Slavery's Metropolis

New Orleans is an iconic city, which was once located at the crossroads of early America and the Atlantic World. New Orleans became a major American metropolis as its slave population exploded; in the early nineteenth century, slaves made up one-third of the urban population.

In contrast to our typical understanding of rural, localized, isolated bondage in the emergent Deep South, daily experiences of slavery in New Orleans were global, interconnected, and transient. *Slavery's Metropolis* uses slave circulations through New Orleans between 1791 and 1825 to map the social and cultural history of enslaved men and women and the rapidly shifting city, nation, and world in which they lived. Investigating emigration from the Caribbean to Louisiana during the Haitian Revolution, commodity flows across urban–rural divides, multiracial amusement places, the local jail, and freedom-seeking migrations to Trinidad following the War of 1812, it remaps the history of slavery in modern urban society.

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Slavery's Metropolis

Unfree Labor in New Orleans during the Age of Revolutions

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For my mother,
Clo Dunn Johnson
(1957–2015)

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"Drowned in the blood of its citizens"

In August 2005, New Orleans officials decided that a mandatory evacuation order applied to people, not prisoners. As the Orleans Parish Prison filled with floodwaters, armed deputies escorted incarcerated citizens from locked jail cells to an interstate highway that, days before, conveyed relatively more privileged residents to safer places. In time I recognized what I call their "confined cosmopolitanism" – bound prisoners detained on a highway that connects Florida to California – but that insight came later. At the time my concerns were more prosaic: Are there my loved ones among the floating corpses? Which cousins are in jail right now? What did eight feet of water do to my home? Will class end early so I can piece together my shattered world from this bench in Washington Square Park?

New Orleans is my home place. I love that city, and I am proud to call it home. I missed Hurricane Katrina by about a week, as I had moved back to New York to prepare for the start of my second year of graduate coursework. As others worried the city would not come back, I worried it would. The poverty and inequality that others "discovered" during Katrina has defined black life in New Orleans and places like it for a very long time. By the mid-1960s, New Orleans "was one of the most impoverished, most unequal, most violent, and least educated places in the United States." Three-fourths of the city's black residents lived below the poverty line, while nearly half of the city's income went to the top 20 percent of the population. Public health and education were abysmal, and the murder rate was double the national average. The 1970s saw shifts thanks to the work of local organizers and War on Poverty programs, but in the 1980s the retrenchment of public will and funding under the Reagan administration and the bust of two major industries – oil and

the port – left the local economy dependent on tourism and the service economy. White flight to the suburbs deprived the city of its tax base, and substance abuse, street violence, and mass incarceration ripped families apart. For most poor and black residents, things were far from easy in "The City that Care Forgot."[1]

As in the paradigmatic post-industrial US cities – Detroit, Chicago, Newark – urban communities in New Orleans have been devastated by wealth inequality, the War on Drugs, the prison industrial complex, and substance abuse. The illicit economy offers what legal capitalism does not, so men and women become trapped in cycles of violence, incarceration, poverty, and recidivism. As of 2012, Louisiana imprisoned 1619 inmates per 100,000 residents, a rate higher than that of any other state in the United States and "nearly five times Iran's, 13 times China's and 20 times Germany's." Louisiana's for-profit prisons enrich local law enforcement officials even as its two major cities – New Orleans and Baton Rouge – lead national murder statistics every year. And imprisonment disproportionately limits black men's lives: "About 5,000 black men from New Orleans are doing state prison time, compared with 400 white men from the city."[2] The murder rates are equally grim. In 2012, the city registered 193 murders in a population just shy of 363,000 residents.[3] Each death is a devastation, one that leaves traumatized partners, parents, children, and communities to shoulder a desperate grief.

Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures exposed the poverty that neoliberalism holds in store for many more in the years to come. But it also exposed the grit that persons of color and poor people across the

[1] Kent B. Germany, "The Politics of Poverty and History: Racial Inequality and the Long Prelude to Katrina," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (December 2007): 743–751, 744. See also Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

[2] Cindy Chang, "Louisiana is the World's Prison Capital," *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), May 13, 2012. On the rise of mass incarceration, see Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010); Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power After Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[3] Report, "Louisiana: Offenses Known to Law Enforcement by City, 2012," Crime in the United States, 2012, Table 8, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), available at www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2012/crime-in-the-u.s.-2012/tables/8tabledatadecpdf/table-8-state-cuts/table_8_offenses_known_to_law_enforcement_by_louisiana_by_city_2012.xls (accessed March 21, 2014).

Global South have long marshaled to survive. Even the guns of private security forces and the market pressures of predatory lending and gentrification did not stop the city's dispossessed citizens from claiming their right to return. The Free Agents Brass Band spoke for me and many others when they declared, "I'm so glad we're back home/I'm so glad we're back home/We made it through that water/That muddy, muddy, water." And in January 2007, the late antiviolence activist and my beloved pastor Rev. John C. Raphael, Jr. proclaimed before protestors of many races and faiths gathered on the steps of City Hall that "A city that could not be drowned in the waters of a storm will not be drowned in the blood of its citizens."[4]

During the Age of Revolution, which witnessed the establishment of racialized citizenship, the emergence of capitalism, and the expansion of chattel slavery, people of African descent harnessed the power of streets and streams to survive a deadly epoch. Generations later, people of all backgrounds are working to transform bloody streets into places of justice and peace. In the present, as in the past, the place of black people in New Orleans remains contested. Their stories remind us that this nation's prosperity rested on the bedrock of exploitation and violence, but they also remind us that pretensions to unbounded power have been – and must be – checked by the determination of the defiant.

[4] Stacey Plaisance, "New Orleans Residents March on City Hall," *Washington Post*, January 11, 2007. Though Raphael was the son of New Orleans' first black police officer post-desegregation, was himself a police officer, and was a member of a family of police officers, "antiviolence" for him was not synonymous with "anti-criminal."

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Abbreviations

AANO	Archdiocese of New Orleans Office of Archives, New Orleans, LA
AHR	*American Historical Review*
GRO	Gloucestershire Record Office, Gloucester Archives, Gloucestershire, UK
HNOC	Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA
LSA	Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, LA
LSU	Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA
NANO	Notarial Archives, New Orleans, LA
NOC	New Orleans Collection at New-York Historical Society, New York, NY
NOPL	Louisiana Division, City Archives & Special Collections, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA
NYHS	New-York Historical Society, New York, NY
NYPL	Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY
THC	The Heartman Collection, 1794–1897, Xavier University, New Orleans, LA.
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, UK
TU	Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA
UWI	West Indiana & Special Collections, University of the West Indies at St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

MAP 1 Map of New Orleans and its Atlantic World, ca. 1803.