The following essay will appear in a forthcoming edited collection on Religion, Race, and Black Lives Matter.

“MOVE at Forty-Five:

A Revolutionary Religion Confronts a Revolutionary Moment”

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“The condition of black life,” wrote Claudia Rankine in a widely read and influential 2015 essay in The New York Times Magazine, “is one of mourning.” A few months before Rankine’s essay appeared, Sandra Bland was found dead in her jail cell. In June, Dylan Roof, a twenty-one year old white supremacist, murdered nine members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church as they worshipped. The previous year witnessed the deaths of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, and many others. As a movement of historical proportions gathered steam in the streets of Ferguson, New Orleans, and the Bronx, Rankine called for “a sustained state of national mourning for black lives”—one that includes reckoning with painful histories. She challenged us to read the chants of “black lives matter,” and “I can’t breathe” as dirges, as songs of collective suffering, as invitations to mourn.

Collective mourning—what Black Lives Matter challenges us to do—is an exercise in historical memory. Assigning agency and victimhood is a crucial of the power behind the production of history. In that pivotal moment when what happened becomes what is said to have happened, those with the power to share the formation of historical narratives often determine whose lives should be mourned, and whose should not. If the state is essentially “a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of
legitimate (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence,” then determining who is agent and who is victim is essential to the legitimation of that founding violence. Black Lives Matter is an exhortation to artists, activists, and historians to revisit these episodes of our nation’s past and revive the humanity; to show that, as Rankine noted, “history’s authority over us is not broken by maintaining a silence about its continued effects.”

How should historians approach our work in the wake of Black Lives Matter? How are we to approach these matrixes of mourning, history, and memory—of lives destroyed, forgotten, and buried? Saidiya Hartman, in her work on the legacies of the Atlantic slave trade, offers us a meditation on the paradoxes historians face when we do our work. For those of us who work on the history of racial violence, the archive is often a “death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body...an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.” It can be difficult sift through the detritus of the archives; the sometimes brutal, most often numbing, banal, and bureaucratic records, built by those with power to shape our understanding of the past, to find the humanity buried therein, to find the stories of lives, of religion, of belief and practice, faith and family beneath mountains of ballistics reports, depositions, and investigation summaries. Even if we succeed—even if we recover the lives buried in the archives—how do we tell their stories? How do we faithfully recreate these lives from archives built to erase them? How do we use the past to “describe obliquely the forms of violence licensed in the present” without subjecting the “dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence?”

It was with these questions in mind that I entered the archive of the MOVE Bombing that turbulent summer of 2015. MOVE is a small religious movement that emerged in 1972 around the prophetic writings and embodied teachings of John Africa,
a middle aged, divorced Korean War veteran who lived in the West Philadelphia neighborhood of Powelton Village. MOVE has never been a particularly large organization. At its first peak in the mid 1970s, there were around fifty MOVE people—a category that includes both devoted, exclusive MOVE members and MOVE supporters. Around twenty of them shared a house in Powelton. And from its earliest days, MOVE operated under the suspicion of law enforcement. The city’s Civil Disobedience Squad (later renamed the Civil Affairs Unit) began surveilling the group as early as 1972.

MOVE’s relationship with the police deteriorated, as MOVE people considered the policing oppressive and an unconstitutional infringement upon their freedom to practice their religion. In the summer of 1974, the Philadelphia Police Department were granted an injunction barring MOVE from gathering to protest near any government buildings. Because of the injunction, over the next two years, MOVE people were arrested over four hundred times. From MOVE’s founding to the summer of 1976, MOVE was not unusual; they were the kind of group that sprang up in droves in the tumult of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

That all changed on May 13, 1985—the date of the MOVE Bombing—but the MOVE Bombing was the conclusion to a story that began on March 28, 1976. That morning, MOVE got into a physical altercation with several police officers in front of their house. When the smoke cleared, MOVE people discovered that six-week-old Life Africa was dead—crushed beneath his mother, who had been knocked down by a police officer. The death of Life Africa changed MOVE. It transformed their theology, repositioned their movement within a cosmic drama, and set them on a historical trajectory that culminated in the MOVE Bombing. Persecution has a way of galvanizing a religious movement. In MOVE’s case, what they viewed as a sustained campaign of
police harassment, followed by what they viewed as the murder of a MOVE infant, convinced them that the System (a complex theodicy, and central feature of John Africa’s religious system, that we must reduce, for our purposes, to the systems of evil that control the world) was out to exterminate MOVE in order to destroy the Teachings of John Africa and the threat it posed to systems of domination.\(^8\)

After the death of Life Africa, MOVE holed up in their Powelton Village home, refusing to surrender to police. The standoff went on for months, and the Philadelphia Police Department erected a blockade of the MOVE house, preventing food and water from going through, in order to “starve them out.”\(^9\) The standoff ended on August 8, 1978, when the PPD launched an assault on the house. MOVE people began shooting (though MOVE people claim, to this day, that the police shot first), and a violent confrontation began. When the dust settled, hours later, the MOVE people in the house had been arrested, and a police officer—Officer James Ramp—had been killed by a bullet to the head.\(^10\) Police officers, incensed at the death of their colleague, were caught on news cameras beating Conrad Africa with their metal helmets and batons. Ballistics evidence shows that four MOVE people—the four men in the house—had fired weapons that day.\(^11\) Still, all nine MOVE people in the house were sent to prison for the murder of Officer James Ramp.\(^12\) MOVE people contend that the MOVE Nine were convicted unjustly.\(^13\)

What remained of MOVE, including the founder, prophet, and spiritual leader, John Africa, went into hiding in Philadelphia, Rochester, New York, and Richmond, Virginia. Federal law enforcement, especially the FBI and the ATF, located the MOVE contingent in Rochester, and arrested all the members there, including John Africa.\(^14\) In 1981, federal prosecutors took John Africa to trial on charges that he conspired to
manufacture and possess explosives in a plot to blow up federal government buildings. John Africa, representing himself, was acquitted of all charges, returned to Philadelphia a free man, and rebuilt his religion. It was not to be.

On May 30, 1984—nearly a year before the MOVE Bombing—John Hogan, the head of the FBI field office in Philadelphia, Secret Service head Kevin Tucker, and representatives from the Justice Department met with Mayor Wilson Goode, District Attorney Ed Rendell, City Manager Leo Brooks, State Police Commissioner Robert Armstrong, and City Solicitor Barbara Mather to discuss legal grounds for raiding the house. They found none. The Secret Service had investigated MOVE’s threats against President Reagan and found them to be too vague to prosecute. Neither the FBI nor the Justice Department could think of a justifiable reason to storm the house or to remove the children. There were no outstanding federal or state warrants. Despite having no legal reason to raid the house, after that meeting, Police Commissioner Gregor Sambor began drawing up plans for an offensive against the occupants of the MOVE house on Osage Avenue. The plan they created involved the use of explosives, delivered either by construction crane or helicopter, to force MOVE to surrender. On August 8, 1984, the Philadelphia Police Department, still without legal pretense, gathered outside the MOVE house to put the plan into effect. Just one gunshot was all they needed to begin the assault. MOVE did not take the bait. After waiting for several hours, the police packed up and went home.

Nine months later, the police tried again. On May 13, 1985, around three hundred police officers and firefighters gathered outside of a house that MOVE people shared on Osage Avenue in West Philadelphia. There were thirteen MOVE people inside: John Africa, six other adult MOVE people, and six children ranging in age from nine to
fourteen. When the police force outside was ready, Police Commissioner Gregor Sambor announced over a bullhorn, “Attention, MOVE. This is America. You have to follow the laws of the United States.” Sambor listed the outstanding warrants and told the MOVE people inside that they had fifteen minutes to evacuate the house before the police would move in. The adults, who had slept in the same room as the children that night in anticipation of the attack, hurried the children down two stories to the basement.

Ramona Africa, the only MOVE adult to survive the day, took to the bullhorn and told Sambor to go fuck himself.¹⁹

From an upstairs window, Raymond Africa, Frank Africa, and John Africa took up arms against the police outside, waging a futile defensive in a conflict they believed to be of cosmic proportions.²⁰ The police responded by firing more than ten thousands rounds into the MOVE house over the course of ninety minutes using Uzi submachine guns, shotguns, Thompson submachine guns, sniper rifles, and M-16s—weapons that they had acquired from the FBI and the ATF for the purposes of the raid.²¹ At around 8:30 in the morning, police officers outside began throwing bundles of C-4 (a powerful and highly flammable explosive which the PPD had acquired from the FBI for the purposes of the raid) and Tovex at the MOVE house. The first bomb destroyed the front porch. A second bomb, thrown around 10:40 in the morning, blew the front wall off the house, killing John Africa and destroying the stairs leading to the basement. There was no shooting from the MOVE house after that. Hours later, at 5:20pm, a member of the Philadelphia Police Department’s Bomb Disposal Unit dropped a third bomb from a state police helicopter onto the roof of the MOVE house. The bomb created a fireball that reached over seven thousand degrees Fahrenheit and caused a concussion felt blocks away. What was left of the roof burst into flames immediately. The fire
department turned off the deluge guns that had been running all day. Within minutes, the fire began to spread throughout the MOVE house and across the roof to the adjacent houses. As the fire grew, Sambor and Fire Commissioner William Richmond discussed what to do about it. Sambor decided to “let the fire burn.” He could use the fire as a tactical weapon. If the water, tear gas, bombs, and gunfire could not drive MOVE out of the house, perhaps fire could.22

As the fire spread above them, the MOVE people inside the house decided to surrender. According to Birdie Africa’s testimony, the water in the basement that MOVE people had been wading in all day began to grow hot. Conrad Africa lit a match to try to find out what was going on. They realized that the haze in the air wasn’t tear gas anymore, but smoke. The house was on fire. The heat grew more and more intense. Conrad used a monkey wrench to unlatch the door to the rear of the house and announced that the children were coming out. His announcement was answered with a volley of gunfire. He waited for the shooting to die down and tried again. Conrad, Ramona, and Rhonda Africa repeatedly tried to tell the police that they were sending the children out, but each time they tried to step out of the garage, the police opened fire.23 Eventually, one adult, Ramona Africa, and one child, Birdie Africa, managed to escape. Everyone else died in the house. Remains from one of the children—examiners were unable to determine who, though it was likely nine-year-old Tomaso Africa—contained buckshot pellets from a police shotgun.24 Birdie did not remember anything after he bolted through the flames out of the house, but a press photographer captured a picture of him sitting in the back of the police van. He was naked, gasping for air, and burned over much of his body. Ramona was arrested in the back alley on charges of inciting a riot. She was taken to the hospital for her burns but refused treatment. Fire fighters lost
control of the fire, which eventually burned the entire city block, destroying sixty-four houses.25

Like many historical episodes of racial violence, the MOVE Bombing was once notable for how thoroughly it has been forgotten. It is not a part of our national narrative. Indeed, many news articles written to mark another anniversary of the MOVE Bombing allude incredulously to the fact that so few people, especially outside the city of Philadelphia, seem to know about it.26 Why has the MOVE Bombing been forgotten? Claudia Rankine’s article provides a clue: I suspect the reason the MOVE Bombing was largely forgotten was because it was unclear, to many, who deserved to be mourned. In the immediate aftermath of the MOVE Bombing, government officials and the media went to work teaching Americans how they should understand the trauma they witnessed on their televisions; whom they should hold responsible; and whose lives they ought to mourn. Americans were taught not to mourn MOVE people. They were taught that MOVE people were responsible for their own deaths, that they had sacrificed their children to a self-evidently false theology. Americans were taught that the MOVE Bombing was avoidable—a tragedy, yes, but one devoid of agency.

The day after the bombing, the nation awoke to confusing and bewildering reports coming out of Philadelphia—mostly based on Goode’s initial press conference. In a typical article, the morning Chicago Tribune reported that MOVE and the police had been involved in a protracted gun battle which lasted all day and into the night, and that the battle culminated in police dropping a bomb onto the MOVE house, causing a fire. The Tribune reported that “at least four members of the radical group, which calls itself MOVE, emerged from the inferno” and continued firing upon police officers. The shootout, combined with “a severe lack of water pressure,” prevented the fire
department from extinguishing the fire before it was too late. The report in the Chicago Tribune was typical of one line of storytelling to emerge from the MOVE Bombing: MOVE had been heavily armed and shooting at the police nearly all day. The police used an explosive device to dislodge a bunker on the roof, causing an unexpected fire. The fire forced at least some of the MOVE people outside where they continued their gun battle with police, preventing firefighters from extinguishing the flames. However, as early as the morning of the fourteenth, a second account of events began to emerge — one based on at-the-scene interviews rather than Goode’s press conference. The New York Times, for example, reported that the police responded to shooting at around six in the morning, and that MOVE and the police traded gunfire for ninety minutes. Most of the day, they reported, there was no activity at the MOVE house at all — at least nothing that the bystanders and press members observed from several blocks away.  

While reporters struggled to determine the series of events, city officials offered a narrative for framing the MOVE Bombing that positioned MOVE as the perpetrators and their neighbors as the victims. On May 14, 1985, Mayor Wilson Goode, Police Commissioner Gregor Sambor, and Fire Commissioner William Richmond gave a joint press conference. This time, Goode read a prepared statement meant to “put the tragic events of the past two days in perspective.” Goode told his citizens that MOVE was “a group dedicated to the destruction of our way of life.” He reminded them that MOVE killed a police officer in 1978. Goode’s message to the press was that the neighbors whose homes burned were the victims of the MOVE Bombing—not MOVE, not even the MOVE children. The police commissioner explained that the bomb dropped from the helicopter was a 2-pound bundle of Tovex explosive and alleged that “there would never have been any fire unless it was assisted by some inflammatory material.” He was
insinuating that Ramona Africa had poured gasoline onto the roof of the house in anticipation of the bomb—something she had threatened to do over the bullhorn.

Sambor insisted that the “plan was a good one.” He explained that MOVE had heavily fortified their row home. Aside from the “bunker” on the roof, they had brought in large tree trunks to reinforce the walls. He also speculated that MOVE people had dug a system of tunnels beneath the house which they could have used to escape into the neighborhood. Perhaps most importantly, the officials reiterated their belief that MOVE people “were prepared to die, to go on a suicide mission.” Even so, Sambor insisted, “As far as we’re concerned” the planned raid presented “no possible danger to the children.”

Goode’s reframing of the MOVE Bombing as an unavoidable tragedy, with the neighbors as the victims, proved influential. In the days after the bombing, a few newspapers ran the photograph of Birdie Africa in the police van. Others ran photographs of Ramona Africa surrendering to police. But the majority of news accounts of the MOVE Bombing ran several photographs taken by news helicopters which showed the entire 6200 block of Osage Avenue — sixty-four houses in all — decimated by fire. Both the New York Times and Time magazine ran photos of the burned-out block on their covers. For the time being, the neighbors whose homes had been destroyed provided sympathetic victims. If the public could not mourn for MOVE people, they could sympathize with the neighbors whose houses burned.

Within a few days, news trickled out that bodies had been discovered in the rubble. City officials used cranes to knock down the remaining walls so that they would not collapse on investigators. But this piled yet another layer of rubble onto the bodies they were trying to recover. Investigators brought in large claw machines to clear the
debris, which only further destroyed the bodies — many of which were already charred beyond recognition. Once it cooled, federal and local forensics teams sifted through the rubble, separated human bones from dog bones, and pieced together fragments of burned bodies. The process took weeks, but they eventually found the remains of eleven people. John Africa had died early in the day, probably from the second bomb blast. Examiners were unable to provide a positive identification, as only a burned torso remained. Frank Africa and Raymond Africa died either from the same bomb or from police gunfire shortly thereafter. There was no smoke or ash in the remains of their lungs, indicating that they were dead before the fire. Conrad Africa, Rhonda Africa, and Theresa Africa died sometime after the final bomb, either from gunshot wounds, smoke inhalation, or the flames. The children—Sue Africa’s nine-year-old son Tomaso, Consuella Africa’s two daughters Zanetta and Tree, thirteen and fourteen, Jeanine and Phil Africa’s ten-year-old son Phil, and Delbert and Janet Africa’s twelve-year-old daughter Delisha—died in the basement.30

Once it became clear that several of the victims of the MOVE Bombing had been children, journalists, activists, and religious leaders began to construct a new narrative of the MOVE Bombing—one that contrasted the complicity of the MOVE adults with the innocence of the MOVE children. On May 15, several national newspapers reported that six bodies had been recovered from the rubble, “at least two” of them children. Within a week, the body count was up to eleven, four of them children. It took nearly six months for investigators to determine that five children and six adults had died. Responding to news, Gregory Williams, a child psychiatrist, wrote an essay in which he pondered a broader lack of empathy towards children within American culture. He wrote about how he was raised “a Baptist Protestant Christian,” but had lost his faith as he “wondered,
with great philosophical concern and anxiety,” whether God would have damned him to hell merely for being born into the wrong religion—something that he had no control over. Williams, like the MOVE children, had been “indoctrinated with views” that he never chose. Like the children of MOVE, he and the countless other children that were taught God had damned them to hell were “innocent victims” to their parents’ ideologies. Who could believe in a God, Williams wondered, who would “wantonly cause the death and suffering of what I considered innocent children?” But, to Williams, society was as cruel as this false god. Clearly, he reasoned, “we do not unambivalently love children.” If we did, the state would have removed the MOVE children years ago. According to Williams, “the adult members of MOVE have been labeled by us as being pathologically dangerous or emotionally ill,” and “to shackle one’s children with an archaic system of magical beliefs of superiority and omnipotence hardly prepares them for a future world.” For those reasons, it was “our responsibilities as citizens in a democracy” to remove the MOVE children from MOVE long before their lives were ever put at risk.31

Many people in Philadelphia and around the country echoed Williams’ sentiment. In the weeks that followed the bombing, the American Friends Service Committee devised a series of projects that shaped the way the broader public understood the MOVE Bombing. Their first major undertaking, begun four months after the MOVE Bombing, was the Philadelphia Perspectives Project, in which AFSC staffers conducted in-depth one-on-one interviews with people living in and around Philadelphia to gauge their reactions to the MOVE Bombing. To find their respondents, staff members at the AFSC cold called Philadelphians and asked them a series of questions ranking their knowledge of MOVE and the MOVE Bombing, the strength of their opinions, and their
willingness to conduct an interview. AFSC staffers conducted interviews with those who ranked highly on the phone questionnaire, either at the AFSC offices downtown or at the respondents’ homes. The Philadelphia Perspectives Project gathered audio tapes and produced transcripts from interviews with forty-five people. Though the Philadelphia Perspectives Project made no pretensions of being a scientific poll, the respondents were a relatively close sampling of the Philadelphia community. They interviewed twenty-four African Americans and thirteen whites. Five respondents identified as Hispanic, and three as Asian. Twenty-six of the respondents were female. Many of the respondents requested anonymity, and some asked to review the transcripts to make sure there was no identifying information. The interviews were generalized into a report called “Voices from the Community,” which the AFSC made available to the press.32

Almost all of the respondents believed that the MOVE adults in the house were culpable in—or even welcomed—their own deaths. A forty-eight year old African American man who worked as a mail carrier placed “ninety-nine and nine tenths of the blame on MOVE.” He believed it was “disgraceful how they carried on” and suggested that he “might have punched a few of them” if he’d had the chance. He told the interviewer that he was not surprised when he learned of the MOVE Bombing “for the simple reason, anyone who would go to any length to force their ideas and their way of living on someone else” invites violent conflict. “This is what they wanted. Total destruction...they were just a form of a cult, a form of terror.” A black man in his late sixties was reticent to say conclusively that MOVE intended to die on May 13th, but that suicidal behavior was not out of character for groups, like MOVE, who were “willing to die for their cause. People, more recently in Jonestown come to my mind.”33
A second point on which most of the respondents agreed was that the children were not MOVE people, but innocent victims held captive to MOVE. A middle-aged white man who worked as a chef and lived in West Philadelphia, told his interviewer that “one thing I could never conceive of is...adults keeping their children, you know, forcing them into staying and living that type of life.” Another respondent agreed that the MOVE children should not be thought of in the same category as the adults. “As an adult you have options. You choose how you want to live. You choose what your beliefs and your creeds are. The children don’t.” Another respondent lamented that the MOVE children “didn’t have the say whether they should stay with these people.” A couple of respondents dissented from the view that the children were not authentically religious people. A white housewife in her late thirties rejected her interviewer’s suggestion that the children were “hostages” to MOVE. “That’s totally alien to me,” she said. “Whatever I am, my children are. I’m of a different religious persuasion. My children were reared in this religious persuasion also. I was questioned very often about this by the community. ‘Why do your children do so and so?’ And then I would say, ‘Well, don’t your children follow your ways? Why is it that my children shouldn’t follow mine?’ To this respondent, MOVE was “their own little community. The children need the parents and the parents need the children.”

A third point on which most of the respondents agreed was that the MOVE adults sacrificed the MOVE children as martyrs and that they, not the government, were ultimately responsible for the deaths of the children. A white schoolteacher in her early thirties said that she “felt the city’s hopelessness.” MOVE, she thought “were willing to sacrifice children, they weren’t going to even let the children out of the house. And that, to me—I’m a child advocate, and that was the very horrendous, not even pathetic—it was
“just a horrendous thing to do.” She agreed with many of the respondents that MOVE adults wanted “to be a martyr,” but that, as a decent human being, you “don’t take the children with you.” The forty-eight year old a mail carrier voiced a common theme. “Who would board their wives and children inside a building...would have open warfare with police,” he asked. “They have no respect for children. So as far as their children getting killed or their way of life to be a martyr, it didn’t surprise me.” Another respondent believed that the children “were a sacrificial lamb,” that “they just happened to be caught in the middle,” and that “they were victims. Victims of a cause.”

The construction of this narrative of the MOVE Bombing, in which the MOVE children were hostages caught in the crossfire of an unavoidable conflict, shifted some of the blame for their deaths away from political leaders, but city leaders were not spared from criticism. New York City Mayor Ed Koch made national news when he trashed Philadelphia’s handling of the situation, saying that he would fire a police commissioner on the spot if he presented such a “stupid” idea. City politicians and community leaders began calling for resignations. City Manager Leo Brooks announced his resignation on June 3, effective at the end of the month. He attempted to distance himself from the decision to drop the bomb by telling reporters that he was out of town visiting his parents in Virginia the week before the raid. Police Commissioner Gregor Sambor resigned on November 13 in a tearful speech at the Police Academy. He complained to reporters on his way out of office that Mayor Goode had forced him to resign, a claim that Goode denied. Fire Commissioner William Richmond had been considering leaving the fire department prior to the MOVE Bombing. At the urging of his family and the mayor, he chose to stay on until his retirement in 1988.
Wilson Goode received much less criticism than either Sambor or Brooks. *Time* magazine polled Philadelphians weeks after the bombing and found that seventy-one percent thought the mayor “had done a good or excellent job handling the MOVE confrontation.”39 Partly, Goode’s initial support was due to the loyalty of Philadelphia’s African Americans, who supported the city’s first black mayor at levels approaching one hundred percent. Though the MOVE Commission report placed the blame for the MOVE Bombing squarely on the mayor’s shoulders as the city’s chief executive, Goode was reelected to a second term as mayor in 1987, fighting off District Attorney Ed Rendell in the primary and defeating Frank Rizzo in the general election. James Berghaier, the police officer who rescued Birdie after he collapsed in the rear alleyway, left the police department after he was subjected to harassment for what he had done. In one instance, his colleagues wrote “nigger lover” on his locker.40

The only person to be charged with a crime relating to the MOVE Bombing was Ramona Africa. She faced trial on three counts of aggravated assault, three counts of recklessly endangering another person, and one count of criminal conspiracy to riot. Ramona represented herself in court. A jury acquitted her on the assault and reckless endangerment charges, but found her guilty of conspiracy to riot. A juror told reporters that the jury was “trying to make a statement in the decision that both parties were wrong, MOVE and the city.” The prosecutor announced after the trial that the verdict was a “compromise.” Ramona Africa was sentenced to a minimum of 5 months and a maximum of seven years in prison. She was eligible for parole for most of her sentence, under the condition that she sever all ties to MOVE. She refused, served all seven years of her sentence, and returned to MOVE upon her release.41
The story that government officials crafted in the wake of the MOVE Bombing—that MOVE, themselves, and no one else, were culpable for their own deaths—has proven influential. In 2017, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, after years of avoiding the issue, erected a historical marker at the location of the MOVE Bombing. The marker read:

“On May 13, 1985, at 6221 Osage Avenue, an armed conflict occurred between the Phila. Police Dept. and MOVE members. A Pa. State Police helicopter dropped a bomb on MOVE’s house. An uncontrolled fire killed eleven MOVE members, including five children, and destroyed 61 homes.”

The marker does not speak the truth, except to say that something happened here that people aren’t quite ready to deal with. The passive voice deflects attention away from the actions of those responsible. “An armed conflict occurred...” “a helicopter dropped a bomb...” “an uncontrolled fire killed...” One could read that sign and believe that what happened on Osage Avenue on May 13th, 1985, was an act of nature. And that is precisely the point. The history of the MOVE Bombing was carefully crafted so that we would not know who to mourn. Those with the power to shape the process of historical narration ensured that there would be no mourning, no remembering, no victims of the MOVE Bombing except, perhaps, the neighbors whose homes burned down.\(^{42}\)

Despite the influence this story has had, it is beginning to change. Since 2015, a new generation of activists, artists, and scholars—many of whom were not yet born in 1985—have found in the MOVE Bombing a powerful simulacrum for how racism functions through state violence. They see in the MOVE Bombing an eerily familiar pattern: the state kills black people, then blames them for their own destruction. The
MOVE Bombing—once a forgotten footnote in American history—is becoming a powerful symbol in the Black Lives Matter movement.

The MOVE Bombing serves as a powerful symbol in a new opera titled “We Shall Not Be Moved,” which opened in Philadelphia in September of 2017 before moving to the Apollo Theater in New York and the Hackney Empire in London. Created by composer Daniel Bernard Roumain, librettist Marc Bamuthi Joseph, and directed and choreographed by Bill T. Jones, “We Shall Not Be Moved” follows a group of five teenagers from North Philadelphia who, orphaned with nowhere else to go, find refuge in an abandoned house that sits on the site of the MOVE house on Osage that burned in 1985. The teens—four of them are named John, an allusion to John Africa—form a family unit together in that house and escape their lives of broken families, underfunded and closed schools, and street violence. But they are not alone. The house is haunted by the children who died in the MOVE Bombing who see the teens’ taking up residence in the home “as a matter of destiny and resistance.” But a police officer named Glenda, who, like the teens in the house, grew up in North Philadelphia, discovers their hideout and threatens to arrest the makeshift family. Act I closes with Glenda accidentally firing her sidearm, injuring one of the teens, John Henry. The rest of the teens overpower Glenda and handcuff her to a chair.43

In Act II, the teens try to decide what to do with Glenda and with John Henry, who lies bleeding on the floor. They worry that if they let Glenda go, she will have them arrested before they can get John Henry to a doctor. It is at this moment of indecision that the ghosts “infuse the home with a spirituality that is palpably felt by the young people in particular.” Inspired by the spirits of the MOVE children, the teens tell Glenda their backstories in hopes that she will understand their plight (and her own, she has,
after all, shot an unarmed teenager). However, in the process of telling their stories, Glenda learns that it was one of the teens, John Blue, who killed her brother. In Act III, the teens decide that the only way to solve their problem is to “disappear” Glenda. One of the teens, named Un/Sung, attacks Glenda, though the audience is left to decide for themselves whether Glenda is dead. In the closing scene, the teens use candles to set fire to the house they shared. “The image is not of arson, but of ritual.” The teens have turned the home “into an altar, perhaps an instrument of forgiving, of letting go, of release, and of renewal.” As the opera ends, “the last remaining image on state is of the skeleton of a house, lit up like a shrine, while the OGs move around it in holy rites.”

“We Shall Not Be Moved” is a meditation on Black Lives Matter, about religion’s role in that movement, and about the ways the past continues to haunt the present. But the opera also performs the historical mourning that Black Lives Matter demands. When the performers build a family in that home, they enter an archive of racial violence. The presence of the ghosts of the MOVE children erases the boundaries between past and present. The problems the teens face—police brutality, street violence, broken homes—were the same problems that drew people to MOVE in the 1970s. Like historians of racial violence, the performers are unsure how best to tell the stories of the lives lost in that archive. The opera is not an attempt to revive the past to inform the present. It is not a celebration of progress. It is not a happy story; it is, rather, deeply ambivalent. Violence begets violence, mourning begets mourning. A house, once burned, burns again.

We must not confuse this ambivalence with defeat. Black Lives Matter is an invitation to mourn, and mourning lives destroyed by the state is profoundly radical. It is a fundamental critique of the state—of the violence that underpins it; of the violence
that defines it. That is important, because as the history of MOVE shows, the inability to mourn lives is an invitation to forget that they existed, that they were destroyed. It is to be complicit in erasure. When we ask whose lives should be mourned, we are making a historical claim. This is why people fight so hard to deny victimhood to those killed by police. It is why reactionary voices strain to remind us that the dead was “no angel.” They are begging us not to grieve, to avoid the humanity lying on the street. They are begging us not to see those who died as lives that should be mourned.

It is not the historian’s job to make moral claims, and I won’t. But it is the historian’s job to tell the truth about the past—to assign agency where it belongs, even when it hurts; to uncover the humanity buried beneath the archive; to “[redress] the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse.”45 It is the historian’s job—now more than ever—to show that “history’s authority over us is not broken by maintaining a silence about its continued effects.”46

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2 Ibid.


4 Ibid., 13.

5 The best record of John Africa’s life comes from his sister. See Louise Leaphart James, John Africa...Childhood Untold Until Today (self published, 2016).

6 Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, Examination of Officers Cresse and Draper of Civil Affairs, October 8, 1985, Box 19, Records of the Philadelphia Special Investigation (MOVE) Commission, Urban Archives and Special Collections, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.


Perhaps the most detailed retelling of the events of August 8, 1978, and of those leading up to it, can be found in an unpublished memoir written by a Catholic priest who was in the MOVE house negotiating minutes before the shooting began. See Msgr. Charles Devlin, I Am Ready and Willing...With the Help of God: A Portrait of the Priesthood as Seen Through Icons of Ministry and Service by a Priest – One Among Many, unpublished manuscript, Cardinal’s Commission on Human Relations Files, Philadelphia Archdiocesan Research Center, Wynnewood, PA.

Federal Bureau of Investigation, Lab Report, September 8, 1978, Box 8, Folder 5, Records of the Philadelphia Special Investigation (MOVE) Commission, Urban Archives and Special collections, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.


John Africa to Conrad Africa, Box 5, Folder “MOVE Writings,” Philadelphia Special Investigation (MOVE) Commission Records, Urban Archives and Special Collections, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.


Transcripts of the trial, United States v. Leaphart and Robbins (1981), can be found in Box 66 and 67, Records of the Philadelphia Special Investigation (MOVE) Commission, Urban Archives and Special Collections, Temple University.

United States Attorney Edward S. G. Dennis to William H. Brown III, January 3, 1986, Box 7, Folder 2, PSIC; Emerson Moran to Bill Brown, January 9, 1986, Box 7, Folder 2, PSIC; Philadelphia Police Department Chronology of Meetings Attended by Major Investigation Division Intelligence Regarding MOVE, May 23, 1985, Box 51,
Philadelphia Special Investigation (MOVE) Commission, Urban Archives and Special Collections, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.

17 Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, Interview with Police Officer Herbert Kirk, September 11, 1985, Philadelphia Special Investigation (MOVE) Commission, Urban Archives and Special Collections, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.


19 My recreation of events in the house relies on witnesses who were in the house at the time. Ward Testimony, PSIC; Philadelphia Police Department Homicide Division, Investigation Interview Record, May 14, 1985, Box 63, Folder 9, PSIC; Philadelphia Police Department Homicide Division, Investigation Review Record, May 18, 1985, Box 63, Folder 9, PSIC; Ralph Teti to William Lyton, July 9, 1985, Box 63, Folder 7, PSIC [enclosure]; Philadelphia Police Department Civil Affairs Unit, Confidential Police Report, May 15, 1985, Box 63, Folder 9, PSIC; Philadelphia Police Department Juvenile Aid Division, Interview of Birdie Africa, undated, Box 63, Folder 9, PSIC.

20 There is some evidence to suggest that the police shot first; William Lyton to Emerson D. Moran, September 9, 1985, Box 8, Folder 1, PSIC.

21 Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, The Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, PSIC.

22 Testimony of Leo Brooks, PSIC; Testimony of William Richmond, PSIC; Testimony of Gregor Sambor, PSIC; Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, The Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, PSIC

23 Michael Ward Testimony, PSIC; Philadelphia Police Department Homicide Division, Investigation Interview Record, May 14, 1985, Box 63, Folder 9, PSIC; Philadelphia Police Department Homicide Division, Investigation Review Record, May 18, 1985, Box 63, Folder 9, PSIC; Ralph Teti to William Lyton, July 9, 1985, Box 63, Folder 7, PSIC [enclosure]; Philadelphia Police Department Civil Affairs Unit, Confidential Police Report, May 15, 1985, Box 63, Folder 9, PSIC; Philadelphia Police Department Juvenile Aid Division, Interview of Birdie Africa, undated, Box 63, Folder 9, PSIC.

24 According to police records, 500 rounds of buckshot were brought to the scene, and zero were used. Autopsy records, however, show that the remains of one child contained buckshot pellets. See Autopsy Reports, Box 50, Folder 19, PSIC.


32 I have chosen to honor these original requests for anonymity. This is why I am not using respondents’ names and using general references to the collection as a whole. However, I have included some information about the respondents including race, gender, and age. American Friends Service Committee, “Voices from the Community,” 1986, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, PA; Philadelphia Perspectives Project, American Friends Service Committee Archive, Philadelphia, PA.

33 Philadelphia Perspectives Project, AFSC.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.


44 Ibid.


46 Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning.”