship is animated by the social and performative dimensions of Bible study predominantly presided over by churchmen and the production of a domesticated everyday spiritual communion commonly engineered by churchwomen. These chapters also shed light on how DBC congregants use spiritual kinship relationships to reproduce and interrogate evangelical heteropatriarchal hierarchies, boundaries, and morality.

Chapter 4, “Bible Study, Fraternalism, and the Making of Interpretive Community,” studies the institutional production of textual identities. In

particular, the chapter excavates the relationships between biblicism and brotherhood by examining how church “brothers” used male-led Bible studies and exegetical contexts to co-constitute a fraternal interpretative community. Chapter 4 also examines the significance of Bible study, literalism, and spiritual kinship discourses as a social technology capable of generating performative and interpretive connections that generate fraternalism and socially valued modes of institutional belonging.

Chapter 5, “Churchwomen and the Incorporation of Church and Home,” examines how “sisters,” “spiritual mothers,” “spiritual fathers,” and “prayer partners” fed, mentored, and confided in one another and created a field of close, everyday spiritual intimacies. Although the location of such relationships in domesticated spaces can be conceptualized as auxiliary to the institutional moorings of spiritual kinship brokered by church brothers, chapter 5 shows how churchwomen’s quotidian spiritual labors and relationships evoked the authenticated communion of the New Testament church idealized by Brethren evangelicalism. It also illustrates how their work incorporated the DBC community by generating myriad connections between church and home spaces.

Chapter 6, “Black Evangelicals, ‘the Family,’ and Confessional Intimacy,” examines DBC evangelical productions and ideologies of “the family.” It expounds upon the antiblack material conditions and moral scripts of black family pathology that shaped the context of black evangelical family life. Significantly, chapter 6 demonstrates that although black evangelicals subscribed to heteronormative family politics, their productions of “the family” were also sustained by the extended family ethos and confessional intimacies mediated by spiritual kinship that, at times, reinforced and questioned the moral premises of “the family.”

The conclusion reviews the limitations of the heteronormative family as a lens through which to study the religious, racial, and familial normativity of DBC evangelicals. As an alternative, it discusses the ways in which DBC evangelicalism unfolds in spaces between religion and family, amid the intersections (and entanglements) of genealogical and spiritual kinship, and among the moral scripts of religion, race, kinship, and the emergent conditions of lived experience. It also demonstrates why the study of black evangelical religiosity in the US like that exhibited by CBC and DBC members—and its counter-hegemonic racial and relational implications—should remain an important locus of future study.

Our exploration begins with chapter 1’s investigation of the religious and diasporic sources of CBC and DBC evangelicals’ reckonings of spiritual kinship and the mapping of CBC and DBC members as a black evangelical constituency within the United States’ religious landscape.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 To preserve the confidentiality of research collaborators, I use pseudonyms for actual church and respondent names. I use the actual name of T. Michael Flowers for historical purposes.
- 2 Although I use the term *African American* to identify the US-born children of Afro-Caribbean immigrants, scholars have also examined the complex identifications of second-generation Caribbeans who can identify alternately as Afro-Caribbean, Caribbean American, and African American depending on the racial, ethnic, and class contexts in which they are situated (Foner 2018; Lorick-Wilmot 2018).
- 3 In addition to emerging in my own research interactions with black evangelicals, the term *Bible-believing* has been discussed by black evangelical theologians such as William Bentley (1975, 110) as an emic term that denotes evangelical orientations among African American Christians.
- 4 Although CBC and DBC evangelicals have historical and genealogical connections to black Bible camps and schools that were established by fundamentalists from the early to mid-twentieth century and Plymouth Brethrenism—which propagated a dispensational millennialism that was foundational to fundamentalist worldviews—I propose that contemporary CBC and DBC evangelicals are best characterized as evangelicals because of their born-again soteriology, literalist biblical hermeneutic, and their moral orthodoxy. In contrast to the insularity associated with fundamentalism, I argue that CBC and DBC members are evangelicals because of their emphasis on missions as an endeavor deserving financial support, as a religious activity in which members participate, or as an aspirational marker of Christian commitment.
- 5 In “African American Evangelicals,” Soong-Chan Rah identifies four threads of black evangelicalism. The first is a fundamentalist thread associated with the Nottage brothers and Plymouth Brethrenism, which directly implicates the DBC

and CBC communities. The second thread refers to African American Pentecostals, in particular the Church of God in Christ, founded by William H. Bentley. The third and fourth are black evangelicals with ties to evangelical educational institutions and para-church organizations (2019, 76–77).

- 6 In “The Church in African American Theology,” R. Drew Smith makes the compelling observation that African American churches hold different meanings for scholars than for congregants and clergy, who emphasize black churches’ deep and long-standing material and social sustenance of black communities: “Black church life has been constructed, deconstructed, celebrated, and criticized from many vantage points. Black churches may be much of what scholars say they are, but they are undoubtedly much more than that as well—especially as viewed by the many congregants and clergy who have sustained and been sustained by these institutions over the centuries and who may bring fewer social presuppositions than scholars sometimes do in their perspectives on churches” (2014, 237).
- 7 In *American Evangelical Christianity*, Mark Noll defines evangelicals as the “heirs to Anglo-American religious revivals” that occurred from the eighteenth century through the twentieth century. Evangelicals exhibit “a consistent pattern of convictions and attitudes,” including an emphasis on conversion as a life-changing experience, an understanding of the Bible as the fundamental source of truth, a desire to spread the Christian faith, and a concentration on the salvation offered through the redemptive figure of Christ (2001, 13). Yet although black evangelicals such as Rebecca Protten, Moses Bakker, and George Lisle are important participants in the trans-Atlantic proliferation of evangelicalism since the eighteenth century (Frey and Wood 1998; Pulis 1999b; Sensbach 2006), Noll concedes that “the relationship of African-American churches to evangelical traditions is complex” (2001, 14). In other words, the location of black evangelicalism, rather than the historical narratives of black evangelists, exists as a still-active site of contemporary scholarly excavation.
- 8 The variable definitions of *evangelicalism* stem from its differential linguistic uses. The term *evangelical* captures a Christian religious orientation that can be professed by individuals or assigned by scholars in relation to a set of identified characteristics. Evangelicalism is also often tied to a set of religious revivals, movements, and organizations that emerge during established historical epochs—a set of contexts that is constantly and productively expanding with emergent scholarship.
- 9 Because Flowers professed his own ambivalence regarding the aims of the racial reconciliation movement as a religious project that did not properly centralize Christ, it is difficult to identify Flowers as an evangelist officially associated with the racial reconciliation movement.
- 10 “Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant>.
- 11 I apply Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony here as the intellectual and moral undertones of supremacy that validate the common sense of a majority

population. I also draw on Gramsci's observation that confessional religion can contribute to the common sense of hegemony to understand how popular evangelical Christianity consolidates and normalizes white racial identity (Grelle 2017).

- 12 Eddie Glaude Jr. (2010) echoes Evans's sentiments, discussing the differentiation of African American identities, the routinization of prophetic discourses, and the decentralization of black church attendance against the broader landscape of African American social life, and has proclaimed that "the Black Church is dead."
- 13 Studies of black Christian voting practices have noted the ways in which religious and racial affinities may shape but cannot predict political partisanship. In their study of black and white Protestants, Jason Shelton and Michael Emerson find that black Protestants across a variety of traditions (though none who fall under the auspices of the black evangelicalism defined above) tend to prioritize structural and experiential dimensions of race as a shared basis for group identity and voting over the religious differences that distinguish them (2012). In her investigations of the voting practices of black evangelicals influenced by neo-evangelical fundamentalist theologies and black Christians who are influenced by black liberation theology, Allison Calhoun-Brown finds that theological affinities cannot predict the political participation of black Christians (1998; 1999). Caryn Robinson (2006) also observes that many black Christians identified with the moral principles of the Christian Coalition, but socially conservative principles do not necessarily generate an ascription to Republican or conservative political platforms (although black born-again believers, black Christians who reported frequent Bible reading, and black Christian women were a bit more likely to support the political programs of the Christian Coalition). Moreover, similar to the observation made by Leah Rigueur (2015) in her study of black Republicans that there is no such thing as a black Republican, my ethnographic engagements with a black evangelical constituency also compel me to conclude analogically that there is no such thing as a black evangelical just as there is no singular way to be or inhabit a black identity.
- 14 In her study "Whither Fictive Kin? Or, What's in a Name?," Margaret K. Nelson conducts a rhetorical analysis of social scientific research on fictive kinship from the 1970s through the early 2000s and finds that 34 percent of fictive kinship references were attributed to African American research participants, 16 percent of kinship references were associated with immigrant respondents, and 2 percent were associated with white research participants. She concludes that fictive kinship is discursively racialized in social scientific research. She explains that by defining fictive kinship as "consensus without real obligation" and associating it with racially minoritized communities, the actions of certain groups are represented as "being more problematic than those of others" (2014, 217). In addition to contemplating the racial and representational implications of identifying African American constructions of kinship as "fictive," Nelson's conclusions also demonstrate the need for projects like this one that explore the myriad grammars of sociality created by African Americans.

- 15 As outlined by Orlando Patterson (1982) in *Slavery and Social Death*, the master/slave relationship was primary in the context of slavery. All other relationships, including familial ties, held no social or juridical consequence.
- 16 I also conducted five pilot interviews with Afro-Caribbean and African American migrants in the Atlanta metropolitan area during my preliminary fieldwork research in the summer of 2006.
- 17 Other Afro-Caribbean congregants whom I engaged were from St. Kitts and Guyana.
- 18 The lion's share of my ethnographic research was conducted with the members of Dixon Bible Chapel. Therefore, a great deal of my ethnographic analysis from the second half of the book emerges from my extended engagements with the DBC community.

#### CHAPTER 1. ON "GODLY FAMILY" AND "FAMILY ROOTS"

- 1 DBC and CBC members were significantly influenced by Plymouth Brethrenism and its strong anticlerical positions. As a result, church members were often ambivalent about the institutionalization of a church pastor. At DBC church members conceded that a "full-time worker" was a necessary, pragmatic compromise, for that person could be available to current and prospective members throughout the week. At the time of my research, the "full-time worker" had also pursued graduate theological training. At CBC, there was a different pastoral worker, but congregants did not seem to express the same concern about the institutionalization of the pastoral role as DBC members.
- 2 The transcript of this Bible study is a verbatim depiction of the discussion. In order to allow the nuances of congregant perspectives to appear as they were expressed in real time, the transcript has not been edited for grammar.
- 3 Acts 17 describes the conversion of Berean Jews and Greeks as a result of Silas and Paul's preaching in Berea.
- 4 Both CBC and DBC members also use the grammar and imaginary of family to create close-knit local assemblies of worship and imagine a transcendent Christianity community. Brethren thought of themselves in communal terms as assemblies that were gathered within a universal family of God in addition to being a part of the "body of Christ." The discourse of family, as an anti-denominational option, is directly encoded in the term "Brethren," which derives from a biblical source.
- 5 Carter argues that the construction of the modern citizen is the outgrowth of a theology of whiteness, articulated by Kant, that rests upon "'the euthanasia of Judaism' which Kant figures as coeval with the realization of the coming ethical community, [which] only brings to completion a rational theology of atonement in which the death of Christ is a dying away from Judaism and from all that makes one a 'son of earth' rather than a son of God. In short, it is a dying away from all that holds one 'fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality'" (2008, 120).
- 6 According to Bernard Ineichen, Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments* has been in print almost continuously since 1907, marking it as a