

Prayers for the People

*Homicide and Humanity
in the Crescent City*

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The Crescent City



Site of My Father's House (photo by author)

So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment. The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (1937, 1)

“Grieve well and you grow stronger. That’s the way it is,” Sister Anne said finally.¹ The room fell silent with the women around the table processing this particular bit of wisdom. Danielle was the first to respond. “Well you know” she said, “May the twelfth made four years for Rock’s death.” She paused, remembering that day and how she had mourned. “I was in the Winn Dixie making groceries. And you know how the Winn Dixie plays all the old songs, and it just be relaxing as you shop? So, this song came on, and it was, ‘It’s So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday.’”

The other women gathered at the church that evening nodded their heads in recognition. Written by Motown industry duo Freddie Perren and Christine Yarian for the 1975 film *Cooley High*, “It’s So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday” plays during the burial scene of Cochise, a young Black man who is brutally murdered on the streets of Chicago. An a cappella version was more famously released in the early 1990s by Boyz II Men, the contemporary R & B group. The accompanying video is also set at a funeral, the lyrics carrying significant weight given the intensified violence in Black communities at the time and ever since. Danielle’s experience of the song nearly two decades later was no less affecting, given Rock’s death in unfortunately familiar circumstances.

How do I say goodbye to what we had?

.....

I thought we’d get to see forever,

But forever’s gone away.

.....
 And I'll take with me the memories
 To be my sunshine after the rain.
 It's so hard to say goodbye to yesterday.

The lyrics triggered an acute experience of grief within an otherwise steady undercurrent of death and mourning in Black New Orleans.

"As I reached through the freezer that's when I noticed that song was playing," Danielle continued. "I was getting the ice cream and when that song came on, *it hit my ear*, and I reached, and I stopped, and I listened. You know when you walk into Winn Dixie out there on Chef . . . Where is it?" She looked around for confirmation of the location, thinking of the grocery store located on Chef Menteur Highway. "Yes, it's on Chef," Sister Anne confirmed, and Danielle went on. "Yeah, and in the front my friend was sitting out there waiting on me. And when that song went playing, I left the basket, I left the ice cream, and I ran by him. And my heart was just *overwhelmed* with that song. And he said, 'What's the matter?' And I couldn't say a word, I just pointed up. I said, 'You see what they playing?' And I thought about my baby."

Her words settled on the hot summer air—a Thursday evening in New Orleans in the early part of June 2009. The sun was still high, and the air conditioning inside the building offered little relief, the whirring sound mixing with the rush of traffic at the tail end of the daily commute. We were gathered in the community development center across the street from Liberty Street Baptist Church, a large, predominantly African American community of faith located in the heart of the Central City neighborhood.² While Central City was on the other side of town from the Winn Dixie on Chef, Black residents across the city dealt with disproportionate levels of violence. Sister Anne, Danielle, and the others had all lost family members, and they now met weekly in a support group Danielle had founded shortly after the death of her son Hiroki. Known to family and friends as "Rock," he was murdered in 2005, just a few months before Hurricane Katrina. For Danielle to situate her memories as "sunshine after the rain" in a world where it was "so hard to say goodbye to yesterday" was thus both personal and political. It situated the mourned death of a young Black man as both inextricable from the devastation and central to the recovery of the postdisaster city.

This particular meeting marked the one-year death anniversary of Brian, whose mother Monica sat quietly, dabbing her eyes dry from time to time. The other women shared their experiences of grief in part to reassure Monica that it was okay to cry and that this was a necessary part

of the mourning process, the “good grief” and accompanying strength of which Sister Anne spoke. Danielle, still in the Winn Dixie, continued her story. “I stood there . . . , [took] a deep breath, and pulled myself together,” she recalled.

So what Sister Anne is saying is very true. Because no matter where you are . . . people are going to ask you “How do you feel today?” You know? And we don’t have to cover up and say, “Oh, I’m alright” when we know that we are hurting. The pain is there of missing our child . . . because that is our grief. And like she just said, you can express it anywhere you need to.

To grieve well, however, went beyond expression. It translated into a certain depth of knowledge that Danielle felt she now possessed because of her son’s death. “I just give God the glory today” she continued. “Because I have gained so much *knowledge* on death . . . I never knew this before so, you know, the Bible has a way . . . God’s words have a way, of letting us know.”

What does it mean to grieve well? To look, in the space of violence, death, and mourning, for sunshine after the rain? What is the source of this warmth and light and the resulting “knowledge on death” it produces? How is that knowledge then shared, and what does it do? Does it make one grow stronger, as Sister Anne believed? Whom do we find at the center of these processes? Black women like Sister Anne, Danielle, Monica, and the others who were gathered at the church that evening. And what does it mean to find them there with the dead—the young Black men who are the primary victims of violence in the contemporary American city? How might this relatedness, which Danielle affirmed in glory and gratitude, strengthen a city and its people?

I explore these questions in New Orleans, at the intersection of Black death, religious work, and the process of social change. I follow the pathways set by several diverse communities of faith; however, I focus in particular on the history, mission, and forward motion of religious work at Liberty Street Baptist Church in Central City. Directed by clergy holding firm to a vision of a beloved community and guided by mothers and grandmothers celebrating birth and death anniversaries to “raise” the dead, I trace the emergence of an old and new African American religious ideal. I examine how the faithful, building on a legacy of Black social Christianity attuned to the conditions of the present day, worked

against the violent ruptures of life in Black families and communities. They asserted Black humanity, in this world and the next, challenging assumptions about the nature of violence or the limits of death and demonstrating the possibilities of Black urban life far beyond the ways in which it has been determined. To grieve well was to chart a generative path through death into new and more expansive ways of being, relating, and dwelling. It was a path toward peace that others could also follow in an increasingly precarious world.

The Flood and the Fire

I had come to New Orleans for fieldwork in 2007, but I already knew the city—a second home for many years. I spent most of my childhood in Tennessee, but in the early 1970s my parents divorced and my father moved to New Orleans, where he eventually met and married my stepmother. They lived Uptown, in a townhouse on Napoleon Avenue, comfortably set back along the far edge of a small park but uneasily situated between the struggling Freret Street neighborhood and the grandeur of the St. Charles Avenue corridor. My siblings and I visited them frequently, for holidays and for longer periods over the summer. As a middle-class African American family connected, through my father's work, to the wealth of Uptown university life, we found ourselves part of a vibrant intellectual community. Yet although I was greatly enriched by the diverse educational, cultural, and social experiences this provided, my overall experience of New Orleans was somewhat sheltered. There were parts of the city to which we rarely ventured.

Decades later, I watched with horror as the city I thought I knew disappeared. It was late August of 2005, and Hurricane Katrina had devastated the Gulf Coast. I was many miles away, and my family in New Orleans thankfully had evacuated. But the images on the television were no less heartbreaking. Floodwaters submerged whole neighborhoods and thousands of people were missing and presumed dead. Many more waited, endlessly it seemed, for help. My father and stepmother considered themselves extremely fortunate even though they had already received word that their house was under a foot of water. Still, they were fairly confident that they would be able to return home soon, to salvage what they could. I hoped that this was true.

A week later, in early September, I was lying in bed half asleep when the telephone rang. It was my mother, calling from Tennessee. "Are you awake?" she asked. Then, "I have some terrible news. Your father's house

burned.” Dazed but upright, I listened as she shared what she knew. The cause of the fire was unknown, but it had started in the house next door and grew with such force that it consumed eight homes. Miraculously no one was hurt, but the loss was devastating. The lessons we were learning about the structural conditions of violence, the process of disaster, and the legacies of loss in Black communities were fast and furious. My father, a physician and professor, was well regarded in his field. However, after the storm he lamented that although he had lived on the edge of a well-to-do (and still dry) neighborhood, he was clearly “not Uptown enough” to escape disaster. We were all alive and accounted for, but with the house reduced to rubble, we, too, looked to the heavens for sunshine after the rain.

Foundations of Love

In academic and public inquiry alike, Black lives have long been under scrutiny. In the United States the focus tends to be on the extraordinarily high rates of poverty and violence found in poor Black communities, with growing though still inadequate attention to police brutality and its intensification within an increasingly militarized urban state. While some analyses continue to confine these conditions, historically and statistically, to the “ghetto,” for the participants of a still-rising progressive movement, they are traced, regardless of their predominant location, to the same root: “a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Garza 2014). From this fraught terrain, the #BlackLivesMatter project and the larger Black Lives Matter movement have emerged.

We now understand that Black lives are challenged by multiple factors, from the brutal legacy of slavery to a status of free but not yet equal American citizenship, from disfranchisement to the continued unevenness with which essential goods and services are distributed, from the persistence of poverty to the ubiquity of violent crime, and from the systematic incarceration of poor Blacks to the fractured communities in which many people are left. We further understand that such processes fundamentally rest on the devaluing of Black lives and that they intensify as the quest for wealth and power ramps up in an increasingly polarized world.

We know far less, however, about the systems and structures of Black humanity, especially beyond the assertions that ring out forcefully from resistance and social justice movements. Despite the tendency to characterize the Black Lives Matter movement as a radical or even violent response, it is important to remember that the movement began as a “love

letter” to Black people penned and posted by Alicia Garza and disseminated by cofounders Garza, Patrice Cullors, and Opal Tometi (Bailey and Leonard 2015, 69–71). Yet love—referring here to the expressions and practices that affirm, value, strengthen, and celebrate Black people—has not received the attention it deserves, not just in studies of Black urban life but in studies of contemporary life more broadly.

In New Orleans I explore these themes in two directions, looking back at the histories and ideologies that inform present frameworks and thinking forward about what they provide for the crafting of a sustainable, Black, and urban future. To take up this inquiry is not to deny that conditions of suffering still exist. Rather, it is to bring forward the knowledge that comes from the Black experience as new frameworks and methods of change are developed. The conclusions to which this study leads, therefore, are not confined to the Black community. As George Lipsitz (2011, 6) argues, “Black negotiations with the constraints and confinements of racialized space often produce ways of envisioning and enacting more decent, dignified, humane, and egalitarian social relations for everyone.”

The call to examine such processes is already made by scholars and activists who emphasize the need for concurrent religious, moral, and spiritual progress. Angela Davis (Davis and Davis 2016), for example, in an interview for *Yes!* magazine, states, “I think our notions of what counts as radical have changed over time. Self-care and healing and attention to the body and the spiritual dimension—all of this is now a part of radical social justice struggles.” Later that same year, Michelle Alexander, author of the celebrated book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), resigned her position as a professor of law at Ohio State University and joined the faculty at Union Theological Seminary. Posting on social media, she gave a similar statement, writing,

I no longer believe we can “win” justice simply by filing lawsuits, flexing our political muscles or boosting voter turnout. Yes, we absolutely must do that work, but none of it—not even working for some form of political revolution—will ever be enough on its own. Without a moral or spiritual awakening, we will remain forever trapped in political games fueled by fear, greed and the hunger for power. . . . At its core, America’s journey from slavery to Jim Crow to mass incarceration raises profound moral and spiritual questions about who we are, individually and collectively, who we aim to become, and what we are willing to do now.³

Before considering such awakenings in New Orleans, through the work of clergy and parishioners, including the women who gathered in support

at Liberty Street, I take three main steps through several connected bodies of literature. In the first, I call for a more expansive conceptualization of Black urban life, one that moves beyond the confines of the “ghetto” and the assumptions still held about life and death therein. Rather than an uncritical acceptance of violence as customary in Black communities, I cast New Orleans as a simultaneously precarious and productive place and situate the people I encountered there as vital agents who find life in the “space of death” (Taussig 1987, 5; Holland 2000, 4). Second, I consider how African American religion has been understood, what new frameworks are emerging, and how they might direct us, as M. Shawn Copeland (2013, 626) suggests, toward “a future with authentic and luminous possibility.” Third, finding Black women of faith at the center of these processes in New Orleans, I bring their experiences and insights to the forefront, merging studies of religion, death, and kinship to understand the reconfiguration of Black social and spiritual value in the space of death through everyday acts of relatedness in multiple realms.

Conditions of Loss

The windows of the community development center looked out on a fragile landscape. It had been nearly four years since Hurricane Katrina, but Central City had not recovered; indeed, this was fragile ground long before the storm ever materialized. To understand Katrina’s causes and effects, therefore, one must do away with notions of a “natural” disaster and look instead at the determinations of difference that made this neighborhood and population vulnerable to begin with—the risky moves of urban expansion, the racism and forced settlement of Blacks in areas below sea level, the poor design and upkeep of levee systems. The tragic loss of life that resulted from the hurricane was directly related, with rates of mortality for African Americans four times higher than those for whites.⁴

Katrina’s devastation also stemmed from neoliberal approaches to disaster management and recovery in which many Black residents were further abandoned—deemed “disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves” (Giroux 2006, 10). Disaster capitalism continued after the storm, with public and private entities taking advantage of the “opportunity” to strategically remake and repopulate the city (Klein 2007; Gunewardena and Schuller 2008; Johnson 2011). New Orleans remained a majority African American city. It had been so since at least 1980 (Arena 2004, 378), but the African American population had dramatically decreased.⁵ Life in Central City nonetheless

went on, and Danielle and the other women made their way to church and home, past shuttered businesses and blighted properties, past corner markets with little sustenance, past recovering schools and neighborhood centers, past crime sites and memorials for those whose deaths were sudden but still situated, as all of them were, in a condition of vulnerability and violence that had long been accumulating.

Like most major cities in the United States, New Orleans experienced an abrupt rise in violent crime over a twenty-five-year period, from around 1970 to 1995. Most accounts attribute this to the drug trade, particularly following the introduction of crack cocaine into urban markets beginning in the 1980s (Grogger and Willis 2000, 528).⁶ New Orleans was at the top of this trend; local homicide rates rose during this period by a staggering 329 percent (Currie 1998, 23). Even though rates started to decline in many cities after 1991, the worst year on record for New Orleans is 1994 when there were 414 murders. While this number has been higher in other cities, New Orleans is consistently set apart by its per capita murder rate. In 2009, at the time of my research, this rate was approximately 52.0, based on 174 homicides and a population estimate of 336,425. It was the highest rate in the nation for that year, compared to a national rate of 5.0.⁷

In the wake of Katrina, the problem of homicide was magnified, becoming a pivot point around which the discourse on recovery turned. It featured prominently in conversations about the future of the city, standing in the way of the peaceful and prosperous comeback that city officials and developers envisioned. What was striking, however, was the fact that many of the proposed solutions seemed to hinge on the exclusion of “violent” people, namely, the poor Black people on whom the characterization was routinely projected (Woods 2005, 1014–1015; Arena 2012, 146). The associated redevelopment projects, which overlapped with the demolition of low-income housing, gained traction through narrow statistical analyses that confirmed violence’s location, such as a study of crime in New Orleans over a two-year period (2009–2010) that found that the majority of homicides occurred in poor Black communities and involved young Black men as both perpetrators and victims (Wellford, Bond, and Goodison 2011).

Efforts to end the violence were more generally supported, especially by residents who perceived a shift in the nature of violence after the storm, as it spilled out of its usual Black boundaries. Several killings took the lives of “innocent” people—those who were clearly unconnected, at least by race or status, to the kind of criminal activity that would explain, or even warrant, their demise. As I discuss in a later chapter,

this expanded and less predictable location of violence was finally unacceptable and it spurred public outcry, most visibly in a March for Survival in January 2007 that was attended by several thousand people. This mobilization fueled another—as some residents decried the suggestion, explicit or not—that certain deaths (white, wealthy, and presumed innocent) were worthy of collective outrage and mourning while other deaths (Black, poor, and declared criminal) were not. This set the stage for a renewed assertion of Black social value regardless of one’s status, location, or criminal history.

From the “Ghetto” to the Crescent City

Neighborhoods like Central City have historically been characterized as the “ghetto,” their residents cast simultaneously as the perpetrators and victims of violence. This remains the case even when violence’s multiple causes are understood. Such characterizations make it difficult to learn from local experience, as people are more frequently imagined as responsible for, or at least confined by, their circumstances. To bring forward the responses they nonetheless develop, therefore, requires that we first interrogate what we think we know about Black urban life. In doing so we might better identify the institutions, structures, and agents of change and follow their lead past assumptions into the new ways of being they suggest.

The history of the ghetto can be traced from the sixteenth century when the term designated the confinement of Jewish people on a Venetian island where a foundry or *geto* had once been located (Duneier 2016, ix). This classification of urban space according to forced settlement and restricted movement and its association with a population identified by a particular feature such as race or religion would remain a key feature of how ghettos were subsequently defined in Europe and around the world (Haynes and Hutchinson 2008, 347–52). The term was first applied to African American settlement in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, denoting the Black enclaves of northern cities such as Philadelphia and Chicago.⁸ By the mid-twentieth century it had entered the mainstream of the growing field of urban studies.

In the latter part of the twentieth century a lively debate emerged about the characteristics that were most important in defining the ghetto, such as geography, race, income level, employment, segregation, social isolation, or subjugation (Wilson 1987; Jargowsky and Bane 1991; Pattillo 2003). For example, while some scholars identify ghettos by their high rates of poverty, others, such as Loïc Wacquant (1997, 341), maintain that

this “obfuscates the racial basis and character of this poverty and divests the term [*ghetto*] of both historical meaning and sociological content.” Wacquant’s (1997, 343) own definition, by contrast, understands the ghetto as “an ethnoracial formation that combines and inscribes in the objectivity of space and group-specific institutions all four ‘elementary forms’ of racial domination, namely, categorization, discrimination, segregation and exclusionary violence.”

More recent inquiries focus on the process of ghettoization, examining the ways that ghettos are produced and maintained, rather than reinforcing the “ghetto” “as an unambiguously discrete category” (Chaddha and Wilson 2008, 284). This fits with a call, again by Wacquant (2014, 1696), to see the “ghetto” as part of a larger system of “peculiar institutions” that have worked to define and confine African Americans over the last four centuries—from slavery to Jim Crow to the ghettos of northern cities in the first half of the twentieth century to the ghettos and hyperghettos of the present time.⁹ These analytical shifts unfortunately have little impact on the everyday lives of poor people, which continue and end under the influence of both old and new forms of domination. Thus, the *ghetto* (or the “inner city” or the “urban margin”) remains inhabited by poor people of color, ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, outcasts, and others—and persists as a necessary, though not predetermined, backdrop for the study of urban life.

Anthropological contributions to this inquiry began to coalesce in the 1940s and 1950s, with urban anthropology emerging as a distinct subfield in the 1960s. By the political economic turn of the early 1980s, scholars were situating their work both *in* and *of* the city (Low 1996, 384), examining larger systems of inequality while simultaneously tracing the ways that people navigate, sustain, and transform their lives and communities (Liebow 1967; Hannerz 1969; Stack 1974; Merry 1981; Susser 1982). The study of violence has been a persistent concern, especially in an approach to urban ethnography that is increasingly interdisciplinary across anthropology, sociology, geography, and attendant fields. While I follow Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois in situating violence as a “continuum” to reflect its structural, physical, social, symbolic, and other dimensions (2004, 1), it is true that the ethnographic study of violence in the United States was founded in the “ghetto,” with a particular focus on gangs and drug trafficking (Bourgois 1995; Vigil 1988; Anderson 1999; Venkatesh 2008). Scholars are increasingly outspoken about the implications; Kilanski and Auyero (2015, 2) argue that “the tendency of ethnography to focus on the types of violence that shape daily life in poor Black and brown communities—when read collectively—can help to (re)

produce negative stereotypes of racial/ethnic minorities circulating in the wider culture.” They call instead for scholarship that brings those who are most directly affected by violence to the center of the discourse in order to better understand how “violence is ‘lived’ and ‘acted upon’” (3).

This call has been met by those who make clear the connection between local and structural forms of violence such as the devastating impact of the United States’ War on Drugs and the rise of the neoliberal, carceral, and militarized state. Their findings reveal the continued oppression and erasure of poor people of color—from displacement and death wrought by poverty, joblessness, poor education, disease, and the inadequacies of social services to the growth of illicit economies, drug trafficking, and associated violence to the ongoing impact of criminalization and increasingly punitive forms of urban governance and social control (Bergmann 2009; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Rios 2011; Contreras 2012; Ralph 2014). Findings also reveal how residents move, as much as they are able, beyond the limits of violence to forge sustainable urban futures. Laurence Ralph’s (2014) exploration of the “underside of injury” in gangland Chicago, with injury cast as “a potential, an engine, a generative force that propelled new trajectories” (17), is such a study.

With this inspiration, I do not situate my research in New Orleans as being in or of the “ghetto.” I do not see the people I encountered—parishioners, members of the clergy, residents, and others—as responsible for, confined within, or incapacitated by the conditions of poverty and violence they nonetheless experience. Instead, I follow the lead of scholars such as Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (2007), who frame a Black geography that frees those who occupy the margins from the places to which they have been relegated, tracing the ways that people refashion their lives in and through the “geographies of exclusion” that have been historically established for them (4). I thus propose a study of urban life and death in the “crescent city.”

The Crescent City, of course, refers first to New Orleans—it is an existing moniker referencing the city’s location along a crescent-shaped curve of the Mississippi River. I also use this term, however, to signify the cusp of change, viewing the city as a generative space in “a world that is crescent rather than created; that is ‘always in the making’” (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 3). *Crescent* comes from the Latin word *crēscere*, whose present participle *crēscens* means “to come into existence, increase in size or numbers.” The word commonly refers to the phases of the moon, specifically the period of increasing illumination (the waxing crescent moon) that follows the new moon. This emphasis on illumination inspires my suggestion of the crescent city, with the city and the

“ghetto” in particular reconfigured as emergent spaces where new revelations and ways of being come to light. However, a “crescent moon” has come to designate either a period of waxing or waning, of increasing or decreasing illumination, and this ambiguity seems also relevant to the crescent city, where the direction of change is not always clear and where the shifts, be they toward lightness or darkness, are cyclical and continuous.¹⁰ The inhabitants of the crescent city, the socially devalued in particular, thus become the vital agents, mediators, and guides who develop and share their visions—now and in the city and world to come. My intent here is not to shift attention away from the continued impact of violence; rather, the idea is to reframe negative characterizations of the “ghetto” so that we can better attend to and follow the transformative responses found therein.

The Space of Death and Transformation

There are many ways to mourn the dead. Following Brian’s death, for example, Monica requested a funeral at the Baptist church she attended in Marerro, on the Westbank and outskirts of New Orleans. After the service, the family processed to the cemetery for the burial. In the year that followed, Monica mourned with such intensity that it was alarming. Her close family members and friends, increasingly worried about her health, did everything they could to support and care for her. Someone told her about the support group at Liberty Street, and finally she came. She prayed with the others, listened to their testimonies, and when she was ready shared her own. When Danielle asked whether she would like to honor Brian on the one-year anniversary of his death, she said yes. Not only would it give her the chance to acknowledge her own journey, the fact that she had “made it” thus far, it would affirm Brian’s continued relatedness—absent in the body but now present with the Lord. The significance of such practices is indeed revealed in the crescent city, where life or death is not a fixed calculus, as traditional notions of violence in Black communities would have us believe. To “grieve well” was a less-defined and more encompassing experience of death-in-life and life-in-death, one that reflected more accurately people’s beliefs and capacities, including their ability to move beyond the limits of the world so firmly laid before them.¹¹

In New Orleans, the boundaries between life and death have long been blurred. The poet Brenda Marie Osbey describes a “peculiar fascination with the dead” exhibited by many residents through everyday practices of relatedness and care. As Osbey (2015, 25) encourages, “Honor the dead as

they ought to be honored. Live among your dead, whom you have every right to love." Helen Regis (2001, 764) identifies a range of related traditions, including jazz funerals and second lines, which make up a broad and "complex cultural repertoire of memorial discourse." For Regis, to honor the dead is also to transform the present by "summoning death to the stage of the living human body" (Taussig 1977, 77, cited in Regis 2001, 766)—claiming space for the articulation of Black subjectivity, especially given conditions of continued oppression and suffering. This fascination with the dead thus has social and political import; it facilitates a critique of the current order (see also Osbey 1996; Breunlin and Regis 2006; Sakakeeny 2013).

Regis (2001, 766) draws on Michael Taussig's work to situate such practices as "death-work"; however, I find Taussig's conceptualization of "the space of death" more apt for a consideration of life, death, and *transformation* in the crescent city. This is a physiological and social condition of terror that emerges out of a painful world history of conquest and colonization seen, for example, in "the space of death where the Indian, African, and white gave birth to a New World" (1987, 5). With the culture of the conqueror inextricably bound to that of the conquered (5), it is only by coming close to death that there might be "a more vivid sense of life" (7). Taussig understands this way of living and thinking through terror as transformative; thus, the space of death becomes "important in the creation of meaning and consciousness" (4).

Sharon Patricia Holland takes up these ideas to think through the relationship between death and subjectivity in twentieth-century African American literature and culture. The existence of a space of death in the United States cannot be denied, Holland argues, as "our boundary is filled with the blood from five hundred years of slavery, removal, and conquest and . . . our border is a constant space of death and terror" (2000, 4). In considering this space, however, the objective is not solely to discover who resides there past and present; it is also to determine why they are kept there and how to free those confined (4). Holland examines in particular the contributions of writers, artists, critics, and others who are "raising the dead, allowing them to speak, and providing them with the agency of physical bodies in order to tell the story" (4). This connection between the living and the dead is also transformative; as Holland asserts, "Perhaps the most revolutionary intervention into conversations at the margins of race, gender, and sexuality is to let the dead—those already denied a sustainable subjectivity—speak from the place that is familiar to them" (4).

The space of death and transformation, when applied to New Orleans, does not simply reveal the terror and violence that plagues poor Black com-

munities. It directs us to the shifts that are simultaneously possible as people live their lives within and through the conditions they inhabit. As Taussig argues, the space of death allows for “illumination” as much as it brings about “extinction” (1987, 4). Holland agrees, arguing that “speaking from the site of familiarity, from the place reserved for the dead, disturbs the static categories of black/white, oppressor/oppressed, creating a plethora of tensions *within* and *without* existing cultures” (2000, 4–5, emphasis in original).

As provocative as this framing is, for the women at Liberty Street it is not enough, despite the illumination, the disturbance, or even the shift in consciousness that the space of death might provide. Theirs were the three-times dead, the ones who were essentially dead to the world when they were alive, dead again when life left their physical bodies, and dead once more from the mourning the world forgot. The transformation that is attached to the space of death, therefore, must also be social and political in nature. Monica’s son Brian had been shot multiple times, targeted by three assailants who fled and had not been apprehended. His death was reported by the police department, but there was no collective outrage; it was instead another case of “black-on-black crime,” an “incident” for which the investigators did not believe robbery was a motive. The mourning was left to his mother.

Such realities require us to open up the space of death as a productive arena in which the connection between death and the determination of human value can be examined and reconfigured. The inquiry into social death, for example, typically begins with Orlando Patterson’s comparative study *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), where the slave is situated as a “socially dead person” (38) with no existence outside of the master’s violent domination.¹² Vincent Brown (2009) offers a useful critique, however, of an inquiry that has been overly focused on Patterson’s notion “as the basic condition of slavery,” an inquiry that has resulted in a lack of sufficient knowledge about the *experiences* of those who are rendered as “socially dead” (1233).¹³ To illustrate, Brown takes an example from the atrocities of the Middle Passage, describing the death in 1786 of an African woman on the slave ship *Hudibras* and the rite of mourning that ensued—performed by the other enslaved women on that vessel who protested, as much as they were able, to make sure that she was properly buried (1231). While many accounts of slavery gloss over such events, Brown argues that they “typify] the way that people who have been pronounced socially dead, that is, utterly alienated and with no social ties recognized as legitimate or binding, have often made a social world out of death itself” (1232–33). The women on the *Hudibras* are thus recast: “[They]

were not in fact the living dead; they were the mothers of gasping new societies. . . . This was first and foremost a battle over their presence in time, to define their place among ancestors, kin, friends, and future progeny” (1241).

In contemporary contexts such as New Orleans, social death continues in an urbanized world engendered by corporate capital and the neoliberal and carceral state (Cacho 2012, 4, 7). As Lisa Marie Cacho argues, human value is now made intelligible through “racialized, sexualized, spatialized, and state-sanctioned violences” whereby certain populations (namely Black, Latinx, and other communities of color—as well as those individuals who are also identified as “illegal aliens,” “gang members,” “terrorist suspects,” and the like) are *permanently* criminalized and therefore “ineligible for personhood . . . subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them” (2012, 6).

It is extraordinarily difficult to counter these effects. Outright demands for the recuperation of social value are understandable but can ultimately be disempowering—not only do they reinforce the idea that human value is achieved or bestowed rather than inherent (Cacho 2012, 7), they necessitate the disavowal of certain relationships, particularly disassociation from other devalued groups and status categories (17–18). This frequently pits criminalized groups against each other “in a way that essentially hides, disguises, and displaces American racism, stabilizing rather than subverting practices and processes of criminalization” (13). While stressing that it is important to continue to fight for basic rights and essential resources (33), Cacho proposes an “unthinkable politics,” which brings forward other kinds of value practices or the refusal of value altogether (31). This requires letting go of the outcome of struggle, thinking counterintuitively, and exploring the contexts that demonstrate why life is valuable in the first place. With this, an exploration of religious work at Liberty Street might proceed in the space of death and transformation—from violence to the determinations of human value that underpin its location and impact to the relational reconfiguration of value in the continuous raising of the dead.¹⁴

Follow the People to Church

Upon arriving in New Orleans in the late spring of 2007, I initially stayed with my father and stepmother, who were getting by in a small apartment outside of the city on the Northshore of Lake Pontchartrain. My father

in particular took refuge in his work, bracketed by the incessant drone of cable TV news. I wanted to assist with their recovery, but the fire had taken everything, there was nothing tangible *to* recover. It seemed that all we could do was to sit and wait, and for what I wasn't sure—settlement, direction, some kind of resolution? The related research with which I had charged myself provided little guidance. The project had been quickly formed, more of a reaction than an arrangement, and thus I had only a broad notion of what I would study as well as many reservations given the very fragile state in which I found the place and the people.

As my interactions broadened to include extended family, friends, and neighbors, a number of key concerns emerged that seemed relevant for understanding the production of vulnerability, the scope of disaster, and the ways in which people were responding. Chief among them was the concern about violent crime. While homicide had long been a problem, residents were reeling from a recent rash of murders, and the March for Survival had occurred just a few months earlier. This compounded the traumatic impact of the storm and colored the discourse on recovery. How had such conditions come to be, and how might they, finally, be addressed? Rebuilding the city would mean nothing, it seemed, without the concurrent remaking of its people.

I followed residents as they made their way through this uncertain terrain, and the paths they took frequently led to church. This was perhaps not surprising given the high degree of religiosity in New Orleans (over 50 percent report a religious affiliation) and the historically close relationship between religious expression, public life, and the process of social and political change.¹⁵ Most interesting, however, were the diverse ways in which religious groups addressed the issue—from providing support for those experiencing violence first hand to crafting visions for the moral recovery that many believed was necessary for the redevelopment of a nonviolent urban society.

My research thus took shape through an unscripted journey across a diverse religious landscape. I spent time with a group of white Catholics in Uptown New Orleans who were praying at a Marian shrine for peace and the conversion of sinners; I followed members of a multiracial Episcopal congregation in the Tremé who publicly named all victims of violence, regardless of who they were or what they had been doing at the time of their deaths; and I observed the work of a Vodou *sosyete* in the Bywater whose initiates, the majority of them young, white, and relatively new to the city, performed anticrime ceremonies at specific neighborhood crossroads. By the time this survey was complete, I had left the Northshore and was living in New Orleans, with my research based primarily at Liberty

Street. The religious work I observed there seemed especially significant; it suggested a slow reframing of the moral architecture of the city—one that was guided by Black residents with a contemporary vision of faith, equality, community, and peace. It was unclear what change, if any, their work would bring about. The message was certainly clear, but its reception by a broader public accustomed to listening elsewhere was undetermined.

Religious Encounters

The pastor at Liberty Street, Pastor Samuel, was a generous man and a powerful driving force. Since the late 1980s he had focused much of the church's work on the problem of violence, pervasive as it was in the community to which he ministered. He gave his full support to the group that Danielle had founded while also leading the congregation in worship, through funerals, on crime walks, to vigils, and in related outreach and advocacy work. All of these activities, however, were driven more deeply by faith in God and a commitment to the church covenant, which focused on salvation and baptism, the responsibilities of Christian living, the duties one had to the church and fellow members, and the obligation to remain engaged with the covenant and with God's word in all other places. It was to God that Sister Anne, Danielle, Monica, and the other women looked for support, and it was to God that they gave glory for the "knowledge on death" they had gained. As Danielle had made clear, "God's words have a way, of letting us know."

In studies of vulnerability, violence, and death in Black communities, the role of religion is inadequately explored. This is especially striking given the evidence we have of religion—"the encounter of human beings with the 'sacred' or 'divine'" (Lincoln and Mamiya [1990] 2003, 2)—as a central phenomenon in the realization of Black social being. The "black sacred cosmos," as Lincoln and Mamiya describe the religious worldview of African Americans (2), should thus come forward in analyses of urban conditions and processes of change, particularly in the crescent city.

Such inquiry would impel us to move, as many scholars have already done, past outdated characterizations of the Black Church as functioning either as a space of accommodation or of resistance. As Fredrick Harris (1999, 5) historically traces, the idea that African American religion operates as an "opiate" or other means of social control has Marxist roots; it suggests that religion "offer[s] African Americans a way to cope with personal and societal difficulties and thus undermin[es] their willingness to actively challenge racial inequalities." These ideas have been

gradually replaced with a more balanced perspective, described by Marla Frederick (2003, 5) as a “shift in focus from viewing black faith as one embedded in escapist theology . . . to viewing it as a faith which acknowledges the power of practitioners to not only endure, but also resist structures of oppression.” This comes closest to Lincoln and Mamiya’s ([1990] 2003, 15) dialectical model of the Black Church as a “mediating institution” in which the tension that exists between resistance and accommodation is just one set of polarities along a continuum that shifts in response to changing conditions (16).

Religious work at Liberty Street certainly had this dynamic quality, as the church attended to the shifting needs of the congregation and the community. However, religious work also had forward motion, as clergy and parishioners imagined more expansive ways of human being, relating, and dwelling. This suggests that analyses of the Black Church might also expand beyond a concern for how the church functions to a consideration of where the church might lead. The idea fits with recent scholarship that considers African American religious ideals as central frameworks for the refashioning of the world, for example, through alternative routes to “black religious consciousness” (Copeland 2013, 636), or a “*theological thinking of love*” that leads to new and freer possibilities “for living and being otherwise” (C. D. B. Walker 2013, 653, emphasis in original).¹⁶

Black Women, Religion, and Restorative Kinship

Black women, in New Orleans and elsewhere, are frequently at the center of these expansions. Their presence and powerful work, however, are not well recognized; the pathways they set are not broadly followed. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000a, 3) argues, the systemic suppression of Black women “makes it easier for dominant groups to rule . . . [and] has been critical in maintaining social inequalities” in the United States and across the African diaspora. Such suppression takes multiple forms (economic, political, and ideological), and while Black women counter in a wide variety of ways, their concerns remain subordinate to the agendas of white male elites, white feminists, and a Black intellectualism with a “prominent masculinist bias” (7). I thus follow Collins in a corrective centering, to bring Black women’s experience and knowledge to the forefront, at the very least in scholarly inquiry (2000b, 44).¹⁷

Especially relevant for my project is the centering of African American religious women. As Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (2001, 10) asserts, religion is central to the African American experience, “and black women’s activities

and commitments form the backbone or indispensable central framework on which every expression of black religion survives.” Judith Casselberry thus summarizes the contributions of historical studies on Black women’s religious (primarily Christian) work and organization (Casselberry 2017, 3–4; see also Collier-Thomas 1997, 2010; Higginbotham 1993; Weisenfeld 1997). Such inquiries focus more on the politics of religious work and less on religion itself. However, more recent ethnographic studies shed valuable light on religious experience without detaching it from persistent conditions of oppression or limiting it to standard time frames and settings (Gilkes 2001; Frederick 2003; Abrums 2010; Day 2012; Manigault-Bryant 2014; Casselberry 2017).¹⁸

Casselberry’s (2017) own ethnographic study examines Black women’s religious labor at a Pentecostal church in present-day Harlem. Focusing on the contemporary nature of women’s social and religious lives within the still gendered hierarchies of the church, Casselberry finds “an unmediated relationship with Jesus” at the center of women’s negotiations of religious and institutional authority (171). The networks and “women-driven patriarchies” these women create are thus emboldened by the knowledge that like Jesus, women “have the power to submit” (171). Casselberry’s broader intent, however, is to explore “the circumstances of producing a *holy Black female personhood* within faith communities” (5, emphasis added). In this way, women’s religious work is fundamentally about their development as “authentic religious subject[s]” while growing the church as institution and Kingdom of God (172).

In New Orleans, the production of a holy Black female personhood was connected more directly to women’s ability to mediate the space of death, and they did so in ways that reconfigured standard boundaries of time, place, and existence. For example, the women at Liberty Street worked steadily to address what Danielle described as “kin pain,” referring to the pain that women experienced following the violent severing of relatedness, which for these women occurred most directly in the deaths of their children. The labor they performed, therefore, was about repairing family, social, and spiritual bonds—a *restorative kinship* that affirmed value among the living, between the living and the dead, on earth, and in God’s eternal kingdom.

I develop this framing within an expanded field of kinship studies that now includes forms of relatedness far beyond kinship’s traditionally biological conceptualization. This reinvigorated inquiry brings diverse forms of recognition, connection, and care to the forefront while also revealing the persistent processes of invisibility, disconnection, and neglect alongside and against which they work. Sarah Franklin and Susan

McKinnon (2001, 7), for example, examine how kinship “can be put to use in ways that destabilize the ‘obviousness’ of its conventional referents, while expanding the scope of its purchase.” The notion of “relatedness” emerges out of this endeavor. Janet Carsten (2000, 4) develops the term “in opposition to, or alongside, ‘kinship’ in order to signal an openness to indigenous idioms of being related rather than a reliance on pre-given definitions.”

Regarding the women at Liberty Street, a consideration of relatedness creates space for an examination of family and social rupture as well as the connections that women forge through outreach and fellowship, in mourning, and in their overall raising of the dead. Relatedness also reveals an important extension of these processes beyond traditional realms, for example, in earthly as well as heavenly dimensions where connectivity, value, and eternal life are assured. Two processes are especially relevant here. The first, as Carsten (2007, 1) again argues, is the intersection that exists between loss, the forms of relatedness that emerge in such situations, political processes, and the imagining and crafting of the future.¹⁹ The second process is the development, frequently at this juncture, of new strands of connectivity. The restorative kinship I frame is thus “co-poietic” in the sense that Robert Desjarlais (2016, 15) describes, constituting a “collaborative fashioning and unfashioning of self and other, as well as . . . a poiesis-on-behalf-of-another.” As Desjarlais asserts, “the call for the living to labor on behalf of the deceased makes such efforts a matter of care, responsibility, and honor, implying an ethics of mourning” (15). In Central City and in other places where disconnection and rupture are intensified, these forms of relatedness are also deeply political, with poiesis connected to processes of healing and justice. As the women at Liberty Street raised the dead, they also situated them (and each other) in valued relation—as some mother’s son, some father’s daughter, and all God’s children. As Gilkes (2001, 140) argues, identifications such as these form “an intergenerational and inter-gender basis for unity” signified by an assertion of personhood within a Black sacred cosmos attuned to freedom in response to death and in the (continued) context of racial and other forms of oppression (Lincoln and Mamiya [1990] 2003, 4).²⁰

Failure as Fieldwork

These ideas, while compelling, did not fully address the reservations I still had about living and working in New Orleans. Even after the scope of my project was clear, the research, especially my role and presumed authority

in carrying it out, raised a long-standing disciplinary and personal concern about the ethics of fieldwork in precarious urban settings. While extensive scholarship over the past several decades has refined methods of knowledge production and dissemination, a troubling characterization of the fieldworker, set out for unfamiliar and even “exotic” settings, still persists. Laurence Ralph brings this concern forward, citing Victor Rios (2011) to describe the care urban ethnographers must take so as not to rehearse what Rios describes as “‘the jungle-book trope,’ the notion that the researcher got ‘lost in the wild,’ the people of ‘the wild’ subsequently adopted her, put her on a pedestal, and she has ‘lived to tell civilization about it’” (Ralph 2015, 442). One cannot assume that today’s ethnographers know better and are able to successfully navigate these pitfalls, and the fallout is high if they do not, as detailed in both Rios’s and Ralph’s critique of Alice Goffman’s (2014) work (Ralph 2015; Rios 2015).

Such situations highlight more broadly the dilemmas of speaking “for” or “with” others (Alcoff 1991), a dilemma with extra weight in already vulnerable communities and especially in violent, postdisaster, or war-torn settings (Howell 1990; Daniel 1996; Gill 2004). While expectations for an immersed experience of fieldwork still exist, I, or any other researcher, cannot expect to be welcomed into such communities without question or concern. Nor can we imagine that our research will have only a positive impact for the already overburdened people we encounter or for the long-standing social issues and problems they face. My own instinct, therefore, was to tread lightly—I did my best to make sure I had permission and whenever possible I took a back seat in proceedings in order to minimize my intrusion.

This was a fine line to walk given the disciplinary associations that continue to be made between the depth of one’s immersion and the quality and application of resulting data. To what extent can and should researchers immerse in such settings? How do we learn from the encounters we are permitted to have? When reciprocal relationships form, to what degree do they reflect the validity of research findings? How, in turn, do we assess findings when these kinds of relationships do *not* develop?

I raise these questions as I think back on an experience of fieldwork that was very difficult. While I was supported by the close relationships I already had, I nonetheless landed in New Orleans as something of an outsider. This, plus the state of the post-Katrina city, made my research challenging to organize and carry out. Appointments were made then suddenly canceled, locations were hard to pin down, and in some cases my own follow-through was poor, overcautious as I was about the added

stress my queries might cause and stressed myself from trying so hard, in such precarious circumstances, to do no additional harm.

Nonetheless, over a period of two years, from 2007 to 2009, I came to know the members of a diverse community of faith, developing most of my connections at Liberty Street, especially with the women in the support group. I relied on participant observation and interviews as primary methods of data collection. This work, however, was fundamentally about listening, and I tried to do so with as little presumption as possible (Angel-Ajani 2004, 142). The narratives and testimonies that resulted were extended and full; their details of disaster, violence, death, and mourning frequently elicited strong emotions in both the sharer and the recipient. I did my best to structure these encounters safely by informing participants about the potential risks of my inquiry, by arranging for support during and following interview sessions, and by making sure participants understood their right to disengage. I also followed up to make sure that people were comfortable with what they had revealed, although the need to tell one's story, to testify, seemed to override most concerns about its translation or broadcast.

My work primarily took place within religious settings, but it also extended to the surrounding community, as participants brought me into their homes, workplaces, and to the public sites they claimed around town. I structured my time in accordance with their scheduled services, prayer groups, vigils, demonstrations, community meetings, and other related activities. The conversations I had in these settings were informal but equally rich, and they broadened the scope of my inquiry beyond the members of a particular congregation to the community leaders, teachers, law enforcement personnel, and city officials with whom they were also involved. Finally, some of my research took place in the archives, where I studied the history and mission of specific religious organizations and traced the development, decline, and recovery of surrounding neighborhoods.

In the long period of analysis and writing that ensued, my data nonetheless seemed diffuse and thin. As George Marcus observes in an article on the sharing of fieldwork stories, anthropologists do not talk about their fieldwork experiences as much as they used to, particularly when research is carried out within complex and increasingly interdisciplinary domains (Marcus 2006, 114). In fact, contemporary fieldwork "may no longer be very ethnographic in the traditional way that it is imagined" (115). While valuable findings still emerge, they often do so through an extensive period of *postfieldwork* reflection. In this way, "it is the fieldwork that provides

stimulation and ideas, but is relatively ‘thin’ in materials, while it is the diffuse efforts to come to terms with the lacks and failures of fieldwork afterward that provide the richest and ‘thickest’ materials” (115).

While I am somewhat relieved by this view, I wonder about the implications, particularly given the emphasis on postfieldwork analysis and the relationship that sets up between the fieldwork and what must be salvaged from it. To what extent might a salvage ethnography be the new norm for the study of the increasingly precarious urban world? What can we expect such an inquiry to generate? That is, what does fieldwork in the crescent city look like, how does it fail, and what might that failure reveal? In coming to terms with the failures of my own fieldwork, I listened to and transcribed interviews, read and reread my field notes, and delved more deeply into related geography and history. It was in this process that Liberty Street was confirmed as a primary site of analysis, the diffuse nature of my data reflecting the scattered state of the recovering city and the practices of Black women emerging to direct an otherwise drifting project and world.

I have organized the book to bring these revelations forward in the clearest way possible. Following the introduction, the book is divided into three parts—an arc that extends from the histories of vulnerability and violence in the Black urban delta to the legacies and current frameworks of Black love at Liberty Street to the processes of restorative kinship at work in the raising of the dead. Each begins with a short “message” in the spirit of a pastoral or lay message one would receive in Baptist worship service. These have two purposes. The first is to position the experiences of Black women as the central framing of the book, the gateway through which one enters into broader context and explanation. The second is to facilitate a sense of connection, or at least recognition, an essential perspective as the reader comes to know and follow these women through the text. The book is also anchored by a series of photographs that provide a visual point of entry for the messages and the material that follows. Rather than use images to illustrate specific locations or events, my intention is to *let in light* at key moments. This is a rough play on the idea of an illuminated manuscript, and I hope it will enhance and not prescribe the reader’s own discovery, with greater access to sacred meaning across the histories, stories, and ideas the book contains.

One final yet central failing, of heart and body, explains the process of my work and the final substance of the book. My fieldwork took place alongside my family’s recovery from disaster, and five years later, as I struggled to make sense of my findings, my father passed away. While his death resulted from a specific illness, it was not disconnected from the impact of

flood and fire—a physical, social, and emotional loss from which he never fully recovered. My writing was thus unexpectedly furthered through my own experience of death and mourning.

Renato Rosaldo, in the introduction to *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* ([1989] 2001), describes the insight such experience provides, referring specifically to the sudden and very tragic death of his wife, which took place during a period of fieldwork in the Philippines while researching the relationship between bereavement and rage among Ilongot headhunters. Writing about this fieldwork some fifteen months after his wife's passing, Rosaldo understands his personal experience as “a vehicle” for making the qualities of Ilongot grief more accessible to his readers. The writing itself became simultaneously “an act of mourning, a personal report, and a critical analysis of anthropological method” (Rosaldo [1989] 2001, 11, emphasis in original).

My own work is similarly attuned—a way to reflect on my father's life and death while considering how the experience brought me closer to the conditions and responses I observed in New Orleans.²¹ Such comparisons are tricky, as personal experience does not necessarily give greater access to the lives of others. Nonetheless, this particular failing has been insightful not just in terms of feeling and thus better seeing the contours of sorrow but through a greater awareness of the aspects of humanity revealed in the process of loss and recovery. This insight is developed by tracing the connections between what we have experienced and what we believe, who we are and what we value, and what this affirms about the kinds of awakenings we inherit and inspire. Certainly, this seems a central part of the “good grief” that Sister Anne described.

In many ways, therefore, the book remains a work in progress, reminiscent of Scheper-Hughes's (1993, 28) notion of “good enough ethnography,” where in perilous times anthropologists “struggle to do the best we can with the limited resources we have at hand—our ability to listen and observe carefully, emphatically, and compassionately.” Bourgois and Schonberg (2009, 298) call for a “good-enough *applied* anthropology” (emphasis added), grounded in critical theory and working to alleviate suffering, particularly for the socially vulnerable. I am not yet sure whether this book is either, which does not make it not worth sharing but perhaps loosens the grip on its determination just slightly so that its methods and findings can flounder and fail in unexpected and perhaps informative ways, as life and death in the crescent city would suggest.