

Kincraft

*The Making of Black
Evangelical Sociality*

TODNE THOMAS



Kincraft

RELIGIOUS CULTURES OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN DIASPORA PEOPLE

Series editors:

Jacob K. Olupona, Harvard University

Dianne M. Stewart, Emory University

and Terrence L. Johnson, Georgetown University

The book series examines the religious, cultural, and political expressions of African, African American, and African Caribbean traditions. Through transnational, cross-cultural, and multi-disciplinary approaches to the study of religion, the series investigates the epistemic boundaries of continental and diasporic religious practices and thought and explores the diverse and distinct ways African-derived religions inform culture and politics. The series aims to establish a forum for imagining the centrality of Black religions in the formation of the “New World.”

Kincraft

The Making of Black Evangelical Sociality

TODNE THOMAS

Duke University Press · Durham and London · 2021

© 2021 Duke University Press. All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Portrait and Century Schoolbook
by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thomas, Todne, author.

Title: Kincaft : the making of black evangelical sociality / Todne Thomas.

Other titles: Religious cultures of African and African diaspora people.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021. | Series: Religious cultures of african and african diaspora people | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020027296 (print) | LCCN 2020027297 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478010654 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478011781 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478013129 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Black theology. | Evangelicalism—Social aspects—United States. | Race relations—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BT82.7 .T466 2021 (print) | LCC BT82.7 (ebook) |

DDC 280/.4089/96073—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020027296>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020027297>

Cover art: *Matisse's Chapel*. © 2020 Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York.

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the Harvard Divinity School at Harvard University, which provided funds toward the publication of this book.

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.

To my departed father, James Thomas Jr., I will always love you. Thank you for being my father from my beginning until your end, for being a type of father you never had, for trying over a course of fits and starts, and persevering. You still inspire me, and I miss you. I will continue to speak your name.

To my son, Tashinga, you have taught me the most lovely, difficult, and enduring lessons about kinship. I love you more and more every day. I thank God for you, and I would do everything over again if it led me to you. Thank you for making me better. I look forward to watching you write your own way and will co-labor to build a world in which your voice can be received for its richness.

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments · ix

Introduction · i

Part One · Contextualizing the Social Dimensions
of a Black Evangelical Religious Movement

1 · On “Godly Family” and “Family Roots”:
Creating Kinship Worlds · 29

2 · Moving against the Grain:
The Evangelism of T. Michael Flowers in the Segregated US South · 57

3 · Black Like Me? Or Christian Like Me?
Black Evangelicals, Ethnicity, and Church Family · 83

Part Two · Scenes of Black Evangelical Spiritual Kinship in Practice

4 · Bible Study, Fraternalism, and the Making
of Interpretive Community · 109

5 · Churchwomen and the Incorporation of Church and Home · 135

6 · Black Evangelicals, “the Family,” and Confessional Intimacy · 167

Conclusion · 199 Notes · 213 References · 229 Index · 247

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

The journey to this book has been long. The help I have received is too expansive to describe in a single document. I will do my best to acknowledge the people who have been formative to the completion of this project. If for some reason you do not see your name present, please “charge it to my head and not my heart,” as the adage goes.

I would like to thank God for endowing me with life. I would also like to thank my benevolent ancestors for the examples of their lives and for their ongoing protection, encouragement, witness, and wisdom. This includes my Brewster, Davis, Henry, Sheffield, and Thomas ancestors. To my brother, Tim Thomas, it is a sheer delight to watch you grow and evolve. To my niece Madison Thomas, you are love, and you are loved.

To the members of the DBC and CBC communities, thank you for welcoming me into your communities and homes, for sharing your stories, for being kind. I appreciate the conversations, the wisdom, the deep hanging out. I learned a lot about community and life from being within your midst. I remain extremely grateful and humbled by that.

To my Emmanuel United Presbyterian Church family who played such a vital role in my upbringing, spiritual walk, and self-esteem, thank you. Thanks also go to Walter and Gloria Mencer, Barbara Glanz, and Dr. Roberto Benson. You made such a big difference in shaping my life course. I hope to make each of you proud.

To my extended family—my Uncle John and Aunt Janie, my Uncle Joe and Aunt Teralyn, my Aunt Joanne and Uncle Kenneth, my cousins Billy and Alyssa, Jasmine, Tyson, Teia, Casey, Asha, and my other uncles and aunts and cousins—thank you, I love you, and I wish you well.

To my chosen family, the dear people whom I hold and who hold me in their hearts and spirits, thank you, thank you, thank you. I would not have finished without you. The list is long: the University of Virginia sisters of my heart, Z'etoile Imma and Sonya Donaldson. My Vermont family and caregivers and confidants without whom I would not have survived: Cailyne Crowder, Dakota Burr, and Jaydyne Crowder, Bindu Panikkar and Peter Richards, Demethra Bradley, Janice Murikami, Amy Burrell-Cormier and Jesse Cormier, Jinny Huh and David Bond, Wanda Heading-Grant, Maria McGrath, and Kerin Stackpole, Major Jackson, Emily Bernard, John Gennari, Traci Griffith, and the entire Vermont Black Friday Crew. My Boston community who has now become its own diaspora but the love still remains: Marena Lin, Marina Magloire, Brenna Casey, Kathryn and Chris Carr, Samantha Morrison, Kenneth Reaves, Maria Beaute, Valentino Robinson, Imani Uzuri, Courtney Stanley, the members of my Union Church Family, and the list keeps growing.

To my advisor, Susan McKinnon, thank you for mentoring me, for encouraging me not to give up, and for providing me with a model of how to mentor and labor with integrity within my profession. I owe you a debt that I can never repay directly but that I will try to return through my own work as a writer and a teacher. To my dissertation committee members—Ira Bashkow, Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton, George Mentore, and Milton Vickerman—thank you for your support and constructive criticism. To other University of Virginia professors from graduate school who shaped and continue to inspire me—Claudrena Harold, Lisa Woolfork, Marlon Ross, and Ian Grandison—your intellectual and artistic work motivates me.

To my dear anthropologist comrades: Vicki Brennan, Bertin Louis Jr., N. Fadeke Castor, Casey Golumski, Rose Wellman, Asiya Malik, Rhyannon Berkowitz, Arsalan Khan, Clare Terni, Jason Hickel, Brian Howell, Claire Snell-Rood, Aimee Villareal, Alex Chavez, Raja Swamy, Reighan Gillam, Graham Jones, Pensri Ho, and Stanford Carpenter, your support over the years has been immeasurable. I look forward to our future collaborations and anticipate reading your future work as well.

To the faculty of the Religion Department at the University of Vermont—Anne Clark, Kevin Trainor, Ilyse Morgenstein-Fuerst, Tom Borchert, and Erica Andrus—thank you for being such warm and supportive colleagues.

Special thanks are due to the Harvard Divinity School administration who provided book subvention funding to support the publication of the manuscript. Thank you for investing in this work. To the current faculty of Harvard Divinity School (HDS), including Catherine Brekus, David Hempton, David Holland, Dan McKahan, Jacob Olopuna, and Mayra Rivera (to name a few), and

the broader Harvard community who are too numerous to name in full here, thank you for your support. Your invitations to present my work, your mentorship, the dynamic examples you set with your own scholarship, and your thirst for learning have propelled me forward. Special thanks to past and current Harvard colleagues Jonathan Walton, Marla Frederick, Laura Nasrallah, Braxton Shelley, Genevieve Clutario, and Jarvis Givens for your mentorship, guidance, and friendship. Thank you to the amazing HDS library staff as well.

Special thanks are also due to the Radcliffe Institute for their award of a Suzanne Young Murray Assistant Professorship, as well as the Radcliffe Institute administration and staff and the 2019–2020 class of Radcliffe fellows and professors. Though our fellowship year was cut short by the coronavirus pandemic, your talent, creativity, and passion will remain a catalyst for my research for years to come. I send each of you my best wishes in your future pursuits and hope our paths will cross again.

To the Tengo Sed writer collective including Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, Alicia Anabel Santos, Vilna Bashi-Treitler, Yndia Lorick-Wilmot, and Michelle Simms, thank you for your encouragement and wisdom.

Humble thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewers who provided two rounds of responses to the manuscript. Your questions and critiques made this work better. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to Miriam Angress, Annie Lubinsky, Chad Royal, Donald Pharr, Diane Stewart, Maria Volpe, and the Duke University Press team that helped make this book a reality.

To Shiprah and the crew at my favorite local coffee shop, thank you for the warm vibes and the caffeine you provide. To Michael Young, our kind building custodian, thank you for helping me with the repeated lockouts that occurred around my writing deadlines. For Kevin, who works at my favorite watering hole, thanks for letting me listen to Emily King on the rough days and for bringing me fries when the kitchen was closed. And for those not named for reasons unwritten, who know who you are: thank you.

This page intentionally left blank

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.

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.¹ 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.² 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*³ or *fundamentalist*⁴ 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).⁵

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);⁶ 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.⁷ Moreover, the designation *evangelical* can be defined in historical, missiological, soteriological, scriptural, and political terms.⁸

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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 Alimkhal 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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