



5-2022

## **Standing Their Ground: Resisting Black Erasure in Knoxville, TN through the Citizens Cemetery Project**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Tatianna Griffin entitled "Standing Their Ground: Resisting Black Erasure in Knoxville, TN through the Citizens Cemetery Project." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Anthropology.

Raja H. Swamy, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Tamar Shirinian, Jodi Skipper

Accepted for the Council:

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Standing Their Ground:  
Resisting Black Erasure in Knoxville, TN  
Through the Citizens Cemetery Project**

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Tatianna G. Griffin  
May 2022

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I do not even know where to begin. There are so many people to thank and to acknowledge. First and foremost, thank you to the Morningside Community, Knoxville Re-Animation Coalition, Citizens Cemetery Group, and Mr. George Kemp. This project would not have existed or succeeded had it not been for your efforts. I appreciate you for letting me be a part of this recuperation initiative. I am so thankful for your kindness, intuition, patience, and acceptance. I hope that you all know that this project is more than a degree for me. I may not have grown up here, but we are community. We are family.

Thank you to the myriad of scholars that have worked their magic to help this project succeed. To my committee, Dr. Swamy, Dr. Shirinian, and Dr. Skipper: I am so grateful for you all. Your guidance, support, motivation, understanding, criticism and praise has sculpted me into the researcher and activist I am today. Dr. Swamy, you have been the mentor I needed since I started studying Anthropology. It was a hard path to get here, but definitely worth it. I promise to take all that you have taught me and carry it with me throughout the rest of my academic training and career. Thank you for everything. You told me we would get my degree, and here we are.

Thank you to my cohort. As the baby, and arguably the most spoiled, of the group, I could not have gotten through this journey without you all. You all have supported me, motivated me, and helped shape me into the scholar that I am today. You all have been role models, mentors, and friends-turned-family. Buddy, your unwavering love and support has gotten me through the toughest times of my life. I could never do life without you. Fred and I love you, and I am so thankful for a friend like you. Derek, from the day we met, you took me under your wing. You are one of the most encouraging and inspiring people I have ever met. Having you as a mentor has been such a ride. From crying in the club, literally, at my first ever AAFS in Baltimore, to crying in The Golden Roast over my proposal, to my PhD application to Harvard, you have helped me grow so much as a researcher and scholar. Thanks to your guidance and support, I have learned how to carve a unique space for myself.

Mom, superwoman, my forever best friend. I would not be where I am today without you. Your love, guidance, support, and patience got me through this degree. From the daily phone calls to warm hugs when I return home. We have laughed together, cried together, and you have prayed over me, my safety and well-being, and my success like your life depended on it. You always told me that I could change the world and look at me now. I know I will always have you in my corner, and that gives me the strength to get through anything I put my mind to. Dad Kevin, my roll dawg forever. We may not have always seen eye to eye, but you have been there through thick and thin. When times were hard, I knew you were just a phone call away. Looking forward to my happy dance when this is all over.

Bean, my built-in bestie. I often wonder how people make it through life without a sister. I surely could not live mine without you. Although you make me want to beat the brakes off of you sometimes, you are arguably the best blessing. The childhood memories we have together and the increasing grown-up memories are ones that I will cherish forever.

You have been a pillar of love, light, support, and motivation throughout my MA journey. I have watched you grow from the rambunctious, attached baby sister to the independent, intelligent, and beautiful young woman you are today. I know you hate being my shadow, but I know you will follow in my footsteps as you forge a way for yourself in spaces that were not meant for us. I will forever be here for you as you have been for me. Shout out to my other siblings too—Trevor, Sydney, Kevona, and Morgan. I love you guys endlessly. While we all know I am the superior sibling (insert laughing emoji here), I would not have been able to get through this journey without your love and support.

Jake—when the universe knew I needed love the most, it sent me you. You met me at the most complicated period of my life, but that did not stop you from knowing me, understanding me, and loving me. You have listened to me complain, watched me cry, and witnessed me focus so hard that I forgot where I was. Your unconditional love, understanding, patience, kindness, support, and motivation was invaluable to my success. I tell you all the time how much I appreciate you, but I am not sure you actually realize how much of an impact you have had on me. All I can say is thank you. I love you.

Lastly, but certainly the most important, Gramma—my sweet angel. Do you remember when church would end, and Tayler and I would ask to go see grandpa? Even though I never met him, visiting his grave was my way of connecting with him. “Playing” in the cemetery and listening to you, mom, Uncle Bernard, and others talk about him was my way of understanding who he was. Do you also remember telling me to get out of the grass in my church dress because my mom would be upset about the grass stains? Although, now that I think about it, I am more than sure you would have been able to get them out. Growing up with you has had such an impact on who I am. Our relationship was like no other. We all knew I was the favorite grandchild. What other kid cries as they are driving away while their grandmother stands on the porch waving from afar? And not just one time, but EVERY time we left your house it was like I was broken until I returned again. I would ask to go visit you, and mom would tell me no because I had to go to school the next day. I would sob. You were my best friend, now guardian angel. I am certain I would have given up at every single obstacle had I not known that you were with me, in spirit, pushing me along. All the times I used to complain when you would tell us we were going to the cemetery—look at me now. I hope to continue your legacy with all that you have instilled in me. Almost 5 years later, missing you does not get any easier. The one thing I promised myself, and promised you, when I decided to come to UTK was that I would make you proud. I hope I have done just that and continue to. I often wonder about my next steps, until I realized that it is still blurry because you and my ancestors have yet to finish writing my story.

## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, I examine ongoing efforts by Knoxville, Tennessee's Black community to resist the erasure of their history and sense of place through community and volunteer efforts to reclaim and restore Good Citizens (Citizens) Cemetery. Citizens Cemetery is Knoxville's oldest Black cemetery, interring nearly six thousand enslaved Africans and their descendants, but today is severely dilapidated due to decades of neglect. Through this project, I explore how framing volunteer opportunities as a critical service-learning program and how Black community efforts to reclaim and restore Citizens combat erasure of Knoxville's Black community's history and sense of place. I also explore the relationships the volunteers and community members share with one another and those they share with Citizens as a historic Black place. I examine these questions through the use of participant observation, extended interviews and life histories, archival research, and spatial analysis. I analyze these connections through the theoretical frameworks of Black geographies and critical service-learning, while also utilizing studies in erasure and power, kinship, memory, and identity. This thesis contributes to national conversations surrounding the protection and preservation of Black burying grounds by bringing much needed attention to common forms of knowledge production, particularly around identity, place, and memory.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One Introduction .....	1
Context .....	1
Historical Acts of Racial Violence and Erasure in Knoxville, TN .....	9
The Red Summer: The Race Riot of 1919.....	9
Urban Removal and the Out-Migration of Black Families.....	10
A Dive into Citizens Cemetery .....	12
Say Their Names.....	13
Burial Practices .....	18
Conclusion .....	21
Chapter Two Research Methods .....	22
Background .....	22
Research Methodology .....	23
Participant Observation .....	23
Focus Groups.....	24
Extended Interviews and Life Histories.....	27
Archival Research.....	29
Space and Spatiality .....	29
Chapter Three “Either you’re inside...” .....	33
A Dedication to Place .....	34
Community Engagement and Interest.....	37
The Untraditional Geography: Black Geography .....	41
The Duality of Black Space .....	43
“How the Cemetery Speaks to Me” .....	44
Black-Space Making: A Changed Sense of Place .....	47
Conclusion .....	49
Chapter Four “... or you’re out” .....	51
Critical vs. Traditional Service-Learning.....	51
Redistributing Power .....	53
A Social Change Perspective.....	55
Developing Authentic Relationships: The ROSOR Framework .....	56
Volunteer Motivations .....	61
A Myriad of Motivations .....	63
“We Just Want People to Care” .....	68
RAM: The Journey to Transformation.....	71
Recognition.....	72
Apathy-to-Action.....	75
Moving Forward .....	77
Conclusion .....	79
Chapter Five Conclusions and Reflections.....	81
Personal Reflections.....	84
References .....	85
Appendix .....	88
Appendix A: Online Survey.....	88
Vita .....	89



**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1.1 Trimble Map of Headstones and Grave Markers.....19

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Context

*July 27, 2005. 8:27am.*

*“8:30...” I whispered. My grandma let me sleep in that morning. She let us sleep in every morning, but I knew when my siblings and I woke up she would make us call my parents. It was their wedding anniversary. Their third one, to be exact. I managed to drag my eight-year-old body out of the bed. My baby sister, three-years old at the time, was sleeping soundly in the bed above me. I knew if I woke her up, I would be responsible for getting her ready for the day. So, I tip-toed out of my grandma’s bedroom and into the kitchen where she was sitting in her chair at the corner of the counter. “Good morning, Gram!” I said, with the biggest smile on my face. I gave her a hug and kiss as usual, as she greeted me in return. I saw my breakfast was already made for me, sitting on the stove, my food neatly placed on a plate so that my bacon, eggs, and toast did not touch. As I said my blessing and began to eat, I heard the words I did not want to hear that day. “We have to go to the cemetery today, so you need to wake up your sister.” My jaw hit the floor. “Grandma, WHY? It is SO hot! Do we HAVE to?” It was disgustingly hot in Jarratt, Virginia that day. Summers in Jarratt are hot and humid. They are the summers where you step outside and immediately start sweating. I knew whenever we were going to the church cemetery at Hassidah Baptist Church on any day besides Sunday, it meant we were going to do work.*

*I finished my breakfast around 9 o'clock and did as I was told. I woke up my sister and got us ready to go to the cemetery. Tank top, shorts, socks, and tennis shoes. Gramma would spray us with bug spray when we got there. For whatever reason, my older brother, thirteen-years old at the time, always got to stay home. Lucky duck. My gramma, my sister, and I hopped in Bessie (Gramma's van) and made our way five minutes down the street to Hassidiah. "You know gramma," I said, as I stared out the window, beads of sweat already forming on my forehead. She looked at me through the rearview mirror, as I was still too small to sit across from her in the passenger seat. Sometimes, she even still made me sit in my booster seat. "We did not call mom and dad yet. Today's their anniversary." This was my failed attempt at getting us to turn around and go home. She told me we would call them later. You can imagine the pain I felt as we kept driving. We pulled into the part-gravel, part-grass parking lot of the church. I hopped out of Bessie and asked Gram what we were doing that afternoon. Mind you, it was approximately 95 °F (degrees Fahrenheit) by 9 o'clock that morning. She did not answer my question with words. Instead, she answered it by handing me a Walmart plastic bag. I knew that meant we were pulling weeds. "Gramma, do I have to pull weeds today?" She had already started helping my baby sister pull weeds, so I knew that answer was yes... I had to pull weeds that day. Pulling weeds was fun when we did it in her driveway, especially in the rain, but doing it in a massive cemetery in sweltering heat was a different story. Pulling weeds was just one of the ways she and I kept Hassidiah's cemetery looking pristine.*

*I always started my work by grandpa's grave. I never got to meet my grandpa. He died two years before I was born, but I still considered us to be close. After every church service, I would run out to the cemetery to say hi to him. "Stand up! Get off the ground, Tati!" I could hear Gram yelling from the entrance of the church to get out of the dirt and grass so that I did not stain my dress. As I cleaned around my grandpa's grave, I made sure no weeds or vines were crawling up his headstone or across his ledger stone. I usually sat with him, crisscross applesauce, for a little while and talked to him, but I knew that day that the others needed my attention. I skipped to where my great uncles were buried. I greeted my uncle Kay, uncle Bobby, and uncle Rufus—my grandma's brothers—with a bright smile. "I am here! I know you all missed us. Mommy dropped us off with Gram, so her and dad could have their anniversary. We are spending the rest of the summer with Gram. I had to spend the first half of summer with my daddy and stepmom. We went to the beach!" I said to them, as I was so sure they were listening. A few years later, my great uncle Gene, who brought us candy all the time in brown paper bags to Gram's house, would be buried here, too, little did I know at the time. I moved on to my great grandparents, great aunts, cousins, and family friends, working meticulously to make sure what was left of their memories shined bright, talking to each of them along the way.*

*When we finally finished, hours, and several history lessons, later, I plopped back into my seat in Bessie, sweating bullets, begging Gram to turn on some air-conditioning. "Just roll your window down," she told me as she started Bessie. Typical. So, I manually cranked the window down desperately trying to get some relief. Gram knows how to keep*

*a girl hydrated, though. She would freeze plastic water bottles and wrap them in paper towels and aluminum foil. My bottle consisted of just a thin icicle by the time we were done. I shook it like a maraca to try to break the ice so I could eat it in smaller pieces. It was now time to go home, have lunch, get checked for ticks (ouch), and help Gram prepare supper. Maybe I would get to help Gram snap the beans Uncle Mutt brought over. "Gram, we cannot forget to call mom and dad," I said, sternly. She chuckled. I miss that laugh.*

*Appreciating the love and life my ancestors embodied, even in death, and being an active part of keeping their memory alive was something I did every summer with my grandma. She taught me "proper" ways to care for our dead and what caring for our dead meant, not only to them, but to us as a family and a community. Respect for our ancestors, a powerful belief system that was instilled in me since I was able to pull a weed by myself. By the time I was in high school, one could say that caring for Black cemeteries was embedded into my DNA.*

This is one of the many childhood memories I have of working in Hassidiah's cemetery, an African American cemetery located in Jarratt, Virginia. My grandma was the main person who took great care of our ancestors buried at Hassidiah. She cut the grass. We picked up debris, pulled weeds, cleared headstones, and placed flowers. Sometimes, we just walked the cemetery grounds. She would tell me stories of my great uncle Bobby, who died when my mother was only twelve years old. She would share memories with me that she had with my great uncle Rufus, who was a mechanic. I had a love-hate relationship with Hassidiah's cemetery. Mostly because doing work in 100-degree

weather was not something I looked forward to as a child, but at least I got to spend intimate times with Gram, and my ancestors, in a sacred and special place. Fast forward to 2021.

I was invited by a friend and colleague, Matt Hoover, to attend a local cemetery clean up in East Knoxville, Citizens Cemetery. He said it may be helpful for my research, which, at the time, centered around the oldest Black church in Knoxville. I was raised in a cemetery, so this was right up my alley. I accepted his invitation, and I asked Matt to give me the information for Mr. George Kemp. Mr. Kemp is the President of Knoxville Re-Animation Coalition (KRC), the local organization leading the clean-up effort. I figured I could reach out to Mr. Kemp, introduce myself, and figure out how I could incorporate this cemetery into my research. I knew deep down, though, even if I could not have included this site in my research, I still wanted to volunteer my time. Mr. Kemp and I exchanged several emails, and I could feel his excitement through the text. He was ecstatic that someone was interested in working with Citizens. He wanted to give me a tour of Citizens, and, of course, I accepted.

*September 9, 2021. 9:00am*

*Today, I am meeting Mr. George Kemp at Citizens Cemetery. I have not been to Citizens before today. He is giving me my first official tour of the cemetery grounds. I have only read about this place. There was not much, though, only two online newspaper articles talking about clean-up efforts. What about its history? It is almost as if on paper, this cemetery does not exist. I honestly have no idea what to expect when I get there. My anxiety starts to skyrocket as I get closer to Fuller Avenue, the street upon which the*

*cemetery sits. I turn onto Wilder Street, from Dandridge Avenue. Then, I turn onto Fuller Avenue. As I drive past several houses, I quickly read the text on the historical marker for Greater Warner Tabernacle African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Knoxville's first African American church. It was established in 1845. I thought about all the history that has happened along this street. I pull closer to Citizens. Where is it? I cannot even find it. Wait, I see a headstone... hidden between several mature trees. This must be it. I beat Mr. Kemp there, but only by a few seconds. I pull over onto the side of the road because there is no formal place to park, but it seems like my car is inside the cemetery. Am I driving over graves??? I am panicking internally, but Mr. Kemp pulls behind me and parks his car, so my anxiety lessens only slightly. We exit our cars and greet each other with a smile.*

*It is humid this morning. The mosquitos and yellow jackets are out with a vengeance. Mr. Kemp asks me if I have put on bug spray. I had an internal war with myself for a few seconds about whether I would say yes or no. I had not put bug spray on, but I have class at 11:30, so I did not want to make my classmates suffer for an hour and fifteen minutes at the hands of Off. I told him I did not have any, and he graciously let me spray myself with his. Hopefully that will keep the insects at bay, and hopefully my classmates will understand. He asked me if I was ready, with a proud smile. I told him yes, and our tour began. I smiled at Mr. Kemp as he led me into Citizens. I asked Mr. Kemp if it was okay if I took photos, and he told me yes. He told me to do whatever I needed to do. As soon as both feet stepped into the boundaries of the cemetery, I felt something I had never felt before in a cemetery. I felt fear, shame, sadness, and darkness.*

*Headstones had fallen over. They were damaged and some were hardly legible. Maybe a flashlight would be helpful? That is how Gram taught me to read weathered inscriptions. Trees had grown through burial shafts, displacing headstones. Who knows how long the vegetation had been growing in this manner? I was so used to ledger stones covering the tops of burial shafts, yet I was witnessing gaping holes, sunken graves, where people were buried. One after the other after the other. I walk closely behind Mr. Kemp. I spoke to no one, something I was not used to.*

*I felt pain, hiding it all as Mr. Kemp thoroughly recounted Citizens' history to me as we walked down the barely visible path. I did not want him to see me as an emotional wreck. I was supposed to be a professional, right? These feelings were something I had never experienced before while in a cemetery. They were hard to come to terms with. Hassidiah always made me feel quite the opposite. How could this happen? "We take care of our dead," I thought to myself, remembering what Gram said to me years ago. Flashbacks of childhood memories flooded my mind the longer he and I walked. We traveled along the outskirts of the rest of the cemetery, as it was dangerous at the time for us to traverse parts of the landscape. As we reached the end of my tour, we came upon his family burial plot on the periphery of Citizens. His father was buried at Citizens in 1962. I smiled. It was beautiful. It reminded me so much of Hassidiah's cemetery. He was telling me about how it was his duty, passed down from his aunts, to take care of his family plots. I can relate to that on several levels. As a child, that was also my duty, and it is still my duty today. Mr. Kemp finished by telling me he knows that it will take many years to bring Citizens back to life. At that moment, I knew this was it. I belonged here,*



*next to him, helping bring his vision alive. I was confident my thesis would center around this cemetery, and I would use everything Gram taught me growing up. I told him I am ready for the ride because I would be here to watch this cemetery return to the sacred place we both knew it was. I looked down at my watch. 11:09. "I am definitely going to be late for class," I thought.*

Good Citizens Cemetery, or Citizens Cemetery as it is informally known (also known as Eastport Cemetery), is Knoxville, Tennessee's oldest Black cemetery. This hallowed burying ground was established in 1836. Citizens serves as the final resting place for approximately six thousand enslaved Africans, who were brought to Tennessee across the "River Road," now Riverside Drive (Maxwell, 1972), and Freedmen who built the metropolis of Knoxville from the ground up. Stepping foot into Citizens, one would not recognize it as a sacred burying place. The vegetation is severely overgrown. Some headstones are decrepit, halfway buried under the hard, compact dirt. The perilous landscape has veiled a community of estranged ancestors from their descendants. Respect for our ancestors, for the dead, is a powerful and guiding belief system instilled in me and several others, including Mr. Kemp. Observing the neglect this cemetery embodied, I kept asking myself why. Why did Citizens look this way? Why did it feel this way? Why did I feel the burning desire to give so much of myself to its restoration? The more I learned about Knoxville's Black community, the more I understood the answer to all of my questions. Citizens is an exemplification of the Black experience. It represents a continuation of the many deliberate acts of violent erasure of Knoxville's Black community's history and sense of place. In this project, I investigate how framing

volunteer opportunities as a critical service-learning program and how Black community efforts to reclaim and restore Citizens Cemetery combat erasure of Knoxville's Black community's history and sense of place. I also explore the relationships the volunteers and community members share with one another and those they share with Citizens as a historic Black place.

### **Historical Acts of Racial Violence and Erasure in Knoxville, TN**

Power plays a critical role in the production of the historical narrative (Trouillot 1995). In this section, I will outline occurrences of racial violence in Knoxville that contributed to the erasure of Black history and sense of place. The erasure of Citizens as a sacred Black place is not independent of these occurrences but is merely an extension of them. The erasure of a Black sense of place in all of these examples is tied to power, systemic racism, and oppressive processes; however, as I argue in this thesis, despite deliberate attempts at erasing Black sense of place, the community is able to cultivate a space that resists these very processes.

#### ***The Red Summer: The Race Riot of 1919***

The Red Summer is the term given to the summer of 1919 when more than 25 bloody, anti-Black 'riots' and 50 lynchings erupted across the United States (Lakin 2000; McWhirter 2011). Many of the riots were the result of rumored assaults of White women by Black men. These rumors drove many whites to participate in organized acts of violence against the Black community. Whilst violence against the Black community was not a new concept in 1919, these 'riots' and lynchings were much different because the Black community resisted—serving as a pivotal point in the struggle for Civil Rights

(McWhirter 2011). One of the worst riots happened in Knoxville, TN. A Black man, on August 29, 1919, named Maurice Mays was falsely accused, arrested, and convicted of the murder of Bertie Lindsey, a White woman. The next day, an angry mob of White men went looking for Mays but could not find him as law enforcement officers caught wind of the mob's plans and moved Mays to a different prison for his safety (Lakin 2000). The angry White mob turned to the thriving Black community with the intention of destroying and looting their neighborhoods and businesses. A squadron of the Fourth Infantry of the Tennessee National Guard was deployed to alleviate the situation, but they made it much worse by helping the White mob assault the Black community (Lakin 2000). Many Black families fled before the White mob was able to harm their bodies, but those that stayed and defended their home were faced with incredible violence, which resulted in many casualties (Lakin 2000; McWhirter 2011). The race riot in Knoxville was only a small fragment of the violence that was taking place across the country. The physical destruction of Black spaces caused long-lasting effects in Knoxville's Black community, erasing the lives and histories they worked so hard to build in the era of Jim Crow.

### ***Urban Removal and the Out-Migration of Black Families***

Urban Renewal, or "urban removal" as Mr. Rick Roach, a community member and activist, and other community members have referred to it, was another phenomenon that contributed to the erasure of Black history and Black sense of place. It pushed hundreds of Black families from their thriving community in order to make space for developed White, middle-class communities and businesses (Teaford 2000). Former residents of these areas were displaced and forced to re-settle in less-developed areas

outside of the renewal districts, and because of the lack of space they were forced to share accommodations (Fullilove 2001). This furthered the distance between the White and Black communities and kept the majority of the Black community segregated from the more developed, White areas. In Knoxville, the Black community was pushed into East Knoxville (Roach 2022).

Knoxville's urban removal programs started in 1959 and ended around 1974, consisting of three renewal projects: Willow Street, Mountain View, and Morningside (Knox Co. R-367-2020). In Knoxville, urban removal decimated the Black community by physically demolishing Black homes, thriving Black neighborhoods, Black schools, Black churches, Black businesses, and other Black cultural spaces. Knoxville's Black community was disproportionately affected by urban removal—70% of over 2,500 displaced families were Black (Knox Co. R-367-2020). After forcing the dispossessed Black community into East Knoxville, there were hardly any efforts to develop those areas like there were to develop the areas they were forced to leave—until recently.

Urban removal is still taking place although it supposedly ended nearly 50 years ago. Tennessee Smokies owner and President of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Randy Boyd, plans to build a multimillion-dollar baseball stadium-shopping-residential complex in the historically Black neighborhood of the Bottom (Duncan 2021). Bulldozing poor, vulnerable spaces, which are where most communities of color reside, to transform them into 'developed' middle-class White spaces is rooted the programs of urban renewal (Johnson 2015). Mr. Roach told me during an interview, "*Gentrification is an insidious thing.*" This attempt to "boost" economic and social development in the East

Knoxville community is just gentrification insidiously masked. It is marketed as a positive phenomenon that will benefit the community by bringing more job opportunities and have an overall beneficial impact on the community. Those that oppose the building of the baseball stadium complex argue that this is a repeat of history, where community members will be displaced and harmed all over again (Duncan 2021). Mr. Roach expressed to me during an interview, *“Black lives from Summit Hill (then Vine Street) wiped out everything on both sides, going down to Jackson. The property he [Randy Boyd] bought has nothing to do with urban removal, but he wouldn’t have had it if it weren’t for urban removal.”* He expressed to me how we cannot tell our own stories, and it ultimately gets to be disheartening and discouraging (Roach 2022). The consistent threats to vulnerable space, particularly Black spaces, from powerful, White actors armed with capital is always looming, thriving on our internalization of displacement, dispossession, and loss of a history.

### **A Dive into Citizens Cemetery**

Knoxville Re-Animation Coalition (KRC), led by Mr. George Kemp, is a local community organization that has taken on the responsibility to reclaim and restore Citizens Cemetery. As the leaders of the Citizens Cemetery Project, they have been working diligently to reclaim a large part of Knoxville’s Black history. Citizens inters approximately six thousand enslaved Africans and their descendants. Although the erasure and abandonment of Citizens is shaped by historical violence towards the Black community, I argue that the descendant community is forming their own special connections to Citizens. The volunteers that have been so crucial to this project’s success

have also formed their own unique connections to Citizens, and I argue that their motivations that brought them into this Black space as outsiders contradict community expectations for why volunteers decide to participate. The Citizens Cemetery Project has thrust Citizens into the spotlight, reminding us all of the significance of Black sacred spaces and Black history.

### *Say Their Names*

Cemeteries are places that hold significant cultural value in Black American communities (Rainville 2009). Certain mortuary practices, epitaphs, grave goods, or plants, such as periwinkle and yucca (Mortice 2017) are indicators to us that our ancestors were buried with care. It is our way of returning to them their human dignity that was lost through slavery and post-emancipation systemic racism. The Black sense of place, especially in a cemetery, cultivates a feeling of solidarity. During slavery and after emancipation, Black burying grounds were segregated, and Black communities were able to develop a sense of place—a place that was specifically for us (Jones 2011). Citizens Cemetery, even in its current state, offers so much valuable information about the ancestral community that is buried. In this section, I will explore the information I found through archival research and data regarding its spatial organization to construct a small narrative of its historical significance and of those buried at Citizens.

*Knoxville Daily Journal, Thursday, June 24, 1886*

*“For many years, Knoxville has been the home of an old colored citizen who has a history. Many months past has found old “Uncle David Scaggs” as he was familiarly*

*called, in rapidly declining health and he has been unable to do much manual work. Yesterday morning about 11 o'clock a severe case of physical agony attacked Uncle David, and he lingered on in a half conscious state until 3 o'clock when he rallied enough to talk in a low voice. His children, three in number, were called to his bedside and admonished to live upright lives and be honest Christians. The old man then sank into a comatose condition and breathed his last at half past 7 o'clock. Scaggs was born in Cocke county, August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1825. He stayed on the farm until he was about 12 years of age, then went to Mobile, Alabama where he acted as a rider in jockey races some time. It was there he decided to become a barber and at odd times began learning the trade. Coming to Knoxville in 1856, Scaggs at once put up a shop on Main Street and was for a long time the main barber at the place. For a number of years he had a shop on North Gay Street near Vine, but recently moved over to 246 Gay Street where he died last night. He married three times, March 11, 1850, June 12, 1859, and October 5, 1885. He had five girls and three boys, all of whom are dead except the two youngest girls and one boy. He was one, but the last of nine parties who helped organize Shiloh Presbyterian Church nearly twenty years ago and has for many years been an elder in that congregation. The funeral will be preached at that church this afternoon at 3:30 o'clock by the paster, Rev. J C Lawrence. The burial will take place in the family burying ground at Eastport Cemetery" (McGinnis 2003).*

This is an obituary excerpt from 1886 from historian Robert McGinnis's 2003 volume on Knoxville's Black cemeteries that was available to me in the Beck Cultural Exchange Center Archives. This is one of the many historical Black pioneers, born

during slavery, that are buried at Citizens Cemetery. While I do not have the space to list all the names of those buried at Citizens, I will say the names (in no particular order) of those whose headstones we have uncovered and/or recorded over the time in which this project took place:

*Cicero Frazier*

*Cobb*

*Louis Caddis*

*Alaxander Davis*

*Martha Davis Sherwood*

*Reverend Henry T. Wright*

*Julian Spears*

*Charles H. Sliger*

*Sarah Matthews*

*Sophronia Hopewell*

*Irene Hopewell*

*Ochia Hopewell*

*Sarah M.*

*Marcus M. Hayden*

*M. M. H.*

*W. M. Wooten*

*Mae Ilia Wooten*

*Elsie S. Finney*

*Jane Smith*

*R. Albert Wooten*

*Joseph Ross*

*Anna L. Keene*

*W. M. Smith*

*Lizzie Shannon*



*Clifford A. Lawson Campbell*  
*William M. Offett*  
*Harriet Smith*  
*Etheldrid*  
*Elizabeth Cline*  
*C. M.*  
*H. M.*  
*Cynthia Maynard*  
*Ella Maynard*  
*Horace Maynard*  
*Flora Wallace*  
*Oscar Wallace*  
*Hattie Dudley*  
*Rodgers Banks*  
*Rosebud M.*  
*Sarah Barney Cheatham*  
*Freddie Burton*  
*Nancy Mays*  
*Reverend Anna Bell Nelson*  
*Cora E. Mitchell*  
*Pope Mitchell*  
*Hattie Gudger*  
*Lions*  
*Joseph Thomas*  
*Louise Dickey*  
*Annie Roberts*  
*William Ivey*  
*Nancy Meek*  
*Infant of Geo and Laura Vance*  
*George R Vance*

*Laura Vance*  
*Will Renfro*  
*Anthony G. Armstrong*  
*Louis Smith*  
*Samuel N. Senters*  
*Alberta Senters*  
*Henrietta Senters*  
*Gertrude Favors*  
*Elmore Senters*  
*Walter W. Senters*  
*Louise M. Senters*  
*Infant son of J. A. and Lucy Hyatt*  
*James L. Smith*  
*Rosa B. Smith*  
*Bennie L. Martin*  
*William T. Martin (1876-1926)*  
*Lillie Martin*  
*William T. Martin (1902-1971)*  
*Ellen Cain*  
*Cora Cain Geonis (spelling?)*  
*Agnes R. Nowlin*  
*Rhoda Mason*  
*Edward Levingston*  
*Charlie Jackson*  
*Albert Jackson*  
*B. J.*

These names represent a small portion of those who are buried at Citizens. Indeed, they only provide us with the information about those fortunate enough to be remembered by a

headstone. As this project progresses over the years, I hope this list is expanded. I hope the list that McGinnis has put together expands as well. Revealing who is buried at Citizens is an important part of achieving one of the goals KRC has for the restoration process. They want to acquire a historical marker to recognize the significance of Citizens to not only the Black history of Knoxville, but to Knoxville's overall history.

### ***Burial Practices***

Citizens Cemetery is located on Fuller Avenue and Addison Street. Just a few yards north sit the original grounds for Knoxville's first Black church—Greater Warner Tabernacle African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. This church was founded in 1845 and served as a station on the Underground Railroad (Kemp 2021). The church provided Blacks a safe haven during slavery and post-emancipation, as they sought to escape the south. The Black Church was one of the first institutions that provided community, solidarity, and refuge during hard times and allowed for safe self-expression (Gates Jr. 2019). It was also a place they would convene to socialize and form bonds with others. Although Citizens sits within such close proximity to the first Black church, it is unknown as to whether the cemetery was associated with the church or not. Many community members have no reason to believe that it was. I used a Trimble Geo 7X (Trimble) handheld data collector to map headstones and indicate the presence of sunken graves (Figure 1.1). I wanted to gain insight into the spatial organization of the cemetery in order to understand a little bit more about the burial practices at Citizens.

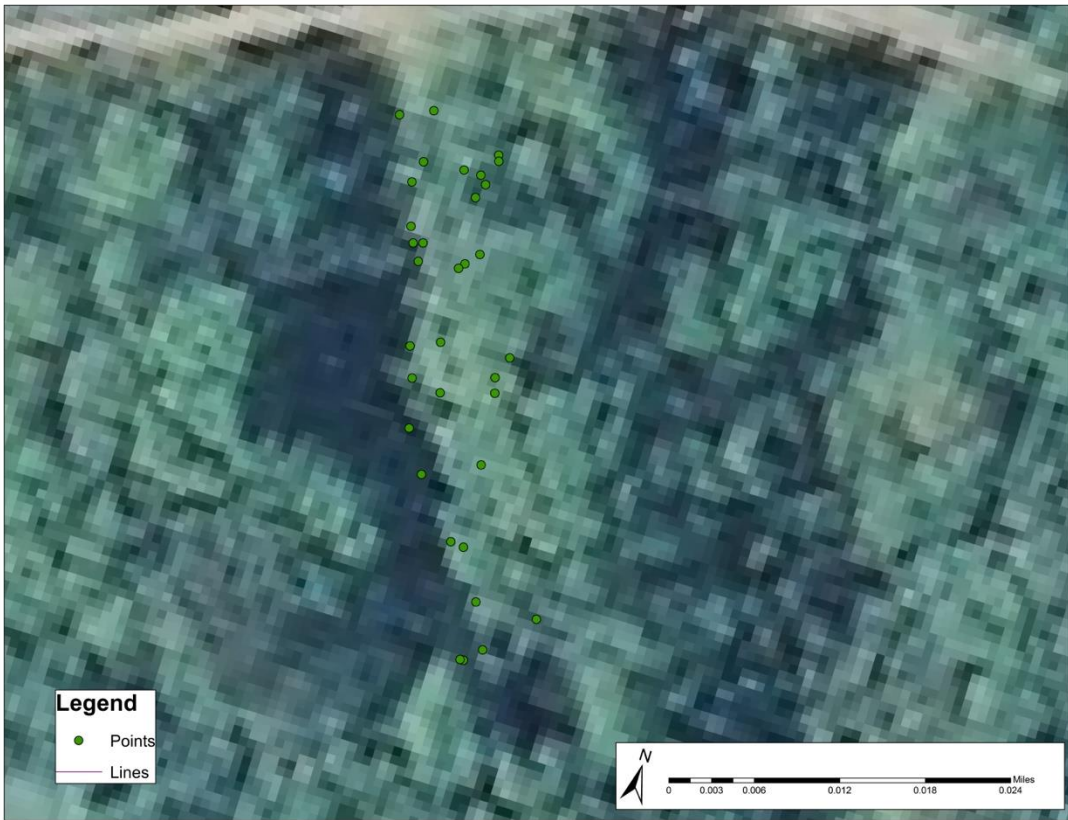


Figure 1.1. Trimble Map of Headstones and Grave Markers.

Figure 1.1 shows the map I made using the Trimble. The graves are arranged in no distinct, structured manner. It is difficult to say with certainty whether the mapped location of a headstone is the original location because some headstones are knocked over, displaced by trees, and some stones are detached from their bases. The sunken graves are also not arranged in a distinguished pattern, but some sunken graves are much larger than others, which indicates that there may be a minimum number of two individuals in the burial. This could be indicative of a family burial plot or the collapse of several burial shafts that are adjacent to one another.

From my own Christian upbringing, I know that typical Christian burials are oriented in an east-west direction—head in the west, feet in the east. They are oriented in this way to prepare for the second coming of Jesus Christ. The sun rises in the east, and scriptures also teach us that so will Son of God. “For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:27). Christians orient their graves in this way so that when they are resurrected, they will sit up in their grave and face the coming of their God. Many of the graves are oriented in this manner, but some are oriented in the opposite way (west-east). Some are also oriented in a north-south and a southwest-northeast direction. These burials were intentional and done with care. The variety in orientation of burials is indicative of no particular association with a specific religion. It simply represents the ways in which the community understood and used the land. Despite the heavy presence of Christianity, and despite its proximity to Knoxville’s first Black church, the ways in which people are interred at Citizens is indicative of multiple priorities and constraints for burial.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis explores the ways in which the Black community, with the help of outside volunteers, combats erasure of Knoxville's Black community's history and sense of place. In the following chapters, I explore the connections volunteers and community members have to one another and the connections they form with Citizens throughout their participation in the project. I explore these connections through the theoretical frameworks of Black geographies and critical service-learning, while also utilizing studies in erasure and power, kinship, memory, and identity.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **Background**

When I began to develop my thesis around Citizens, I had a hard time choosing a research group. Do I study those buried at Citizens? Do I study leaders and members of the Black community in the Morningside neighborhood who are involved with the reclamation of Citizens? Do I study those who are not members of the Black community that volunteer their time, labor, and resources? It took me a while to come to the conclusion that they would all serve as my research group, but in different capacities. All of these groups play an important role in the reclamation of Citizens and play an important role in answering my research questions.

My thesis takes a mixed methods approach, combining both traditional ethnographic research methods and geospatial surveying methods. I used ethnographic research methods primarily—participant observation, focus groups, extended interviews, life histories, and archival research. The fieldwork for this project took place in several small areas of Citizens for five months, from November 2021 until March 2022. This section is broken down into two main sections: research methodology, and space and spatiality. The first section, ‘Research Methodology’, is broken down into four subsections which outline my methodology for the ethnographic research methods I used to address my research questions. The second section, ‘Space and Spatiality’, outlines the steps I took to understand the spatial organization of Citizens Cemetery.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Participant Observation***

Volunteers are at the heart of my research. For the purpose of this research, the term ‘volunteer’ refers to any individual who may not be members of the Black community in the Morningside neighborhood of East Knoxville who are giving their time, labor, resources, and/or care toward the reclamation efforts of Citizens Cemetery. I set up six volunteer sessions where volunteers, and occasionally community members, worked together in a small section of the cemetery. The number of volunteers per session varied. The smallest group was five, and the largest group was fourteen. The focus of each volunteer workday was planned by either Mr. Kemp or myself. Tasks varied depending on the day, but it always involved manual labor, and we usually used tools, such as shovels, rakes, bow saws, weed wrenches, pickaxes, and wheelbarrows. Volunteers participated in workdays where they cleared vegetation (with and without tools), backfilled sunken graves with dirt, placed colored survey flags across the landscape, recorded headstone information, and collected and discarded debris.

I participated in all of these volunteer sessions. During these sessions, although I was actively engaged in workday tasks, I carefully observed interactions between volunteers, interactions between volunteers and community members, and interactions between volunteers and the cemetery. I also participated in community-wide events held by the Black community in the Morningside neighborhood, such as their neighborhood meetings and the Keep Knoxville Beautiful trash clean-up along Dandridge Avenue and Wilder Place. Through this participant observation, I investigated how volunteer service-



learning and Black community efforts to reclaim and restore Citizens combats erasure of Black sacred cultural spaces. The overarching goal of the Citizens Cemetery Project led by Mr. Kemp and KRC is to recuperate Black place, memory, identity, and history. Many participants in this research, including myself, embodied various forms of privilege in relation to the Morningside community. Often unaware of their own racial privilege, many also expressed ignorance about the ways in which racism manifests for Black people, in both life and death. Being an observant participant – a term coined by Loic Wacquant to emphasize the embodied participation/practice aspect of research – during volunteer workdays allowed me to be critically reflexive and recognize my own positions and privileges as I navigated this project (Wacquant 2003; Nagar 2014). Participating and observing in volunteer workdays and in the community allowed me to situate myself within the context of the volunteer realities that my research participants were experiencing. I had to quickly realize that even though I am a researcher, I am still a volunteer. Positioning myself in this way served as a reminder that this project would function as a learning process for me too, not just the volunteer participants.

### ***Focus Groups***

Focus group reflection meetings were held after each of the six volunteer workdays. The first focus group was held in-person at Morningside Community Center, an accessible, public community building in East Knoxville. The rest of the focus groups were held on Zoom due to growing concerns over the increase of COVID-19 cases in Knoxville, TN. Focus groups lasted for approximately an hour and thirty minutes each session. The largest focus group consisted of nine participants and the smallest consisted

of six participants. The goal for these focus groups was to create a space where volunteers, facilitators, and community members could come together and engage in reflective dialogue regarding racism, erasure, and power. Through the dialogue in these focus groups, I was able to encourage volunteers to think deeply about their motives for volunteering, the impacts of their voluntarism, and the often small but important personal transformations that may have occurred throughout their volunteer service-learning experience.

Through focus groups, I wanted to learn how the volunteer experience may be personally transformative by providing volunteers a safe space to reflect upon the meanings and impacts of their service. While this project creates a space for me to be critically reflexive, I also want to cultivate an environment of critical reflexivity (Nagar 2014), so that volunteers and community members can be critical of their worlds. Cultivating this space is especially important for community members. Marginalized communities, especially those in the South where violence against them is much more explicit, are so commonly silenced and erased. As a result of this, these groups are considered unable to produce or contribute “true” knowledge. I opened these spaces for the Black community to be critical of me, to be critical of volunteers, and to be critical of their worlds. One of the broader impacts of this project is to bring some much-needed attention to common forms of knowledge production, particularly around identity, place, and memory. I would not be doing the community I am serving any justice if they are unable to criticize their world and openly challenge the traditional ways in which knowledge is produced.

While conducting this research, I have come to realize that it is difficult to question the ways in which knowledge is produced. I have a hard time with that myself, but framing research as processual (Nagar 2014) turned it into a pedagogical process that opened up spaces for us to think critically about all of our relationships to one another, to the cemetery, and to the structures of power that brought us all to Citizens. The pedagogical challenge of producing this critical space is also a dialogical one (Nagar 2014). The focus groups were introspective, where volunteers and community members were challenged to think relationally. While it is certainly a space to be self-critical, it also serves as a space for mutual learning about the world and about one another. Instead of teaching volunteers and community members about racial justice through what Paulo Freire calls the “banking method” (Freire 1970), focus groups became spaces that created an equilibrium between the researcher and the researched. Focus groups were spaces where we were able to grow as a collective, learning from one another and valuing different experiences that helped us grow as individuals. I was able to foster an environment of discomfort, especially for those with racial privileges, that was productive in ways that allowed us to take small but important steps towards social justice by withdrawing the veils of racial privilege and ignorance about racism, power and erasure.

Those who were unable to attend a focus group session or who chose not to participate in this activity, were still able to reflect on their service experience through a 9-question survey (Appendix A). The survey questions focused on similar topics that were discussed in focus group sessions. Here, participants were able to reflect on their

service experience and on the impacts the service experience had on them. The goal of the survey was to create a private thought-provoking platform for volunteers to share things they may not be very comfortable sharing in a large group.

### ***Extended Interviews and Life Histories***

Interviews were conducted with ten long-term adult residents of East Knoxville, Tennessee. These semi-structured interviews were used to explore the connections between the members of the descendant community and those buried at Citizens, and how, despite the severance of this connection between kin due to erasure and silencing, these individuals strive to recuperate and honor Black memory, identity, and heritage. An increase in activity at Citizens piqued community interest, and some community members even stopped by to talk to Mr. Kemp and me. They generally expressed gratitude and appreciation for our efforts, and several agreed to be interviewed. Otherwise, I identified individuals to interview through snowball sampling. I asked my participants if they knew of any other long-term adult residents of East Knoxville who would want to participate in an interview for my research. On several occasions, I was contacted by members of the community after research participants shared information about the project and my contact information with them.

Interviews ranged from one to three hours in length. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. The questions I used to guide these conversations produced a narrative of history residents shared with me about Citizens, and memories of living or growing up near Citizens. They would begin by answering my questions very straightforward and to the point, almost as if they were trying to tell me what I wanted to

hear instead of speaking their truth. During my first few interviews, I recognized how difficult it was for members in the community to speak with and be honest with me as an academic, even though I am also a person of color. The more I talked to members in the community, the more I recognized the ways in which both my identity and theirs affected the conversation. So, it became imperative that I let them control the narrative. Guiding the conversation so that my research participants were able to control the direction in which it flowed was the result of the recognition of my own positionality and subjectivities. I asked open-ended questions in order to move the conversation forward, and these questions allowed for research participants to reflect on their memories and lived experiences as they relate to Citizens Cemetery and Knoxville's Black history. Using a person-centered approach to interviewing (Hollan 2005) allowed for me to use my active listening and engaging research skills to gain a better understanding of the descendant community members I interviewed while also fostering a warm, welcoming atmosphere that made community members want to talk to me.

Alongside extended interviews with ten long-term adult residents of East Knoxville, I conducted a life history of Mr. George Kemp, leader of the Citizens Cemetery Project, President of the Knoxville Re-Animation Coalition and long-term resident of the Morningside neighborhood. A life history allowed me to contextualize and understand Mr. Kemp's life experiences in relation to the larger historical processes that unfolded in Knoxville. Mr. Kemp has grown up and lived around Citizens throughout his entire life, and now he is leading its restoration. There were two life history interviews, both lasting between two and three hours. During the first interview, we discussed basic

background information—demographics, family history, lifetime career, religious affiliation, and significant life memories. During the second interview, we discussed key life events in childhood and adulthood, reflections, regrets, and evaluations.

### ***Archival Research***

I conducted archival research for this project in order to familiarize myself with the history of the Black community in Knoxville. I mainly used digital archives through NewsBank for newspapers and journals and digital archives I had access to via the Knox County Public Library. I also spent time in the archives at the Beck Cultural Exchange Center, Knoxville's Museum of African American History and Culture. The information I gathered in these archives were helpful and important for historical context and learning more about the Black men, women, and children buried at Citizens Cemetery.

### **Space and Spatiality**

I conducted the mapping portion of my fieldwork during February and March 2022. I mapped Citizens Cemetery, with help of my research assistant, Matthew Hoover, using a Trimble Geo 7x Handheld Data Collector (Trimble). Information about the spatial organization of the cemetery is extremely invaluable as it provided important information about the community interred at Citizens. It also served as the guide for careful recuperation. Many headstones, grave markers, and other artifacts were, and still are, hidden by brush and overgrown vegetation. Developing a map to demarcate headstones, grave markers, and sunken graves was, and will continue to be, helpful in preventing further destruction of the cemetery when we used power tools during a volunteer service-learning session or if Mr. Kemp invited a local landscaping company out to Citizens to

use their Bobcat to clear vegetation. The goal of mapping Citizens was not only to determine why and how Citizens is organized the way it is but also to make sure we did not contribute to the further deterioration and neglect of this cemetery.

The Trimble is a reliable high-accuracy GNSS (global navigation satellite systems) receiver. Using this piece of geophysical equipment allowed me to record the location of headstones, grave markers, and sunken graves accurately and precisely. For each headstone and grave marker, one point was taken in the middle of the marker. If the headstone was detached from the base, one point was taken for the marker and one was taken for the base, making a note that the two were separated. For sunken graves, I used a polygon feature to outline the shape of the sunken grave. Sometimes it was difficult to figure out where one sunken grave ended and another began if they were right next to each other, resulting in a large pit containing multiple burials. In those cases, I outlined the entire pit and noted that the area potentially contained more than one individual. I also recorded any inscriptions and symbols engraved on grave markers. Mapping the cemetery in this way allowed for me to develop a digital rendering of the cemetery using the ArcGIS software. Understanding how the cemetery is organized provided me with information about how the Black community interacted with and used the land.

I was able to create an easy-to-read map of the cemetery with the Trimble so that project leaders and community members can visualize the distribution and organization of headstones, grave markers, and sunken graves. Because of the violence Black people have faced in life and in death in the United States, there was a time where there was nothing that marked the graves of Black folk. Enslaved persons were buried without

headstones or traditional grave markers. Citizens dates back to 1836 and less than ten percent of its inhabitants have markers. This means that if an individual buried at Citizens did not have a headstone, grave marker, or they were not resting in a sunken grave, then it is hard to tell where they are buried. I proposed to survey the cemetery with a ground penetrating radar (GPR), as that would tell me where potential unmarked graves are located, but due to time constraints, the physical landscape of the cemetery was still too rugged and uneven to accurately collect subsurface data. Subsurface data collection should wait until further restoration endeavors are completed.

I observed my research questions through a mixed methods approach. Combining ethnographic research methods with geophysical data provided me with much more depth when attempting to understand my research participants, their lived experiences, and their worlds. There are many benefits to using geographic information systems (GIS) in conjunction with ethnographic research methods, or “geo-ethnography” (Matthews et al. 2005). Combining these two research methodologies allows for me to understand people and space in a more holistic manner. My goal in combining these approaches was to provide depth in illustrating the complex lives of the residents of East Knoxville, something that ethnographic or geospatial data could not reflect on their own, while at the same time producing technical knowledge that can be a useful tool for community activists (McLafferty 2005). Although I carefully and intentionally designed my thesis project, I know that research does not come without its limitations. According to O’Sullivan (2006), there is a lack of historical knowledge of how society influenced the science of GIS and how GIS has influenced society. The interrelationships involved in



technologically dependent research methods reaffirm inequalities in power and often helped obscure it. This is particularly the reason for why I took great care in forming my research questions and sharpening my research methodology; moreover, both my research questions and methodology were informed by a critical focus so that I was able to constructively engage with my work and research participants within a context in which we actively sought to produce our work as a catalyst for change.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**“EITHER YOU’RE INSIDE...”**

“Black matters are spatial matters.” (McKittrick 2006, xii)

*February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, 10am*

*It was bright out. A solid 53. I had an interview today. I definitely struggled to keep my researcher hat on. Sometimes it is hard to remember I am a researcher. The woman I interviewed today, I will call her Mrs. Fay, was like family to me. I babysat for her son pretty regularly in my early graduate school career. I would sometimes bring the kids over to her house, if they wanted, since Mrs. Fay’s house was within (short) driving distance. Even though she knew I was coming to talk to her for my research today, neither of the two small children in tow, she still asked me to play for her when I arrived. I would bring the kids over and one would ask me to play “Mary Had a Little Lamb” on the old piano that sat tucked away under piles of papers in the living room. Of course, I would oblige every time because their precious dance moves and infectious smiles outweighed my hatred for playing that song. Now, Mrs. Fay expected me to play for her whenever I came to visit, which was not very often these days. I never loved playing in front of people. Stage fright always got the best of me, but Mrs. Fay never cared if I hit a wrong key or played the wrong chord. She never cared if I played a waltz or a sonata. If I played a classical piece or a popular song off of the radio. Today, I opted for “Clair de Lune.” I had a lot of stress to get out today, apparently, because I was yearning for the tranquilizing chords of Debussy. I noticed Mrs. Fay’s footsteps behind me, and I felt my body immediately become tense. She knew I hated it when I could tell she is listening or*

*watching me. I think she could tell I was getting nervous because I immediately felt her hand on my back a few moments later. She grabbed both my shoulders and whispered, “Take your time sweetie. No need to be nervous, when you’re here you are like family.” I hadn’t heard those words in a while. I smiled and turned to her as she stood next to me. “I’m going to teach you how to play one day,” I said half-jokingly, as I lifted my fingers from the keys. “Girl, I don’t have the coordination.” She rebutted. “Look, Mrs. Fay,” I tried to get out through laughs. “Anyone can play the piano; it just takes a little dedication and a genuine desire to learn,” I told her. “Plus, imagine YOU playing ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ now for the kids instead of me.” We both laughed so hard, but I had to dampen the mood. I steered the conversation toward more professional, research-related matters.*

### **A Dedication to Place**

Mr. George Kemp, President of Knoxville Re-Animation Coalition (KRC) and leader of the Citizens Cemetery Project, is the epitome of dedication to place, history, and community. A native of the Morningside-Five Points East Knoxville neighborhood since 1952, he has proved to be a pillar in his community. He has a loving wife and three proud children who have supported him in the community efforts in which he takes part. While Mr. Kemp has been working tirelessly to restore and reclaim Citizens Cemetery since August 2020, his dedication to Black place, history, and community started much earlier in his life. The Citizens Cemetery Project serves as the most recent project set in motion by this beloved community leader.

Before he helped form KRC in 2009, his relationship to the community looked a lot different than the way it does now. He knew from the time he was in high school that he wanted to be an educator. He participated in summer youth programs that provided active, constructive activities for community youth. He told me, *“At this age, kids want to know things and doing it in an engaging way is constructive”* (Kemp 2022). His participation in these programs led him to recognizing that he wanted to work with kids. For 26 years, he served as a fourth-grade Educator for Oak Ridge Schools. *“Being a teacher is impactful,”* he expressed to me, *“but the pay is minimal, and still is. Before I got married, I didn’t work in the summer, so I donated my time to Walter P. Taylor Recreation Center.”* At the recreation center, he would get the kids engaged through exercise activities, cultural activities, and sang songs with them. Then, he came back to his home community and served as an Assistant Principal at Vine Middle School for 7 years (Kemp 2022).

His love for teaching and engaging youth continued beyond those public-school walls—extending into the religious domain of his life. A devout Muslim, in 1998, he established Annoor Academy in Knoxville, TN. Annoor Academy is a private Islamic school off Foxvue Road dedicated to developing “thoughtful and engaged citizens” (Kemp 2022). After he retired from his Assistant Principal position at Vine Middle School in 2008, he helped establish another Annoor Academy in Chattanooga, TN. Both schools house pre-kindergarten through eighth grade students (Kemp 2022). Although Mr. Kemp has a history of being an active agent for social change in his community, he was not always involved with the reclamation of cemeteries.

Mr. Kemp grew up on Cityview Avenue, one street over from Citizens Cemetery, with his aunts, his two older sisters and one younger brother. He attended Eastport School, which was, at the time, on Bethel Avenue. While exploring his major childhood events, I asked if he could remember anything that directly influenced his decision to lead the reclamation project at Citizens. He chuckled and told me, *“Not really. I grew up on Cityview, so I walked Fuller Street every day from Grade 1 to Grade 6. My aunts did not tell me the significance of it and neither did my teachers.”* Mr. Kemp walked past Citizens every day and had no sense of the significance it held to the community or its importance in Knoxville’s (Black) history. This was not only because his aunts and teachers did not tell him the significance, but it was also because no one was actively trying to reclaim this place.

It was not until he was approached by two of his classmates in 2008 to discuss trying to do something to reclaim Odd Fellows, which is another Black Cemetery in East Knoxville. It was established in the 1880s, and is another cemetery that Mr. Kemp saw every day growing up as it was located right across the street from the Eastport School, where he attended primary school, on Bethel Avenue. He told me, *“The stars aligned, and I wanted to give back right in my neighborhood. I have always been interested in culture. When he [classmate] approached me, from there I said, ‘whatever I can do, I want to make a difference’”* (Kemp 2022). Thus, in 2009, the KRC was formally organized with the mission of restoring and reclaiming historical sites in East Knoxville and educating people about the historical significance of these sites (Kemp 2022). Since 2009, their reclamation efforts focused on Odd Fellows Cemetery. In August 2020, their

focus shifted to focus on both Odd Fellows and Citizens Cemetery. Mr. Kemp's dedication to the restoration and reclamation of these historic places, Citizens Cemetery in particular, is more than just an interest in Black history, place, and community, but is rooted in a sense of kinship, as his father is buried at Citizens Cemetery.

In this chapter, I will explore the connection the descendant community has to Citizens Cemetery. I will examine closely the historical reasons why some members of the community show more interest in its reclamation and restoration over others. Utilizing the theoretical framework of Black geographies, I portray how the community's reclamation and restoration efforts at Citizens Cemetery create a new sense of place for the Black community. I will also portray how these efforts rekindle the relationships between the descendant community and those buried at Citizens, focusing on how it serves as a form of resistance to erasure of Black history, place, and community.

### **Community Engagement and Interest**

When I first began developing this project, Mr. Kemp made it very clear to me that one of KRC's concerns was community engagement. There was a lack of interest in participating in the restoration efforts at Citizens by some members of the local community. I decided to explore the reasoning behind what might be causing this disconnect. As I talked to members of the community, they all agree that there is a lack of awareness. Mr. Kemp told me some people are more invested in Citizens' reclamation and restoration due to some people not being exposed to this history and being unaware that the cemetery is there (Kemp 2022). Another community member, stopping me as I was collecting data one day, was in utter shock that the cemetery was even there. He

asked me to contact him on the next volunteer day, so that he could participate. Another community member told me in conversation, *“I drive down this street almost every day, and had no idea the cemetery was this large.”* While there is certainly a lack of awareness and exposure to this historic site, much of it can be attributed to power imbalances and physical violence that caused the erasure of Black histories, places, and communities.

Two previously discussed major instances of physical and systemic violence toward Knoxville’s Black community caused migration out of Knoxville by Black families. In August 1919, an angry White mob destroyed and looted the thriving Black community after a Black man, Maurice Mays, was accused and convicted of murdering a White woman (Lakin 2000). The Black community did what they could to defend themselves, resulting in the loss of many Black lives, but many of them decided to flee as result. Then, from 1959 until 1974, the Black community was ravaged and displaced because of the urban removal programs put in place by the United States government (Teaford 2000; Fullilove 2001; Hyra 2008; Knox Co. R-367-2020). It destroyed the Black community and caused dispossession among the community that still has not been remedied at present.

These violent events that the Black community had to endure, causing the migration of many Black families, over decades can be directly related to the erasure of Citizens from the physical landscape and from the scope of the Black community. James White Parkway, sections of Interstate 40, and the Knoxville Civic Coliseum and Auditorium were built in the place of Black neighborhoods and businesses (Clouse 2020)

during urban removal projects. Trouillot (1995) tells us that the production of silences in the historical narrative is an active process. The physical removal of a thriving Black community from the landscape and replacing it with areas for Whiteness—displacing Black families and segregating the White and Black community in Knoxville even further—is a glaring example of the manifestations of silencing and erasure. These events can be regarded as processes of long-term ruination, an array of violent, active processes, that results in ruins—dismal, bleak places and physical remains that persist long after communities are afflicted by ruination (Stoler 2008). Stoler (2008) uses these terms to describe formerly colonized societies and the processes that violently harmed them, but it can also be applied to what marginalized communities in the United States face since they are constantly treated as the racialized “other” in their own country. Ruination manifested in East Knoxville as the silencing and erasure of the Black community from the historical narrative. This resulted in many areas of ruin, including Citizens Cemetery.

The lives and histories hidden in these ruins connect us to our past. Their persistence in the form of ruins is indicative of how their individual and collective histories were, and how they continue to be, intentionally erased and silenced by narratives of powerful white actors (Rainville 2014). The same landscapes Black people helped to build and develop are the same landscapes from which they have been expelled and the same landscapes White people stood on to erase Black history and a Black sense of place. In this sense, it is a double erasure—one, the erasure of the Black community from the places they built, and two, the connection between the Black community and their history. “*Whoever the victor is chooses history,*” Mr. Roach, a community member



and activist, expressed to me during an interview, *“Have you ever heard the African Proverb about the lion [Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter]? There is a different perspective coming from the lion and the hunter; the two stories are a lot different.”* He told me, *“[They are] controlling what people see because seeing informs us. Things that inform us about people we are connected to and maybe could inform us of how we live or how we should live.”* “Seeing” ruins, I refer to seeing in the same way my interlocutor does, represents loss and severance between the present-day and historical precarity of Blackness (Hartman 2007). The severance between the Black present and Black history due to the silencing of the Black narrative, coupled with the massive migrations of Black families out of Knoxville, results in a massive sense of unawareness and lack of exposure in the community to the history that was never told. We cannot expect the community to be a part of something they know nothing about, especially if the biological descendants of the people buried at Citizens no longer live in this area.

In the next section, I will outline the theoretical framework of Black geographies in order to explore how the community’s reclamation and restoration efforts at Citizens Cemetery create a changed sense of place for the Black community, as well as how these efforts build and rekindle relationships between the descendant community and this sacred place. During this analysis, I will focus on how these efforts serve as a form of resistance to erasure of Black history, place, and community.

## **The Untraditional Geography: Black Geography**

The erasure of a Black sense of place, through systemic racism, violence and dispossession, and the persistence of ruins in the Black community exposes the spatial forms of racial violence in Knoxville. This serves as an example for what Katherine McKittrick (2006) terms “geographies of domination.” Practices of geographic domination are “sustained by a unitary vantage point, naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups “naturally” belong” (McKittrick 2006, xv). That unitary vantage point is the traditional viewpoint of Geography as a discipline. Traditional geographies, as defined by McKittrick (2006), are conceptualizations in which we perceive and organize the world through a “white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed” lens (xiii). Therefore, traditional geographic discourse and practices of geographic domination produce a naturalization of difference based on racial essentialisms, economic status, and what is determined by powerful white actors to be “normal.” This allows for the control of Black communities through the control of space—rendering Black bodies as “placeless” (Domosh 2017). Traditional geographic approaches make it impossible for a Black sense of place to be regarded as “true” knowledge.

The unequal production of space is directly related to the naturalization of difference in traditional geographic discourse. This naturalization is compounded by the idea of transparent space, which is the idea that “space ‘just is,’ and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation, and that what we see is true” (McKittrick 2006, xv). The presumption that space is knowable in terms of White,

Western knowledge systems ignores the fact that all space is not knowable (McKittrick 2006). For example, slave landscapes are an extension of enslaved persons' knowledge systems. Slave landscapes allowed for them to interact with the physical landscape in a way that was much different from the way in which White people interacted with the landscape (Ginsburg 2007). This helped enslaved persons develop a sense of place. The knowledge of their landscape that allowed them to understand and traverse the landscape in ways White people could not, served as a form of resistance to traditional geographic discourse. Traditional geography undermines a Black sense of place by requiring that Blackness stay in the place in which it was given by White, Western knowledge systems. The idea of a Black sense of place is at the center of Black Geographies. Black Geographies is the theoretical framework in which I will situate the descendant community's sense of place regarding Citizens and its reclamation.

Black geographies operate both within and outside of the contours of traditional geographic spaces. McKittrick (2006) states:

“...they expose the limitations of transparent space through black social particularities and knowledges; they locate and speak back to the geographies of modernity, transatlantic slavery, and colonialism; they illustrate the ways in which the raced, classed, gendered, and sexual body is often an indicator of spatial options and the ways in which geography can indicate racialized habitation patterns; they are fragmented, subjective, connective, invisible, visible, unacknowledged, and conspicuously positioned...” (McKittrick 2006, 7).

Black geographies no longer render Blackness and a Black sense of place as “placeless” (Domosh 2017) or un-geographic. Black geographies, then, express the duality of Black space as it shaped by, but also serves as a form of resistance to, systemic racism and white supremacy (McKittrick 2011; Brand 2017). While traditional geographic discourse excludes the capacity for Black people to make space and develop “true” knowledge,

Black geographies provides a framework that reflects how Black people organize and perceive their world.

### *The Duality of Black Space*

The duality of Black space is a reflection of the complex Black identity. The Du Boisian theoretical concept of “double-consciousness” (Du Bois 1903; Brand 2017) is when Black people see themselves through this Black-White dichotomy—through their own, Black eyes and through the eyes of Whiteness. Anna Brand (2017) analyzes, through her fieldwork in Treme and the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, Louisiana, how the concept of the double-consciousness can provide insight into the ways in which race and space are deeply woven into both systems of oppression and of resistance. Place, and the ruins that persist on these landscapes, are not static and are not independent of the historical context in which they were created (Armada 1996). To think about space as representing both oppression and resistance—a reflection of the double-consciousness—reveals the complex Black knowledge systems that organize their sense of place into past and present.

The Du Boisian theory of space requires us to think about the deconstructed Black space as a material site of racial processes and as a site of resistance to these same hegemonic processes (Brand 2017). Although Black spaces are historically shaped by oppression, systemic racism, and violence, they are also sites where Black social worlds flourish. Black people are still able to connect to these spaces in ways one would not imagine. Citizens expresses the duality of Black space and place through its physical appearance and the reclamation and restoration efforts that are bringing it back to life.

The ways in which the reclamation and restoration efforts at Citizens serve as a form of resistance to the same racial processes that caused it to fall into disrepair is two-fold: rekindling relationships between the descendant community and the cemetery and allowing for the Black community to develop a changed sense of place.

### ***“How the Cemetery Speaks to Me”***

The myriad of hegemonic processes that led Citizens to its eventual state of disrepair outlines how this Black sacred site was shaped by historical racial violence. In line with the Du Boisian theory of space, Citizens also serves as a site of resistance to these same processes. The reclamation and restoration efforts combat these processes by rekindling the relationships between the descendant community and the cemetery through the development of feelings of discovery and the ignition of living connections.

During the only focus group where community members attended, I posed the question of how we grapple with this sense of loss due to the reciprocal nature of erasure. As Citizens is removed from the historical narrative and the scope of the Black community, it is less likely they will even recognize it is there, which perpetuates a lack of awareness of its existence. Many of the volunteers in this session were sad, angry, and frustrated. *“As like an anthropologist’s point of view, and like an archaeologist who’s always feels that sense of loss, when you’re working on a site you realize that there is that sense of erasure. I’ve worked in a couple of different cemeteries and it’s, for me, it’s always frustrating to see stones missing or overturned or they’re sinking into the ground and you’re just like, ‘what is there that we can do to remedy that?’ We’re losing kind of that part of history. And so, for me, it’s more of like a frustration than anything because*

*it's like we can only do so much. And it's—we're basically fighting against time*" a volunteer said. Another expressed, *"It's sad, but (I'm) also angry. I wonder, like, why you see parts of Knoxville, white cemeteries, so well-maintained, so resourced. As a way of thinking about Knoxville history, it completely wipes out Black Knoxville, and it's just thinking—seeing those small things like that make you remember that this stuff is so real."* They are not wrong in the sense that the historical racial processes did help shape this sacred place, but the community members do not necessarily see it that way.

A community member proudly conveyed his feelings about Citizens during the reflection after the workday: *"Loss? I felt a sense of discovery. Again, like I grew up there and we always knew where my grandfather was buried because my father always kept that area clean. But, you know, Fuller Street, there. We rode our bikes through, you know, the street. We walked, and we never knew what was behind all of that overgrowth. We just never knew. So, you know, I don't know if it's a sense of loss as much as it is a sense of discovery. I felt a really, really deep connection... Proximity, like that geographic part, like [growing up in] that area. And the cemetery being that close, right, and I have a grandfather that's buried there. I could have other family members buried there, right? It could be dope. I could have family members buried, buried in that cemetery. So just a very deep sense of connection. That's not necessarily a sense of loss, but a sense of discovery, a sense of obligation."* This sense of discovery, connection, and obligation extends far beyond this one community member, but the restoration and reclamation efforts at Citizens provides a platform for community members to recognize and act on these feelings.

While we were wrapping up a volunteer workday session one day, we were stopped by a local community member. Mr. Kemp talked with him for a little while and then introduced me to him. I walked with him for a little bit into the small area at Citizens where we were working that day. He was in disbelief that the cemetery was here and was as expansive as it was. He kept repeating that he just *did not know*. After we walked back up toward the road, he continued talking with Mr. Kemp. He ultimately helped Mr. Kemp gather tools and wheelbarrows and transport them so that Mr. Kemp did not have to make more than one trip in the bitter cold weather. He was doing his part to make a difference after being exposed to Citizens and its history just by driving past that day when many volunteers were out there engaging in restoration work. After initial exposure, community members that care about this place and its historical context are eager to help make a difference where they can—no matter how big or small. Beyond driving community members to recognize their feelings of a sense of discovery, connection, and obligation to Citizens, the restoration and reclamation efforts at Citizens ignites living connections between the descendant community and the cemetery.

During my interview with Mr. Roach, he told me, “*It [Citizens] is an informed gravesite... it informs you about people.*” He is absolutely right. Citizens is an informed gravesite. Citizens serves as a legacy, a history, as Mr. Roach put it (Roach 2022). He also told me about how after his mother died, he started reading about the African tradition regarding ancestors. He said, “*You notice, there’s something you do not lose... Full appreciation for what came before has to inform me, and we may not have all the facts, but when we do, we have a living connection.*” The idea of connecting with the

ancestors buried at Citizens and learning their history, the community's history, allows the Black community to reclaim and be proud of the resistance, resilience, and survival of their present community and of those that came before them—those that lived and endured even more racial violence throughout space and time than in my generation. The cultural trauma (Eyerman 2004) we share due to racial violence serves as the very foundation for this history and connection. Understanding and reclaiming their history and sense of space through the Citizens Cemetery Project allows for a changed sense of place for Knoxville's Black community.

### ***Black-Space Making: A Changed Sense of Place***

The Du Boisian theory of space, reflecting the double-consciousness of Black people (Du Bois 1903; Brand 2017), provides the foundation in which I will examine how the reclamation and restoration efforts at Citizens creates a changed sense of place for the Black community. We can see Citizens through the lens of abandonment, neglect, and as a physical manifestation of structural inequalities woven deep within the fabric of the United States society, but as many community members have told me—that is not the only lens we can use to view Citizens and what it means to the community members who care. When looking through the lens of oppression, the people buried there are undignified from decades of racial violence that harmed them in life and in death. Traditional geographic discourse renders Black place-making and knowledge systems as dispossessed and un-geographic (McKittrick 2006; Brand 2017). Through the lens of resistance, the community, with the help of volunteers, is pushing back against traditional geographic discourse by liberating Citizens and those buried there. Mr. Kemp expressed



to me, *“People outside the community are making it happen!”* While volunteer participation has certainly been helpful, without a community leader and community group to follow, we would be causing the same effects that decades of power imbalances and hegemonic processes caused that led to the disrepair of Citizens.

Traditional geographic discourse would have us only thinking of Citizens in terms of a vulnerable, abandoned site; however, as a site of resistance, it reconstitutes Black knowledge systems. Reclaiming and restoring Citizens turns it into a site of not just beauty and community (Brand 2017), but also of learning. Not much is known about the approximately six thousand people buried at Citizens, but as the physical space started to change (i.e. as we volunteers followed the lead of the community in restoring the physical landscape) we revealed more of the history of Citizens while beautifying it in the process. We found more headstones, recorded information, and took photographs. During sessions, community members would often stop and thank us. Seeing the massive change taking place in the cemetery, and the slow but important change taking place within the community, impacted Mr. Kemp, as he often ended strenuous workdays, smiling, with deep sense of satisfaction.

The community is taking it upon themselves to not only change the way in which the public sees Citizens and Black history, but also the way they, themselves, see Citizens and Black history. Due to the reclamation and restoration efforts at Citizens, no longer is this sacred place a space where someone just walks past or drives past. The community is turning it into an explicit site of memory (Morrison 1998)—bringing that erasure to life and creating a different, livable space. Through the valuing of Black bodies and Black

spaces, the community is dignifying those that came before them. They are operating outside of traditional geographic discourse, outside of racial processes, and outside of the lens of oppression, transforming Citizens into a place that reflects exactly who they are as a community: beautiful and resilient.

### **Conclusion**

Before I conclude, I want to return to my interview with Mrs. Fay:

*February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, 10am*

*As I was wrapping up my interview with Mrs. Fay, she asked me a very odd question—one I never thought I would be asked as a researcher or really as a person in general. She asked me if I could choose a song that would represent this project, what would it be? It took me a few minutes to think. I was not prepared for the question, and I honestly did not know how to answer. I guess she assumed my musical knowledge from playing piano all of my life would extend into popular music. “You mean a song with lyrics?” I asked her, trying to stall because I did not know what to say. How do I connect a song to a project focused on reclaiming and restoring a historic cemetery? I probed her a little further, and she finally gave me the piece of information I needed to accurately answer her question. She said, “You talk a lot about power and resiliency. Everything you have learned so far about the community and about the cemetery, what song would reflect what you have learned?” As soon as she said that is when it clicked. I played her “Golden” by Ruth B. “This song came out in 2015, the year I graduated high school. I was really struggling in my late teens and this song actually got me through a lot of hard*

*times. I think a few lyrics of this song reflect the power and resiliency of the East Knoxville community, and the power of this project, perfectly.”*

*“Burn, burn, burn, they used to yell  
You thought I was coal, my friend I’m gold  
Can’t you tell?*

*‘Cause I’m not weak, I’m not broken, I am bold  
And the fire you put me through turned me into gold*

*...  
The fire that you tried to burn me with, it made me who I am  
All the things you said I couldn’t do. Guess what, yes, I can.*

*...  
Out of the ashes you buried me in  
I, I am golden  
I, I am golden, golden”  
(Ruth B 2015 “Golden”)*

While the entire community is not invested in the reclamation and restoration of Citizens Cemetery, I cannot not recognize the hard work put in by those that are invested in order to create a different, changed sense of space. Challenging traditional geographic discourse—challenging any dominant ideology—is difficult; however, with the help of volunteers, the community is resisting erasure of their history and their place by making use of a space to reconstruct their own world. Taking a place that was, and is, shaped by historical racial processes and constructing their own visions and interpretations of this sacred place is a result of their double-consciousness and the duality of Black space (Brand 2017). Conducting this project alongside the community has shown me that even though a legacy, a sacred place, a people have been erased from the historical narrative and from the physical landscape, that does not mean that they are powerless and unable to produce their own sense of space.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **“... OR YOU’RE OUT”**

“When the heart is touched by direct experience the mind may be challenged to change”  
(Kolvenbach, 200) (as cited in Yamamura and Koth 2018, 139)

The concept of giving and receiving are cultural universals. In the United States, among a myriad of other societies, existing social and economic hierarchies create circumstances where some people have, and others do not. These hierarchies serve as the foundation for volunteerism by allowing the act of giving to flourish. Over the course of this project, those who engaged in the act of giving to Citizens cemetery gave their time, labor, and resources.

In this chapter, I explore volunteer motivations and how they compare to the expectations of community members. I also analyze how participating in a critical service-learning project impacts volunteers’ views on racial justice. I will start by outlining the difference between traditional and critical service-learning, framing the critical service-learning project at Citizens through the ROSOR (relationship-objective-structure-outcome-relationship) framework (Bennett 2018). I will then examine how participating in this critical service-learning project at Citizens can serve as a personal transformative experience that produces more conscientious human beings through what I call the RAM (recognition, apathy-to-action, moving forward) framework.

#### **Critical vs. Traditional Service-Learning**

While I was a student in Maryland public schools, I participated in several traditional service-learning programs. In order to advance to the next grade, we had to

complete a certain number of student service-learning hours. I have fond, and not so fond, memories volunteering at food and clothing drives, homeless shelters, and with non-profit organizations that focused on increasing quality of life for Black and Brown communities. These volunteer hours were times where I begrudgingly helped those in my community. I did not actively want to participate, but I did it because I had to; however, this was the system's way of trying to produce a more aware and compassionate citizen. These traditional programs emphasized my volunteer service without recognizing the systemic inequalities that allowed for me to give my time and resources to those who could not do the same (Mitchell 2008). As I look back on these memories, I recognize that I did not learn or gain much from volunteering beyond a few moments of gratitude after being thanked for my volunteer service.

Traditional service-learning programs focus on student service experiences, where positive impacts on their personal and social development are the main outcomes. These developments can manifest as changing perceptions on leadership, altruism, and even the communities in which they served (Mitchell 2008). These types of service-learning programs are practical for schools and universities, which makes it quite easy for them to prioritize the development of their students over meaningful community change (Mitchell 2008). These traditional programs do not pay close attention to the systemic inequalities that produce these service-learning opportunities in the first place. Although traditional service-learning programs are highly regarded in academic environments as being transformational opportunities, service in this capacity provides no real social impact without addressing the reasons these opportunities exist. In this way, service-learning

perpetuates the “have-have not” binary. Service-learning can be a powerful, transformative pedagogy (Butin 2006), and taking a critical approach to service-learning is exactly what is needed in order to produce meaningful social change.

Critical service-learning is a pedagogical practice that aims to dismantle the systems of power in place that create and sustain the inequalities that make service-learning possible (Mitchell 2008). A critical approach to service-learning allows for students to think critically about the work they do and how their own lives might be connected to the lives of those who are a part of the communities being served. Without the analytical factor of critical service-learning, the act of giving in the form of volunteerism fails to revolutionize volunteers or propel them towards making sustainable change (Mitchell 2008). As Tania Mitchell (2008, 1) outlines, there are three elements that distinguish critical service-learning from traditional service-learning: redistributing power amongst all participants in the service-learning relationship, working from a perspective of social change, and developing authentic relationships. In the remaining part of this section, I will discuss these three elements and how I structured the Citizens Cemetery Project as a critical service-learning project.

### ***Redistributing Power***

As previously mentioned, traditional service-learning programs perpetuates the “have-have not” binary when the service-learning experience is not analyzed with a critical lens. Traditional service-learning programs do not address the stark power dynamics that are inherent within this dichotomy (Mitchell 2008). Mitchell (2008) notes that the students who participate in service-learning opportunities will certainly hold

some form of privilege over the members of the community being served, whether it be in the form of race, socioeconomic status, education level, physical ability, time, or another form of societal privilege. I found this to be true within the demographic of volunteers at Citizens. Most volunteers were White, seemingly middle- to upper-class, and students pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree who have the time to spare to help in the community, as opposed to the lower income, historically Black residents of the neighborhood in which Citizens lives. This leads to the dominant ideology that these sites are places in need, and outside volunteers who have the privilege to help must be the ones to provide aid—minimizing and erasing the agency and voice of the people in that community, which can be observed through a short informal conversation I had with a volunteer several minutes before we started the workday: *“Are you excited to participate this morning? I know it is cold, but I am looking forward to seeing the work we get done”* I said, as I walked with a small group of volunteers down the hill of a cleared area in Citizens. The volunteer closest to me, as we started to fall behind the group, said, *“I would be more excited if it wasn’t cold, but I am here to do my duty in making this community a better place. I’m always willing to answer a call from people in need.”* This conversation shows a clear divide in “us” and “them” and reinforces the differences between those who serve and those who get served.

While these power dynamics are inherently embedded within the nature of service-learning, a critical approach to service-learning challenges power imbalances and works to redistribute that power (Mitchell 2008). The Citizens Cemetery Project challenges the way that “true” knowledge and understanding is developed because of

how power is distributed. The individual who oversees the entire project, and whom I collaborate with and serve as his second-in-command, is a community leader who has biological ties to the cemetery. This puts much of the power of this project in the hands of the community to which the cemetery belongs. Different power dynamics than what are typically assumed ultimately created this mutually beneficial experience that is crucial to critical service-learning (Mitchell 2008), as I was able to have a field site to conduct my research and the community was able to mobilize an academic support system.

Critical service-learning as a pedagogical practice also opens up spaces for dialogue among all parties involved in the service-learning relationship (Mitchell 2008), this was particularly true in this project among the volunteers through participation in focus groups. In this space, volunteers and researchers came together and openly discussed racism, historical violence, empathy, and imbalances in power. Challenging the “banking method” of knowledge production and dissemination in favor of a “problem-positing” method (Freire 1970), I was able to create a safe space that avoided traditional power relationships and hierarchies, allowing us to constructively challenge and question the structures that produce the need for service.

### ***A Social Change Perspective***

The second element that distinguishes critical service-learning from traditional service-learning is a clear and intentional social change orientation (Mitchell 2008). This crucial characteristic of critical service-learning urges volunteers to view themselves as agents for social change. This also builds on the first element, redistributing power amongst all parties of the service-learning relationship, because operating through a



social change perspective calls for actively engaging community members in developing the service-learning experience instead of perceiving them as “passive beneficiaries” (Mitchell 2008, 5). Similarly to the first element, conducting focus groups was a way for me to encourage analysis of real-world issues and the structures that keep them in place. Because of the prevalence of racial violence in Knoxville and of racial privilege among the volunteers, discussions after workdays revolved mostly around racism and racial justice. The content of these conversations supports the intentionality of the project in pushing participants to become more self-aware and to think critically about their role in producing a more equitable society, which is a key aspect of a social change orientation (Mitchell 2008).

### ***Developing Authentic Relationships: The ROSOR Framework***

The third and final element of critical service-learning that distinguishes it from traditional service-learning is developing authentic relationships based on connection (Mitchell 2008). This became increasingly important when developing this project.

*August 30, 2021, 4:00pm*

*Today was my first meeting with Mr. Kemp. I met with him to talk about Citizens Cemetery. Maybe I could conduct research at Citizens? I parked my car in the back parking lot, grabbed my bag, and made my way to the side door at Morningside Community Center, located on Dandridge Avenue in East Knoxville. One of the first things we talked about were the mission and goals of the Citizens Cemetery Group—a group of community leaders heading the initiative of the reclamation of Citizens Cemetery. One of their goals was to obtain funding, for a myriad of reasons. Mr. Kemp*

*told me how he was working with another individual to obtain said funding, but this person single-handedly wrote up the grant only asking Mr. Kemp for his signature. Mr. Kemp had no part in drafting the grant proposal. I could tell that Mr. Kemp was very clearly distraught and hurt from this interaction. He told me that this was their [community] project, no one else's. From that point forward, I knew that if I was going to develop a service-learning project, I needed to first create and nurture a relationship with Mr. Kemp and other members in the community that was built on connection, trust, and reciprocity.*

Building an authentic relationship with Mr. Kemp and other members of the East Knoxville community was key in developing this project through a critical service-learning lens. It took me a little while to come to terms with the fact that even though I was approaching them, a Black community, as a Black woman, that by itself meant nothing. I realized soon that I could not expect them to trust me so easily but had to remember that in addition to being a Black woman, I also am a Black academic.

Introducing myself as a student pursuing an advanced degree at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville placed me in the ivory tower that was simply out of reach for some of them. Reckoning with my privileged education level, understanding how my very discipline has harmed Black and Brown communities, allowed me to open myself up and connect more to the community, taking off my researcher hat as needed. As I did, I saw how incredibly trusting and welcoming they became.

Nurturing such relationships that challenged the us-them binary (Mitchell 2008) was also based on reciprocity. Traditional service-learning is one-sided, where the focus

is on what the community can provide for the students and not what the students can provide for the community. This is an example of negative reciprocity—when a relationship is characterized by low trust and high social distance and one party receives more than they give (Sahlins 1972; Bennett 2018). Negative reciprocity happens when one group holds power over another because the receiving group is in need (Bennett 2018), which is indicative of the power dynamics of the parties interacting within a traditional service-learning context. In order for critical-service learning to be successful, there should be a mutually beneficial, balanced relationship between parties (Bennett 2018). This is the anthropological concept of balanced reciprocity. Balanced reciprocity is a relationship where there is little, if any, power imbalance and is an even exchange between those involved (Sahlins 1972; Bennett 2018). The relationship is based on mutual benefit. Elaine Bennett (2018) offers the ROSOR framework, which builds on the anthropological concept of balanced reciprocity. This framework serves as a process for how I framed the critical service-learning project at Citizens.

I wanted this project to be mutually beneficial for me and the community with which I was working. In general terms, I provided them with a catalyst for volunteer service so they could kickstart their reclamation efforts, and they provided me with a research site; moreover, we (the volunteers and myself) provided the community with manual labor and resources, and they provided us with the context to reflect on and analyze real-world concerns. In her work, Bennett (2018) highlighted two distinct models of service-learning, discipline-based and problem-based service-learning, and I framed this project as a problem-based service-learning project using the ROSOR framework.

A problem-based service-learning project is one where the instructor (me) acts as a consultant and conducts research for the community (Bennett 2018). Using the ROSOR framework (Bennett 2018), I was able to answer questions based on the anthropological concept of balanced reciprocity. Once these questions were answered, we were able to build a successful project that mutually benefitted both parties. The first question, the R, I asked was, what was our relationship (Bennett 2018)? I was introduced to Citizens by a colleague and introduced myself to Mr. Kemp via email. I reached out to him with the intention of possibly including Citizens as a field site for my thesis and wanted to set up a meeting with him. I emphasized my desire for this to be a collaborative project and for my research questions to be informed by community needs and desires, which delighted Mr. Kemp. He was ecstatic that someone was interested in conducting research at Citizens and agreed to meet with me. Even though he was excited to meet with me and excited for me to work on the project, I still needed to gain his trust and build rapport. The second question, the O, I asked was what were our objectives or goals we want to accomplish through this project (Bennett 2018)? Mr. Kemp wanted me to take the lead on collecting data—mapping data, headstone data, and any archival data I could find. This would provide them with substantial historical information about their community cemetery that could aid in reaching some of their goals, such as obtaining a historical marker for Citizens. My goal was two-fold: to understand how this reclamation process was combatting Black erasure and how this service-learning experience could serve as a critical transformative experience for volunteers. The third question, the S, I asked was what are the specific plans (Bennett 2018)? This was probably the simplest of all the

questions for me because I wanted the project to suit community needs and desires. I knew what methods I would have to use—participant observation, interviews, life histories, archival research, and spatial analysis—and Mr. Kemp approved. The fourth question, the O, I asked was about satisfactory outcomes (Bennett 2018). Satisfactory outcomes looked different for me and Mr. Kemp. For him, satisfactory outcomes were progress in the restoration of the physical landscape and as much material data (maps, headstone information, photographs, etc.) that I could provide. For me, satisfactory outcomes were a completed thesis and more engaged and aware human beings citizens. The last question, the final R, returns to our relationship and asks what our relationship is following the project (Bennett 2018). Our relationship changed over time as mutual trust became stronger. The connection we have is much stronger, and Mr. Kemp began to trust me to represent the project publicly, as for instance in the media, without his supervision. As I was developing this project, I made sure to always think about, and critique the relationships I was forming and maintaining as they were just as important to the success of this project as the actual research.

This framework not only helped me to recognize the structure of this project, but it also provided me with a process to make sure the project I developed was actually mutually beneficial and did not take advantage of the community with whom I worked. Fostering these relationships based on connection, trust, and reciprocity served as the very first example for volunteers to draw upon, on how to actively engage with marginalized communities and how to think critically about their roles in the community as well. Throughout the next section, I will explore volunteer motivations for

participating in a critical service-learning project at Citizens and how these motivations compared with the expectations of community members.

### **Volunteer Motivations**

*February 1, 2022*

*Today I had an interview with a woman whom I will call Mrs. Rosie. Mrs. Rosie is one of the long-term adult residents of East Knoxville interviewed for my thesis. I had a Zoom meeting with her due to our concerns about the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic. I logged on to Zoom to see a bright face smiling at me. We took a few minutes to chat about small things, as I wanted her to feel a little bit more comfortable since I knew I felt disconnected due to the virtual capacity of our conversation. She asked me about Fred, my dog, as she had a dog of her own and loved to talk about her. I asked her about her connection to Citizens, and she told me that she had no family buried at Citizens. They were buried elsewhere in Knoxville, but she did say something about her connection to Citizens that made me stop and reflect on my own relationship and connection to Citizens. She said, “You know, Miss. Tatianna, whether we have kinfolk buried at a cemetery or not... that cemetery tells our story—a history of suffering and of triumph. We are extensions of that history.” She continued, “It does not matter whether they are blood relatives. They are all our ancestors. We, as Black folk, are all connected... a lot more than we realize. I wish I had realized it like you have at your age. Now, I feel like I am unable to help with the efforts” She smiled at me. Once I logged off of my Zoom interview with Mrs. Rosie, I slumped back into my chair. Had I really realized that we were all connected? I had never actually thought about it. Plus, how could she decipher that I had*

*realized this? What did this cemetery mean to me? Why did I feel so strongly about this project? I am not from here.*

Mrs. Rosie was right. I had realized we were all connected, but probably not in the way that she thought. She probably assumed that I had this passion before I started this project, and that is not true. My passion for helping my community flourished because of this project and because of my Gramma. I have not been to Hassidiah since she died in 2017. I cannot bring myself to go back there, not yet. What kept me motivated then, and what kept me motivated at Citizens, when I honestly wanted to quit was my ‘why.’ Why do I do what I do? Throughout this project, I constantly kept in mind what made me feel this intense connection to Citizens. After my conversation with Mrs. Rosie, as I thought back to my very first focus group discussion, I realized what it was. I was projecting my relationship with Hassidiah onto Citizens. *I was subconsciously extending my Gramma’s legacy in order to extend the Black legacy in Knoxville because it was very clearly swept under the rug in favor of a White historical narrative. The people at Citizens were not biologically my family, that I knew of, but I viewed myself as an extension of their wildest dreams. I owed them everything I had, just like I owed those buried at Hassidiah.* My motivations were a bit more personal than others; however, there was a myriad of reasons volunteers decided to participate in the critical service-learning project at Citizens. As I learned more about why people outside of the community were wanting to get involved, I gained insights into how these motivations compared to the expectations of the community members.

### *A Myriad of Motivations*

In almost every focus group, and on the survey for those who chose not to participate, I asked volunteers what their ‘why’ was. I even informally asked volunteers in passing as we were working at Citizens. I want to know what drove them to volunteer with this project. The only discussion where I did not ask this question was the very first one. During the first discussion, it was a community member who participated in the volunteer session and the focus group, who asked everyone why they were there: *“Why are you all doing it? Just curious. I know, Tatianna, you- you have your reasons, but I know one of those is you’re doing the thesis on this, right? And all you are connected with UT in some way. But yeah, why are you guys doing it? Just curious. I appreciate it, you know, but curious as to like, what’s the, what’s your why?”* There were many reasons why volunteers decided to give their time and labor, but there were five prominent reasons why volunteers decided to participate in the critical service-learning project at Citizens: they felt a kinship connection to me, they wanted to honor and respect the dead, they wanted to volunteer in the local community, they felt a sense of responsibility, and, lastly, they wanted to build community momentum and awareness.

*One of the volunteers stood next to me as we looked on at the volunteer work being done at Citizens. “I’m all for that [equity for everyone] and very committed to diversity. But honestly,” he said, “like, if I heard about this I would have been like ‘that’s cool,’ and I might have thought about going. But the real reason I kind of showed up today was because I knew it would be helping you... there’s a different kind of kinship at play... it was only because I had a connection to this space through you.”* This is one



example of one of my close friends explaining to me why he decided to come out that morning to volunteer at Citizens. *“For me, Tati is my friend. And she’s very, she’s important to me; therefore, her project is important to me. So, I was like ‘Yeah, whatever way I can help you out, I want to help you out.’”* This is another example of one of my close friends defending her presence at the table. Kinship ties are not just defined by blood relations. Kinship can manifest in different ways. Between these individuals and I, our friendships manifested as fictive kin relationships. We are “not related by blood or marriage, but... regard each other as kin” (Stewart 2007, 165). Fictive kin relationships can be formed in several ways, such as religious or spiritual affiliations and romantic or platonic relationships (Stewart 2007). In our case, our platonic relationship served as the basis for our kin structure. Our bonds are strong—difficult to break—similar to blood kin relationships. In fact, they have been permanent volunteers—ones that have stuck with me through everything since the beginning of this project. I am incredibly grateful for them, and I am proud to have them as part of my community. Through their fictive kin connections to me, they were able to volunteer and form their own unique connections to Citizens.

Regardless of vast differences in how they do so, all human societies honor and respect the dead, and by that token also consider it unethical to disrespect them. Some volunteers reflected this universal sensibility when asked why they decided to volunteer at Citizens. *“And for me, there’s always that like sense of responsibility of honoring the dead and respecting them. And for me, one of the most powerful places is cemeteries. And so, anytime there’s an option to help, whether it’s cleaning or just maintaining or*

*educating people on cemeteries. I just have- I have that like sense of obligation that, 'yes, this is what needs to be done.' People need to be honored. People need to be remembered. Whether it be through cleaning or educating. And so, I think I was really excited to like to hear about this and have that opportunity to participate. And just, yeah, honor the dead." "I just wanted to pay my respects to the dead."* People are more likely to participate in volunteer service-learning programs if they possess what Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital,' particularly embodied cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital are "long-term dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu 1986). Having cultural capital represents various sorts of social power. Cultural capital can be useful in securing material and social advantages. Knowing how to treat and remember the dead is a form of cultural capital. Volunteer service is guided by someone's cultural capital, as it provides an ethical framework that informs volunteers' motivations to participate (Wilson and Musick 1997). Their operationalization of their cultural capital led them to volunteering their time, effort, resources, and talents to the critical service-learning project at Citizens.

Volunteers were also motivated to participate at Citizens because they wanted to do service work that was helpful in the local community. All of these people, in one way or another, had a social connection to me or to someone on the research team. In contrast to those operationalizing their cultural capital, these people made use of their social capital, their social networks, and relationships (Bourdieu 1986) in order to volunteer at Citizens. Wilson and Musick (1997) argue that these social relationships provide volunteers with resources, like information, that make participating in volunteer programs more likely. This was certainly the case for an entire group of volunteers.

*January 30, 2022, 9:00am*

*This morning, the bitter cold air made my fingertips freeze. 25 degrees, but we were all out there ready to work. Today I was meeting with a group of individuals who are from all over the United States, but they are all in Knoxville for school for a few weeks. My brother is in the United States Air Force, and a good friend of his that he was stationed with at one point reached out to me via social media asking me if I knew of any local nonprofits where their class could volunteer.*

*“You know of any local charities here? Our NCOA (Noncommissioned Officer Academy) class has like 150 people, and we all gotta do a community involvement event and I’m trying to find something aside from helping VFW,” he asked me.*

*“Yeah, there’s a few. Do you have to do something by a certain date? I do research in collaboration with a local nonprofit, and we do volunteer work at a local historic Black cemetery. We aren’t going back out there until January 29<sup>th</sup>... but it’s a great way to learn about Knoxville’s (Black) history and do something that helps that community. I also hold reflection discussion groups afterwards that are super fruitful! The cemetery is large, and we could definitely use the manpower. Okay, that’s my shameless plug lol. I have some other suggestions if you guys want something a little closer to you all.” I said in response.*

*At the time, I did not know if this conversation would lead them to participate in the service-learning project. My relationship to him through my brother and the rest of the class’s connection to me through my brother’s friend led them out to Citizens to help us get a massive amount of work done. Not all 150 came out to volunteer because of the*

*COVID-19 pandemic; however, those that did come out worked together diligently as a team. I supervised one area, while Matt Hoover supervised another. People were having casual conversations as they worked, which is not abnormal. Because it was so cold, it first seemed that no one wanted to be there... myself included. Once we got working and moving, though, spirits were much higher.*

These volunteers had direct and indirect social connections to me, which motivated them to participate in the service-learning project which allowed them to help the local community.

Volunteers were motivated to participate in the critical service-learning project at Citizens because they felt a sense of responsibility toward those buried at Citizens and to the descendant community. In *Disquieting Gifts*, Erica Bornstein (2012) challenges the idea of liberal altruism. The concept of liberal altruism is giving to those in need based on a “universality” of human rights and human dignity (Bornstein 2012). Although she discusses this term in a humanitarian context, I feel it is useful here to examine this particular volunteer motivation. I remember asking a few volunteers what their ‘why’ was, and they told me. Their motivations were along the same lines. *“I really just am here to give back to the community and reclaim the graveyard, here.” “When he brought it [the idea] up to us, we thought it was a worthy cause. We jumped on board.” “I feel bad that these people have been stripped of their basic human dignity. I wanted to do something to help the community dignify these people again.”* Volunteers participate in service-learning programs through the lens of liberal altruism because they feel some sort of human right and/or human dignity has been lost and violated (Bornstein 2012). This

violation evokes compassion and short-lived empathy in people, which moves them to volunteer their time, resources, efforts, talents, and labor. In this case, what motivated volunteers to participate in the project at Citizens was their desire to act compassionately on their feelings about the violence and trauma endured by those buried at Citizens and by Knoxville's Black community.

The final prominent motivation that moved volunteers to participate in the critical service-learning project at Citizens was their desire to build community momentum and awareness. A volunteer noted during a focus group discussion, *"I think this [volunteering] is a step in the right direction, just keeping the momentum... I'm not trying to hit a homerun but just to get the ball rolling, I think, is important about just building that ownership in the community because you can't do it alone."* Volunteering can have a positive impact on volunteers' social well-being (their sense of belonging within a larger community context) (Son and Wilson 2012). After talking with this volunteer, I felt as though they wanted to extend this positive impact on social well-being to the community that has been violently harmed and erased over time. While these are the most prominent reasons for what motivated volunteers to participate in the critical service-learning project at Citizens Cemetery, most of them jarred with what communities expected would motivate volunteers.

### ***"We Just Want People to Care"***

Parts of the conversations I had with the long-term adult residents of East Knoxville revolved around their feelings toward volunteer efforts and what they expected would be volunteers' motivations. I would like to return to my interview with Mrs. Rosie.

*“Mrs. Rosie, can you tell me a little more about how you feel now that the project is picking up some momentum? Volunteers are out there working quite often,” I asked her.*

*She smiled at me. I could not help but smile back. I knew there was a statement of gratitude coming. “I am so grateful. I am grateful that people are willing to take the time to listen and to help,” she responded.*

*“Now, I have a slightly more complex question for you, if you don’t mind me asking,” I said timidly. Her eyebrows furrowed for a moment, but she invited me to ask her. “What do you expect to be the motivating factor(s) behind volunteer participation in the project?” I asked.*

*She immediately and confidently exclaimed, “we just want people to care, honey!”*

*“Care, how?” I asked, pushing her a little bit further.*

*“I hope they are imagining that this could be their kin or friend or loved one” she said somberly. I could feel the intense shift in her mood through my computer screen.*

*“Maybe if they see us as something like kinfolk, and that is what is driving them to help, they will be more inclined to continue volunteering and learning.”*

*I was stunned. “You can’t force a connection,” I thought to myself.*

This was one of the many conversations I had with members of the East Knoxville community. It became clear that community members wanted volunteers to approach their participation through the lens of what Bornstein (2012) terms ‘relational empathy’. Relational empathy is transforming the relationship between giver and receiver

through a relational prism—the giver viewing the receiver as kin, as family. Through this transformation, it shortens the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Mr. Kemp, my main interlocutor, and collaborator, wanted people to volunteer because they cared about the historical aspect of Citizens. He expressed to me that, *“It should give them purpose when they hear the history and proximity of it [Citizens] to the first African American Church.”* Many of them just want those who entered this space to care about them, about their ancestors, and to develop connections to the cemetery that would result in them wanting to consistently participate in the service-learning project at Citizens. The transformation of stranger into kin exemplifies the historical continuity of the realities of Blackness and how, or if, it is remembered (Hartman 2007). This is a small portion of a conversation I had with Mr. Roach.

*“[There are] Remnants of people, children, someone’s mom, child, sister, father, brother. Could be mine or theirs, somehow some way. But people don’t think that way.”*

Not every volunteer service-learning opportunity allows for participants to develop an “ethic of care” (Mitchell 2008, 2). However, reframing their relationship to the Black community, and to Citizens itself, will not only align volunteer motivations and community member expectations, but it will also allow for the volunteers to develop their own unique connections to Citizens and to the community. From what I have observed through this project, the only long-term volunteers I have had, those who consistently participate and put forth a lot of time and effort into this project, are those who have fictive kinship ties to me or are very close to me in some way. I have watched them develop their own connections to Citizens and to the community, just as I developed

mine. On several occasions, they have expressed to me that they were invested in this project but did not want to seem as though they were approaching this project with a “savior” complex. They still wanted to help although they felt like outsiders in this space. I think in order to overcome this feeling of (mainly white) saviorism, they justified their presence at Citizens through their relationships to me. As a result of that, their relationships extended far beyond their connections to me—forming their own relationships to the physical landscape and to community members that give them the desire to return every time they are able. These long-lasting relationships between volunteers and the Black community is just one example of how the critical service-learning project at Citizens can serve as a transformative experience. In the next section, I will analyze how volunteer participation in this critical service-learning project served as a transformative experience.

### **RAM: The Journey to Transformation**

Critical service-learning pedagogy practices have the potential to be transformative, revolutionary experiences (Butin 2006). Taking a critical approach to service-learning can help bring about social change, and this project serves as a proof of concept that such a project in a Black community can be a transformative, revolutionary pedagogy. The most crucial part of this project that provides an analytical component to the volunteer portion were the focus groups I held after volunteer sessions. These focus group discussions were a space for critical dialogue between volunteers to reflect on their service-learning experience. Most volunteers were very open to being transformed. *“Any, everybody should take this [volunteering at Citizens] on as a serious responsibility to not*



*just contribute but to actually, I mean, be changed, like... be moved and changed and we should allow ourselves to be changed in the process. Because it's for the better of all of us.*" On the other hand, some volunteers were not expecting to be transformed by the volunteer service-learning and reflection experience. One volunteer expressed, *"I came out learning a lot more than I expected to just by cleaning stuff."* Another noted, *"I feel like I can take what I have learned here and try to help other people understand the racial injustices Black and Brown communities face."*

As I analyzed my data from focus groups, surveys, and from observations through participant-observation, I identified three ways in which volunteers were being transformed through their volunteer service: *recognition, apathy-to-action, and moving forward*. The RAM framework is something I developed that helped me to organize and understand these three aspects of change. Each letter of the framework stands for one of the ways in which I observed volunteers to be transformed or how their view of racial justice changed through their volunteer service at Citizens, and the following sections will outline each.

### ***Recognition***

For as long as I can remember, I have loved creative writing, poetry in particular. It was my favorite part of any English class because it was a structured way for me to express myself. I was restricted by the type of poem I was writing, but the words that filled the stanzas came from my soul. Writing was always a safe space for me to pour out my heart when I could not speak about how I felt. Conversations about race and racism are hard to have. A volunteer told me, *"It's not a super comfortable topic to talk about,"*

and I recognize that. It is hard for me to talk about race and racism, too. Since creative writing has always been helpful when I cannot seem to speak about the way I feel, I used creative writing as a method for volunteers to share their thoughts and feelings on race and racism after a volunteer session. I asked volunteers to write a poem about how they felt about race and racism after their participation in the critical service-learning project at Citizens. It did not matter what kind of poem they wrote. In fact, they all wrote free verse poems. That was surprising to me because I expected people to write *haikus*. When asked to write a poem off the top of my head, I almost always will choose a haiku because of the easily remembered 5/7/5 syllable pattern. I think they chose to write free verse poems because they needed more than three lines and seventeen syllables to express their thoughts.

I gave them fifteen minutes to write their poems, and while they wrote theirs, I wrote one as well. We shared our poems. I was taken by surprise when they were all as emotional as mine was. I was not expecting one session to change these volunteers. It was not a massive change in their views on racial justice, but I feel like many of them were taking the initial step in making a more just and equitable society. That first step is recognition—recognizing their privileges and positions in upholding oppressive structures.

There are two poems that I particularly love because they explicitly show the volunteer's process of recognizing their privilege and recognizing the massive discrepancy in the experiences of Black people.

*Today I saw the overturned headstone*

*Of a small two-year old child.  
I thought to myself, "things happen."*

*Then I saw another headstone  
Of a child, and then another.  
Why are you here?*

*I think about where my  
Parents are buried. So pristine.  
Filled with adults. No babies.*

*We are allowed to live longer lives.  
We are remembered.  
That is a privilege.*

I listened intently, noticing her tone of voice change as she was reading her poem. The next volunteer then read his poem.

*"It don't matter if you're Black or White"  
Except it does.*

*"Respect the dead"  
Except we don't.*

*Not unless they are White,  
Then we do.*

*To see a lack of dignity  
For a human*

*I admit I used to be color-blind  
Now I see.*

These poems were, and still are, powerful. After we shared our poems, we talked about how this service-learning experience and the opportunity to reflect afterwards brought a lot of things into perspective. Many volunteers were ignorant about the ways in which Black people are treated as a result of oppressive structures because their social circles are not diverse. Their participation in the critical service-learning project at

Citizens was their first intimate interaction with a Black community and a Black place. Writing these poems was a way for them to express their emotions and change their perspective on the long-lasting effects of oppressive structures. These volunteers are not going to go out and immediately enact major change, but they are on their way to helping create a more just and equitable society by slowly transforming their thinking—recognizing these oppressive structures in place and how they, themselves, fit within these structures.

### ***Apathy-to-Action***

*“Okay, well, first and foremost, thank you all for being here. I appreciate you guys taking the time out—one, to volunteer, and also to sit and discuss with me afterwards,” I said nervously as I looked around the table. My very first focus group. How am I supposed to guide these volunteers through an analytical, transformative critical reflection when I am a big ball of anxiety? What if it is not enough? I cannot let those anxious thoughts cloud my mind. I have a responsibility to the community. “Okay, so what I am going to do first is—I have a few photos. These photos were taken before we really started getting into the restoration process.” I passed three 8.5-inch x 11-inch photos around the table. I let them take a few seconds to take in the ruin. “Alright, so now, I want everybody to close their eyes. And take a deep inhale. And exhale,” I said softly. Was I leading a meditation or a critical reflection? I just wanted them to FEEL something—to dig deep down and unlock a portion of their emotional capacity they never knew was there. That I never knew was there for myself. “I want you to imagine yourself*

*standing back at Citizens. Think about the photos you just saw. How does it make you feel?" I continued in my soft tone of voice.*

Photo elicitation is a qualitative research method that researchers use to foster deep discussion through photographs. The use of images in research focus groups or interviews invoke profound depths of human consciousness (Harper 2002). These interviews result in a different kind of information than do discussions using words only (Harper 2002), so I knew photo elicitation would be a great starting point for discussing how the experience made everyone feel. It started off very negative. We were disappointed. We were angry. We were frustrated. *"Disappointed," a volunteer said. I nodded my head at her, silently asking her to continue. "I just felt like it was very poorly made or neglected, which is kind of surprising."* However, I noticed a shift in our tone soon after. The conversation took a more positive, powerful focus. *"We're coming here to learn," a volunteer said triumphantly. "To fight against racism is not only your contribution to East Knoxville and the Black community. The fight against racism is something we all need to fight, you know, and be a part of, and it's a benefit to everybody—to us also."* Now, we were talking about actively fighting against racism. We were no longer talking about how it made us feel these negative emotions. We were opening a discussion to address what we can do to make sure we no longer have to feel those emotions.

*"All of this starts with awareness, right? Awareness of the historical context of why this cemetery is the way that it is and awareness of ourselves and our own positions and subjectivities. I want us to think about, you know, how we have moved into this space*

*of awareness. In order to get there, we had to leave a space of apathy and inaction and silence and being unaware of these things. So, I want you to think about ways in which we have been silent in the face of racism.” I said as I looked around the table at the volunteers. I wanted volunteers to look back on ways they were apathetic towards promoting and actively engaging in the fight against racism. It definitely was not a super comfortable topic to discuss, but the volunteers took full advantage of this opportunity. They discussed ways that they were passive and apathetic toward racial justice endeavors and explained how this critical service-learning opportunity made them realize they were being passive. They also explained how, due to their participation, they will now be more active in the fight against racism. “I feel like for me, being silent was more of an unconscious thing. And I think I was like, maybe like, ignorant, not willfully, but it’s just plain ignorance. But I’m trying to change that, and like he [another volunteer] said, like challenging people’s notions, especially within our own community or whether it be with other people is something that I want to keep doing.” I nodded at her. I immediately responded that no racial group is immune to passivity and apathy, Black people included.*

Through our discussion, I actively noticed the transformation of volunteers from a space of apathy to a space of action as they reflected on their own (in)action in the fight for racial justice.

### ***Moving Forward***

Developing authentic relationships built on trust and connection are an important feature of critical service-learning projects (Mitchell 2008). Throughout this project, I noticed volunteers developing their own unique relationships to the community and to

Citizens, independent of the ones I made in order to develop this project. These relationships make the project stronger because the distant gap between “us” and “them” gets shorter the more we nurture these relationships.

*February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022, 12:00pm*

*Today, I met with the Knoxville Re-Animation Coalition. I have been working solely with Mr. Kemp for the past seven months, but since he has shared so much about me to them, the entire board wanted to meet me. I sat nervously at the table while the board members arrived, each saying “good morning” to me as they walked through the door. We sat around a table as Mr. Kemp, the President, called the meeting to order. He introduced me, and I continued by telling the board about myself and about my project. After I finished what I had to say, Mr. Kemp added that among those who consistently volunteer at Citizens are my professors. He said that with a very big, proud smile on his face. He always asks me about them...*

*Because I was feeling unwell today, I had to let Mr. Kemp know I would not be able to participate in the volunteer workday that was scheduled but Matt would. Matt and Mr. Kemp have built their own relationship, as well, from day one—to the point where Matt can go out without me. Mr. Kemp even expects him and volun-tells him that he needs to be out there to supervise the volunteers. Mr. Kemp is always happy to see Matt and appreciates him for what he has contributed to the project. He is an invaluable asset.*

I observed these relationships flourish in volunteer sessions. I saw my advisor shake hands with Mr. Kemp, slowly building his relationship to the East Knoxville Black community. I saw Matt taking a leadership role, strengthening his own connection to

Citizens. What, to me, was transformative about these developing relationships and connections to the community and to a sacred space was an extension of empathy.

Bornstein (2012) critiques the idea of operationalizing compassion through the lens of liberal altruism because it reinforces the “us”- “them” dichotomy. She challenges this idea with her proposition of relational empathy. Again, she uses this term regarding humanitarian practice, but I think it will be useful here as well.

Relational empathy is a model that could profoundly reshape the relationship between the parties of a volunteer program—the giver and the receiver. It reshapes it in such a way that the giver begins to see the receiver as kin (Bornstein 2012). This framework does not completely erase the power dynamics inherent in giving, but it does shorten the distance between the giver and the receiver. The relationships volunteers are developing with community members and with the physical landscape reflect the decrease in distance between “us” and “them.” While I do not think volunteers at Citizens see Mr. Kemp or anyone in the descendant community or those buried at Citizens as kin, I do think that the volunteer work they are participating in allows their relationship to become more intimate through their empathic emotions. The relational prism that enables this empathy serves as the foundation for them to cultivate warmer, more intimate, and sustained relationships, as opposed to the transient ones developed by the operationalization of compassion through the lens of liberal altruism.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of framing the project at Citizens as a critical service-learning project was two-fold: to ensure that the service-learning project would be mutually beneficial,



and to provide an avenue, a safe space, for volunteers to become more aware human beings. Volunteers who participated in the critical service-learning project at Citizens were transformed by recognizing oppressive structures, turning their apathy into action, and by developing authentic relationships in order to move forward. This serves as evidence of the importance of Black sacred cultural spaces in not only educating the public about Black history but also connecting the public to communities that have contributed so much to the places in which they live, work, and play every day.

I think a lot about my conversation with Mrs. Rosie, and several other community members. *"We just want people to care, honey!"* rings in my ears fairly often, even as I write this. While we cannot expect people to care about a space like this, especially if they have no direct biological or spiritual ties to Citizens, those that do care seem to engage through the lenses of both liberal altruism and relational empathy. I experienced a sense of relational empathy with the community throughout my participation in this project. Viewing Mr. Kemp and the community the way I view those closest to me allowed for organic, trusting relationships to form. Although I am an academic, and I embody powers and privileges that go along with being an academic, shortening the distance between myself and the community has been critical, and will continue to be, as this project continues. The transformation that these volunteers undergo as they participate in this project conveys how (self)awareness and how simply caring are the first steps in reclaiming such a severed, missing part of Black history.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

“Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable.” -African Proverb

I think that I need to finish this ethnography exactly how I started it—by thanking the community that made it possible. I am grateful for you all trusting me with your story and for allowing me to participate in this very worthy project. Thank you.

This project reveals the limitations of traditional geography and the ideology of transparent space. Space does not just exist through the cartographic manifestations of the White, Western organization of the world. “Black matters are spatial matters” (McKittrick 2006, xii). Black communities are just as capable of producing their own meaningful, powerful spaces. The East Knoxville community reflects this. Citizens is more than just a site shaped by historical violence. This sacred Black place serves a site of resistance to all that produced its disrepair. The community, with the help of people outside the community, is transforming it into a visible site of memory (Morrison 1998). This is Black history. This is their history. This is my history. All too often, the Black experience is excluded from the narrative and forgotten, but the community is combatting erasure of their history and legacy in Knoxville. Reclaiming and restoring Citizens, producing their own changed sense of space, and making their history visible is the first step in stimulating community pride and, in light of gentrification, proudly making claims to place. Not everyone in the community is interested in the participation in the restoration of Citizens, even when they do know the historical significance of this space. That does not mean they are not impacted by the restoration efforts.

Even though some community members do not participate, they are still actively influenced by the reclamation of Citizens. The changed sense of place being developed by those community members engaging in the restoration process brings this history and heritage to the forefront. Community members are now aware of Citizens' presence. It is now there for them to engage in if they feel so inclined. I know Mr. Kemp and the other board members of KRC want to actively get the community engaged, especially the younger generation, but I do not think they should sell themselves short by any means. Mr. Kemp has told me on several occasions that he knows this restoration process will take several years. When they first started this project, things were moving very gradually, and Mr. Kemp was unsure if they would be able to get Citizens restored. However, in the short time I have been working on this project, Mr. Kemp and KRC has given the community something to be incredibly proud of. They are walking role models for the younger generations. When it comes to navigating issues of oppression and resistance, Mr. Kemp and KRC have done it with grace and resilience. Not everyone is going to feel obligated to have a connection to Citizens. Not everyone is going to feel obligated to help in its restoration, and that is okay. However, I think that giving the community examples of resistance, resilience, and survival is something to be proud of, and is the first step in making it possible for those who want to participate in Citizens' reclamation.

This project also reveals the ways in which critical service-learning projects in Black spaces can serve as transformative experiences for volunteers. Since this critical-service learning project was not connected with a particular class, the learning portion of

the experience was more introspective. Through focus groups, surveys, and participant-observation, I concluded three ways in which volunteers who participated in the critical-service learning project at Citizens were being transformed by their service. The first was recognition. Volunteers were taking the first steps in contributing to the development of a more just society by recognizing their racial privilege through their direct interaction with the Black experience. While these volunteers are not going to claim themselves to be pro-Black or even anti-racist at this point in their journey, in order to make meaningful social change one has to understand where they fit within the structures of oppression and privilege. The second was apathy-to-action. During focus group reflection sessions, I noticed a considerable shift in volunteer focus. Discussion would start off very negative. We would stew in our anger, our frustration, our sadness, and I could feel the passivity. Then, they used these same negative emotions and transformed them into motivations to take intentional action towards being anti-racist. The final way I observed volunteers being transformed through their service at Citizens was through their methods of moving forward. Some volunteers were going above and beyond, operating outside of their relationships to me, to form their own unique connections to Citizens and to the community. This actively shortened the distance between volunteers and the community and moved the interaction slightly beyond the us-them dichotomy. Without volunteers, we would not have been able to make the progress we have so far in this project. I am eternally grateful for all of those who took the time to participate. You all have been a critical part in bringing Citizens' capacity to serve as a place of resistance to the fore.

## **Personal Reflections**

Since this project was developed and carried out in a short period of time, these results are by no means exhaustive. While I wish I could have spent more time in the community, it was certainly an experience that I had to adjust to, and very quickly might I add. Sharing their stories to the best of my ability was only possible through sharing some of my own story. It portrays how deeply connected the Black experience is in the United States—how connected we all are to each other in some way, shape or form. Even though we do not come from the same local community, we share similar experiences. While I hope my story did not deflect from my main arguments, I hope it served as evidence as to why this project means so much to me.

I will admit this journey has been difficult. This project challenged me to reflect on myself in ways I never thought I would need to. I am grateful to have had a strong leader to rally behind. Mr. Kemp kept me in check, and he trusted me more than anyone throughout this process. I could tell he had faith in my ability to contribute to this project from the day we first met. For that, I am thankful. The discomfort I felt, feeling like an imposter in this community, is the same feeling that challenged me to be the most authentic version of myself. I was able to form genuine connections with the community, and that made the difficult parts of this project much easier to navigate.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **APPENDIX A: ONLINE SURVEY**

1. Why did you decide to volunteer? Would you be interested in participating in another session?
2. How much of an impact do you feel your volunteer work at Citizens Cemetery had?
3. Did volunteering at Citizens impact you in any way? Reflect on your own subject-position and how that affected your volunteer experience.
4. What are some things you learned about Citizens Cemetery at the volunteer session? How did that make you feel?
5. Is there anything you learned about yourself while engaging in this volunteer session?
6. How did participating in this volunteer session change your perceptions about memory? Identity? Erasure?
7. What does the term 'ancestor' mean to you? Do you feel any type of connection to those buried at Citizens? If so, how?
8. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being the worst experience, 5 being the best), how would you rate this experience? Why?

## VITA

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