

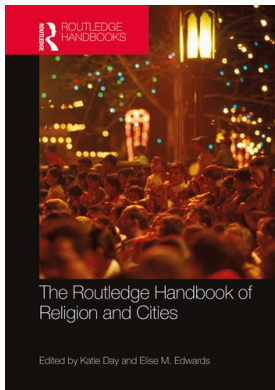
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10

WHO DEFINES THE RELIGIOUS
NARRATIVE FOR JUSTICE?The old guard meets the avant-garde
in Nashville—the “it” city*Teresa L. Smallwood*

Situated in the deep south, Nashville, Tennessee is the home of the Grand Ole Opry. The Grand Ole Opry is a symbol of almost a century of country music, conservative politics, and separatism. North Carolina organized Davidson County as a political unit in 1784 with land grants to soldiers in 640-acre increments after the Revolutionary War. Chartered in 1806, Nashville is flanked by the Cumberland River, which gave the city its first trade boom. Land ownership in the form of large plantations produced tobacco and cotton through forced labor. Farmers and planters formed the gentry as the economic influencers of the region even after the introduction of the steamboat to the rapidly growing economy.¹ For the next 100 years, Nashville added churches, infrastructure, government, and jails. The city developed around a particular racialized *venire facias juratores*—a group of folks commonly known as the gentry who decidedly established the borders seen and unseen. This article will explore religion and the city from the lens of grassroots organizing by amplifying the voice of the people for justice in contradistinction to the voice of the gentry in city governance. It shows that, when the people have a mind to work, as the prophet Nehemiah propounds, the will of the people will harness itself into direct action for justice.

The historical dynamics in Nashville stem from a post-Civil War ideology of othering and belonging. In 1907 *The Nashville Banner* ran an editorial cartoon that captures the phenomenon, which signifies this post-war ideology and the emergence of the gentry.² Nashville—presently referred to as the “it” city,³ is portrayed in the twentieth-century cartoon as a white female, a part of the gentry. Tear-drops flow from her eyes and on her face a black spot is plastered with the words “Black Bottom” inscribed. On her hat appear the words “Miss Nashville,” depicting her as a debutante of the Nashville gentry. Her contention is that the area derogatorily known as “Black Bottom,” where the poor lived, which at that time likely consisted of blacks, poor whites, and Jews, should have been demolished and removed. The Nashville elite planned to have the city build a park in its place. While the effort to build the park failed, the John Seigenthaler Pedestrian Bridge was built, proving the long-standing practice in the city to cordon undesirables into shanties away from the elite. This narrative is one among many in Nashville pointing to the racially charged historical fangs of an ophidian structure (see Figure 10.1).



Figure 10.1 “Miss Nashville.”⁴This 1907 editorial cartoon from *The Nashville Banner* depicts the city as a woman with a dark blemish on her cheek, and asks what can be done to remove it.

Source: Nashville Public Library Special Collections

Racial tensions in the city ebb and flow most notably around issues of place and space. The Jefferson Street corridor, located in North Nashville, once served as Nashville’s black mecca. The home to Fisk University and Meharry Medical College, the north Nashville scene once thrived with historically black businesses such as entertainment venues, barber shops, beauty salons, and restaurants. Black churches lace nearly every major thoroughfare in ZIP Code 37208. Plans for urban renewal in the 1960s positioned Interstate 40 down the middle of North Nashville’s Jefferson Street. The placement of I-40 leveled a blow to what was then the black business center of the city and it wreaked havoc on “African-American business and culture,” generally.⁵ North Nashville citizens formed a steering committee consisting of residents, business professionals, and students to fight against the placement of I-40 in the heart of the thriving black business section. The interstate created literal dead ends cutting off the flow of commerce to the area. The steering committee brought a lawsuit against the city, to no avail, alleging the placement of the interstate was based upon racial bias.⁶

Nashville holds an abundance of rich history around the Civil Rights Movement, Jim Crow laws, and the Nashville Christian Leadership Council. The Nashville sit-ins, which lasted from February 13 to May 10, 1960, were part of a nonviolent direct-action campaign to end racial

segregation at lunch counters in the downtown area. The sit-in campaign was coordinated by the Nashville Student Movement, Nashville Christian Leadership Council, and Nashville's African American community. All of these entities worked together to lay the foundation for dismantling racial segregation.⁷ Nashville holds a unique place in history as it relates to that legacy. Victor Anderson opines “gone are the days when democracy embraced a liberal progressive spirit such as defined the voices of public theology in the past.”⁸ Anderson notes that in the absence of the “giants,” the “faithful ordinary”⁹ must fill the lacuna created. Giants like Martin Luther King, Jr., protestant public theologians Paul Tillich, the Niebuhrs, as well as German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer are all gone. The faithful ordinary—those who answer the call of justice to avenge the wrongs created by biased governance, live their faith in the public sphere. The faithful ordinary engage religion as orientation. Charles H. Long opined “orientation refers to the manner in which a culture, society, or person becomes aware of its place in the temporal spatial order of things.”¹⁰ Religion as orientation, according to Long, “expresses creativity and critique in the face of the given order of creation.”¹¹ A brief study and a (re)membrance of this history proves vital to the understanding and the recent shaping of a new and powerful narrative for the marginalized in Nashville. This article will examine what can happen in cities when faithful “people have a mind to work.” Having a mind to work connotes a symbiosis formed from common purpose and commitments within community. It refers to the spirit of a people to correct injustice through collective will.

The old guard

A black Vanderbilt University Divinity School student, James Morris Lawson, Jr., was the architect of the nonviolent direct-action training for area activists in the 1960s. Lawson worked to train local activists in the Ghandhian technique of nonviolent resistance, which he studied in India. His work met with opposition from Vanderbilt University, resulting in Chancellor Harvie Branscomb expelling him from the Divinity School. The Lawson expulsion “pleased powerful board member James Stahlman, publisher of the *The Nashville Banner*, which was editorializing stoutly against Lawson’s off-campus agitations.”¹² As a member of the gentry, Stahlman exercised power and influence over the Chancellor of Vanderbilt University; because he was a powerful businessman and print media mogul, he controlled the dominant narrative to a great extent.¹³ Lawson’s expulsion commandeered national attention and spawned a protest by Divinity School faculty and students alike. When Divinity School faculty resigned as a result of Lawson’s unfair expulsion, faculty and students formed a picket line. The University capitulated and Lawson was reinstated.

The Nashville sit-ins proceeded with students trained by James Lawson. When students were arrested for sitting at the lunch counter of the local Kress, Woolworth’s, and McClellan stores, several NAACP lawyers, among them Z. Alexander Looby, represented them. Looby’s house, which he occupied with his wife in North Nashville, was subsequently bombed while the two slept. The bomb caused extensive damage to other homes and structures in the immediate vicinity, including blowing out as many as 100 windows in a Meharry Medical College building just across the street, which catapulted 2,500 black students, activists, clergy, and concerned citizens to the streets later that same day. Though this bombing case was never solved, it sparked a silent protest march in the streets from North Nashville to City Hall. Students and community members marched in silence until they reached the steps of City Hall, where Diane Nash confronted Mayor Ben West. This confrontation led to the desegregation of lunch counters in the city.¹⁴

The avant-garde

Every generation sees the emergence of the faithful ordinary. The courageous example of Diane Nash in the 1960s inspires current young adult activism like that of Rasheedat Fetuga of Gideon's Army. Orientated toward *doing justice*, the young people of this generation seek fairness and equality in the structures of society designated to be the gatekeepers. In 2017, structural barriers to equal treatment and opportunity within the economic, legal, educational, and residential components of Nashville communities served as a backdrop for the kind of nonviolent direct-action giving rise to a community committed to placing accountability over police and to protecting the vulnerable from the machinations of the gentry. On the economic front, classism confines the marginalized communities to low wages, unemployment, and dependency upon governmental subsistence. The legal system is statistically guilty of disparate treatment toward black and brown citizens, which demonstrates a race-based animus in arrests and deportations. The *Driving While Black Report*¹⁵ released by Gideon's Army on October 25, 2016 shows conclusively that the Metro Nashville Police Department (MNPd) is guilty of turning the streets of Nashville into a racial battleground with community policing serving as a front for racial harassment by law enforcement. The report, virtually ignored by those in Nashville's government, paints a picture eerily similar to what the old guard faced in the 1960s.

The *Driving While Black Report* sounded the clarion call for students, clergy, community activists, organizers, and concerned citizens to pay closer attention to the disparate treatment of racialized minorities on the streets of Nashville. It points out the disparity that racialized minorities in Nashville deal with daily. The report, over 213 pages, demonstrates that racial profiling is a method in force and effect within MNPd.

For instance, in zone 821, which is located in the Midtown Hills Precinct, [located in ZIP Code 37203] 7.1% of black men who are stopped are subjected to a consent search compared to 0.8% of white men who are stopped. The rate for black men is 787.5% greater than the rate for white men while officers are also 5.8% less likely to find evidence [of a crime] on black men than white men.¹⁶

Fewer than four months after this alarm sound, the murder-by-police of Jocques Scott Clemmons signaled the need for concerted community action. From the lawsuit filed by Clemmons' estate, the officer chased Mr. Clemmons.

On February 10, 2017, Mr. Jocques Scott Clemmons was fatally shot in the back by Metropolitan Nashville Police Department (MNPd) Officer Joshua Lippert following an alleged traffic stop. Initial statements released by the MNPd asserted that Mr. Clemmons assaulted Officer Lippert before Mr. Clemmons was shot and killed. In a widely reported video released to the public on February 14, 2017, however, surveillance footage revealed, in fact, no physical altercation had occurred.¹⁷

A video of the murder-by-police confirmed what the *Driving While Black Report* concluded; MNPd routinely harassed black folks. This time, it resulted in the death of yet another young black male. Moreover, the police lied about how the death occurred. It was clear that the Metro Nashville Police Department could not be trusted, particularly when the overwhelming evidence was that it would always protect one of its own, even if it meant falsifying public records. It was systemic. The community was outraged. Jocques "was driving through the James A. Cayce Homes, the largest public housing complex in Nashville."¹⁸ Initially built for white families in 1941, Cayce Homes became the place for black families who were gentrified "due to

discriminatory lending practices that allowed whites to purchase single family homes and move out of low income housing. Cayce's residents went from all white to mostly black" in the span of 30 years.¹⁹ Jocques Clemmons' girlfriend and son lived there.

Part of the momentum for the public outcry at this murder-by-police is that previous killings of young black men over the years had yielded, through public demand, that police be equipped with dashcams and body cameras. Though the city had approved such expenditures, the Police Chief, Michael Steven ("Steve") Anderson, circumvented the issue at every turn. Clemmons' mother, a devout Christian, was determined to seek justice and put her faith into action. At a rally inside the lobby of City Hall, Sheila Clemmons Lee declared that the "blood" is on the hands of the city for every death at the hands of police.²⁰ Her statement echoes Ezekiel 3:18 and served as a warning to city officials to take her position seriously. Motivated by her own orientation toward justice and fairness, Clemmons Lee vowed to act every week until she was heard. This tenacity reflects the nature of a people who have a mind to work. Her persistence inspired many to stand with her. In the weeks, months, and years after her son's senseless killing, Sheila Clemmons Lee and her family members accompanied by friends, concerned citizens, activists, and a growing cadre of support held routine vigils outside the police precinct. According to Dr. Sekou Franklin, "some of the anchors on the activist side had built up a network of indigenous folks who had long-standing relationships with each other."²¹ Community oversight had been contemplated for many years by community activists. There was a consistent call for police accountability over multiple decades spanning the service of the current police chief and his predecessors. Now, it was imminent. The culture of police brutality, particularly toward black and brown people, was well established. The difference in this moment was the will of the people. The people joined forces with Sheila Clemmons Lee, who formed the "Justice for Jocques Coalition."

The first two weeks after the shooting death of Jocques Clemmons, Black Lives Matter Nashville, under the leadership of co-founder, D.J. Hudson, a Vanderbilt Divinity School graduate, canvassed Cayce Homes to speak to residents and build solidarity with the people. Jocques' death synced with other advocacy and activism work done by the group on issues across the spectrum of social and racial justice in Nashville. Meanwhile, Sheila Clemmons Lee, through her Coalition, stormed Metro Nashville City Council demanding "Justice for Jocques!" 11 days after his death. Calling for community oversight at that Council meeting, and emboldened by widespread community presence chanting for justice, they disrupted the city's narrative in ritual fashion. Their chant "no justice, no peace" fueled their litany: "It is our duty to fight for our freedom; we have nothing to lose but our chains." Their song, inspired by Sweet Honey in the Rock, "we who believe in freedom cannot rest, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes," serves as the liturgical thread for their direct action. The Metro council, forced to grant the protestors a platform to speak, yielded to the will of the people.²² In those defining moments of this movement, religion as orientation motivated the faithful ordinary to organize themselves around the principle of justice. They sought freedom from the tyranny of domination in the streets of Nashville for their family and neighbors. The gathering together of the faithful ordinary in this way formulated a "contact zone" in the Longian sense. A "contact zone" is a way of describing the "spaces of inquiry" that provide "the basis for creativity and critique" within the "temporal-geographic area."²³

As her faith held strong in the power to effectuate change, Sheila Clemmons Lee experienced the death of another young black man similarly murdered by police. Police Officer Andrew Delke, a white officer, fatally shot Daniel Hambrick the evening of July 26, 2018. From the lawsuit filed by the decedent's estate, officer Delke randomly selected Daniel Hambrick to stop and harass. When Hambrick stopped his car, he ran. Delke pursued him and shot him

from behind. Bullets landed in his left side torso, heart, lungs, back, brain, and spine.²⁴ Dashcams and body cameras were noticeably absent. Both were approved by Metro council as stop-gap measures for the fact-gathering component of these types of investigations. The fact that the Nashville Chief of Police stalled their full implementation gave the community pause in light of the deaths of Clemmons and Hambrick—two young black men.

Jo Johnston Avenue, where the Hambrick murder occurred, is located in one of two primary areas of Nashville where concentrated poverty, lack of opportunity, and over-policing hover. The Fraternal Order of Police and MNPD fought the legislation for a Community Oversight Board vociferously. By January 2018, the legislation to create a Community Oversight Board, submitted to Metro Nashville City Council, died by technicality. Eventually, the Coalition was forced to seek a Charter Referendum in order to secure the matter for the ballot. A Charter Referendum is particularly difficult because it requires a “yes” vote from 27 out of 40 members of the Metro Nashville City Council or it must garner signatures equivalent to 10% of the number of votes cast from the previous general election through a petition drive. Rev. Sekou Franklin drafted the first iteration of the Community Oversight legislation. His work triggered further study and revision of the legislation supported by numerous activist groups throughout the city, including Black Lives Matter Nashville, NAACP Criminal Justice Task force, Tennessee State conference of NAACP, Gideon’s Army, Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), Democracy Nashville—Democratic Communities, Music City Riders United, Nashville Peacemakers, Urban EpiCenter, SONG—Southerners On New Ground, and NOAH—Nashville Organized for Action and Hope, whose member Kyle Mothershead, a civil rights attorney, finalized the legislation. The final draft that was submitted to the Metro Nashville City Council in mid-March 2017 was endorsed by the Interdenominational Ministers’ Fellowship (IMF), New Covenant Christian Church, Clark Memorial United Methodist Church, United Autoworkers Local 137, Barbara Sanders, Synergetic Solutions Blog, and No Exceptions Prison Collective.²⁵ The Coalition, operating as a united front under the moniker Community Oversight Now, continued to build rapport with community members. Momentum grew at a rapid rate and by March 2017, a final draft of the legislation was submitted to Nashville Metro Council.²⁶ Though that measure was considered “dead on arrival,” Community Oversight Now persisted. On April 4, 2018, 50 years from the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Coalition had secured in excess of 8,000 signatures for a Charter Referendum.²⁷ The measure went before the electorate in the November 2018 General Election and won by a landslide 59% of the votes cast.²⁸ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee at the Lorraine Motel April 4, 1968. The significance of this date was not lost on the Coalition. With two murders by police looming in the shadows of a community’s memory, Dr. King’s death, another state-sanctioned killing from a protest perspective, served as a stark reminder of the gravity of the moment.

King’s death continues to spark interest around the horrific trend in American culture to brutally murder, defile, and destroy black genius. That Dr. King was a genius of social change is virtually undisputed. Yet whether there is a historical, sociological, or moral connection between King’s death and the recent rash of murders of black bodies, particularly by the state apparatus, presents a question of serious import for both scholars and community activists alike. Are there connections between the lack of protection of black genius and the deliberate killing of black genius? African Americans have experienced prolonged trauma in the form of kidnappings, lynching, bombings, dismemberment, caged isolation, and, most particularly, what social scientist Orlando Patterson names “social death.”²⁹ What causes this phenomenon and what sustained it throughout the history of Africans in America? Patterson names two conceptions of social death. Where one had no social existence outside the dominant power structure, one was considered to be “socially dead,” or if one was “ritually incorporated as the permanent enemy—the

domestic enemy,' because [one] was the product of a hostile, alien culture,' one was considered socially dead.³⁰ The latter definition serves as the locus of meaning for the hostility that black bodies experience in the face of murderous police brutality. Arguably, because they are thought of as products of an alien culture, killing them appears justifiable to police. If one is socially dead, one's physical death has no value.

Reflecting upon the circumstances of Dr. King's assassination, of note is the theory that many critical thinkers continue to hold: Dr. King was murdered by the "nation state" through a conspiratorial machination by which James Earl Ray was tethered and marked as scapegoat. Dr. King's death caused feelings of despair and hopelessness to surface within the black communities of this nation because the police did not serve and protect one so revered. The suspicion around the actual perpetrator and whether justice has been served presents an eerily parallel view of the numerous black deaths in recent times at the hands of the police, an apparatus of the state. The circumstances surrounding the recent police killings of black genius across the nation point to black communities' continued distrust of police departments. Black communities are traumatized by the ineffable lack of response to these recent deaths within American jurisprudence. Black communities rioted in frustration at the death of Dr. King, and nearly every attempt to seek justice in the criminal justice system for the lives lost in recent times leaves families hurt and disillusioned. The multifaceted effect of this growing trend in the face of massacres such as that in Charleston, South Carolina at Mother Emanuel Church evidence the conspiratorial nature of this phenomenon, where nine faithful, law-abiding citizens were fatally gunned down and where Dylann Storm Roof, the perpetrator, declared that his mission was "to start a race war." This is particularly so when one compares the arrest of James Earl Ray, who was ushered into America by white police officers after extradition, wearing a bulletproof vest and "safety pants" to protect him, and the arrest of Dylann Storm Roof, the convicted murderer at Mother Emmanuel Church, who was taken to Burger King for a burger and fries after his arrest.³¹ Moreover, the recent show of bravado and murderous insolence in Charlottesville, VA by torch-bearing neo-Nazis, white nationalists, white supremacists such as the KKK and their sympathizers, adds inflection to the voice of ideologues perpetuating a belief that gunning down black genius is an overarching ethos of American patriotic values. Consequently, this ideology seeps into governmental structures and produces racist governance in the areas of city planning, financial opportunities, infrastructure amenities, growth, and development. Blight and neglect tend to follow the residential areas of racialized minorities in Nashville.

Legislatively, poor Nashville communities tend to receive far less in governmental support than predominantly white communities on a range of societal concerns including zoning, community renewal investment, food deserts, excessive taxing, and access to healthcare. Public education suffers from a growing trend evident in cities across the US—a failure in literacy overall. In fact, Nashville's 2016 Education Report Card conducted by a local commission recommended that "Metro Schools should engage community partners in developing a citywide plan and timeline to ensure early-grade (K-2) literacy by May, 2017."³² Moreover, a residential crisis created by sophisticated real estate developers breeds gentrification—the displacement of low-income and limited-income citizens from their long-term homes caused by new construction and development, which makes retaining housing in their familiar locale unattainable due to the rising costs of the new market. In turn, the new market affords the "gentry" the opportunity to both build new vistas of living and also claim New Market tax credit for the systematic displacement of racialized minorities. Who challenges the false prophecy of a carceral nation-state? What interventions must be employed to foster liberation for those condemned by a nation-state obsessed with itself and oblivious to the common interest of the people? It is those who are attentive to the cry of the children; those who will not be silent in the face of multiple sites of

suffering, and those who envision, articulate, and codify hope for the marginalized. In Nashville, the collective experience of the faithful ordinary dictated a particular religious response. The community's response was to demand justice. The cultural transmission of this religious claim mediated through various modalities: marching, door-knocking, petitioning, prayer vigils, chanting, and singing. In the aftermath, the existing system did not respond favorably. Instead of retreating, the people worked to change the laws. They would not be denied. Their will overtook the powers of elected officials to rewrite the laws. The people in their collective will caused the "ark of the moral universe to bend toward justice."³³

The lives

Just as the investigation into the shooting death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is mired with controversy, the deaths of many young black folks in cities across the country and particularly these in Nashville offered the multi-racial coalition, determined to bring about justice, some sobering truths. Tennessee officially declined to reopen the case regarding Dr. King's death, despite evidence that there were co-conspirators to the murder. In what has been dubbed the largest investigation in Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) history, the lack of attention to the evidence of a conspiracy involving state actors closely resembles the cursory treatment of dubious attempts at prosecution of the plethora murders of black genius at the present moment. Trayvon Martin was killed by gunshot on February 26, 2012 at Twin Lakes Apartment Complex, 11500 Myrtlewood Dr., Sanford, Florida, amid allegations that he posed a threat to a quasi-law enforcement personnel while walking home from a convenience store in his father's neighborhood. George Zimmerman, his killer, was acquitted of all charges. In 2014, a New York cop, Daniel Pantaleo, avoided prosecution when a New York Grand Jury failed to indict him on charges stemming from the choking death of Eric Garner on Bay street in Staten Island, despite the fact that the murder was captured on video. Also, in 2014, Michael Brown was killed in the middle of Canfield Drive in Ferguson, Missouri, and Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old black boy, was gunned down by police while playing with a toy gun in the park alone at Cudell Recreation Center on West Boulevard in Cleveland, Ohio. This horrific incident was captured on video; however, no true bill of indictment was returned. Similarly, the District Attorney in Nashville issued a formal statement indicating that he would not pursue charges against Officer Lippert in the killing of Jocques Clemmons.

Few police officers have been indicted in the face of overwhelming evidence that actions taken by the police were overzealous and lethal in ways that could have been avoided. Officer Andrew Delke was indicted and faces a jury trial on a 1st Degree Murder charge for the shooting death of Daniel Hambrick. The people of Nashville stood up against the inherent bias of the police and demanded that Delke face charges. However, the deaths of Christian Taylor in Arlington, Texas, Alton B. Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Paul O'Neal and LaQuan McDonald in Chicago, Illinois, Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, North Carolina, and many others point to systemic racism and justify a critical exploration of the criminal justice system. Moreover, there is a growing ideology that police misconduct is off-limits to criminal prosecution. The death of Sandra Bland in Prairie View, Texas, Akai Gurley in Brooklyn, New York, and Walter L. Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina embolden the tendency to whitewash prosecution where protracted trial dockets hold out the potential for a semblance of justice or where lesser charges are offered for reduced guilty pleas. Concomitantly, the cases in which a jury is seated point to the burgeoning occurrence of not guilty verdicts or deadlocked juries, as seen in the attempted prosecution of officers in the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland, Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, Terrence Crutcher in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Samuel DuBose in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The mind of the people to work figures prominently in the overwhelming global community response at the murder-by-police of George Floyd, May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. After seeing video footage of Officer Derek Chauvin, Minneapolis Police Department, choke the life out of Floyd, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protest, all over the world.³⁴ The people rose up and demanded police reform in response to the 8:46 minutes that Chauvin pressed his knee upon Floyd's neck while three other officers held Floyd's legs.³⁵ The vicious, brutal nature of this murder laid bare the race-based animus operating in some police departments around the globe. Calls for justice could not be ignored as people poured into the city streets. Black Lives Matter, organized as worldwide cells of consciousness, led the peaceful protests to a crescendo that effectuated change in many police departments including Metro Nashville Police Department.³⁶

When I was a young child, my mother and grandmother would often stop their daily routines to watch soap operas. There was one "story," as they called them, entitled *Days of Our Lives*. What a sordid mess the characters confronted: competitiveness, infidelity, insecurity, passion, jealousy, and avarice. In the daily portrayal of the lives of those characters, there emerged certain patterns that I find eerily parallel to the days of *our* lives. In our lives, on a daily basis, Black Americans witness firsthand the destruction in real time of the very semblance of the democracy that we have come to cherish. Americans have long held the belief that the US is built upon three separate branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) with the ability to bring checks and balances to one another. Yet, the three branches of government are reduced to a level of dysfunction so steeped in racism that it has now gripped the very workings of government to a complete halt on multiple occasions. It resembles a soap opera; but, the impact is real to our lives.

The presence of brutality is so real that one ponders what will become of our lives. Will we survive? The great warrior poet Audre Lorde would tell us from her poem "A Litany for Survival," that "we were never meant to survive."³⁷ On the issue of survival, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. espoused a view in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on the Lincoln Memorial, August 28, 1963 that his "four little children would one day not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." That was a high and lofty ideal, one born of a vision of America as a place where those children would be dealing with rational people who would not seek to render them invisible, but rather seek to acknowledge their good character. However, as we reconnoiter the landscape of America's philosophical ethos in this present moment, it is abundantly clear that we must once again revalue the color of our skin, and also name its import to *our lives* and maintain a connection to it for our survival. The Harvard University scholar Henry Louis "Skip" Gates has impeccable character; but, on the basis of his color, he was arrested, transported to jail, and booked for disorderly conduct at his own home, on his own street, in his own neighborhood in this America.³⁸

It is no less a categorical imperative to declare that Black Lives Matter than it is to conclude that skies are blue. For it is in the ideological crevices that we find sophisticated tricksters contaminating the truth. Dr. King's dream, spoken almost 60 years ago, is used by ultra conservatives to reduce Dr. King to puppetry in order to express bedrock views opposing affirmative action and programs intended to help the disadvantaged. Many of Dr. King's words have been used to usher in the colorblind narrative. The truth is that black lives really do matter. Rather than accepting that truth as an unconditional moral obligation, which means it is binding in all circumstances and is neither dependent on individual inclination nor manipulated for sinister purpose, we are met with "social death." It is this phenomenon that instinctively causes young black men to run when they see white officers approaching them. Social death condemns them

before there is an inquiry. There is a presumption that, if they run, they must have done something. It matters not whether there is any evidence to the contrary.

Social death, by Patterson's standards, moves the analysis of enslavement beyond the conclusion that our ancestors were considered by the dominant culture as mere chattel or property; but rather stresses the centrality of the sociological, symbolic, and ideological factors interwoven within the slavery system.

Relations of inequality or domination, which exist whenever one person has more power than another, range on a continuum for those of marginal asymmetry to those in which one person is capable of exercising, with impunity, total power over another.³⁹

This is instructive as we consider our lives, because it forces us to acknowledge our deaths—social, mental, and physical. It is cyclic.

The power relation has three facets. The first is social and involves the use or threat of violence in the control of one person by another. The second is the psychological facet of influence, the capacity to persuade another person to change the way he perceives his interests and his circumstances. And third is the cultural facet of authority, "the means of transforming force into right, and obedience into duty which, according to Jean Jacques Rousseau, the powerful find necessary 'to ensure them continual mastership.'"⁴⁰

The declaration that our lives matter has its antecedents: "I am a Man," "Black is beautiful," "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud," all of those phrases of affirmation served to make that same definitive statement: that you cannot appreciate the content of our character if you cannot recognize the sacredness of our black bodies for our black lives. The pronoun in the genitive case indicates ownership.

The movement

In Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, March 31, 1968, before his assassination four days later, he spoke from the thought "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" Dr. King said:

It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, 'Wait on time.' Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right.⁴¹

What is the movement for cities today? Marian Wright Edelman asks.

that too many Americans would rather celebrate than follow Dr. King. Many have enshrined Dr. King the dreamer and ignored Dr. King the 'disturber of all unjust peace,' as theologian Vincent Harding said. Many remember King the vocal opponent of violence, but not the King who called for massive nonviolent civil disobedience to challenge the stockpiling of weapons of death and the wars they fuel, and the excessive

materialism of the greedy, which deprives the needy of the basic necessities of life. And many celebrate Dr. King the orator, but ignore his words about the need for reordering the misguided values and national investment priorities he believed are the seeds of America's downfall.⁴²

What established a movement for Dr. King and concomitantly defines his effectiveness is a flat-footed commitment to the truth, a consistent resistance to evil, the rebuke of fear, and a steadfast march toward his mark no matter the disparaging and often discouraging signs of the times. His hope was built; first, in the Spirit. It is what Lewis Baldwin and Victor Anderson name in the edited volume, *Revives My Soul Again: The Spirituality of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, as "his deep engagement with the life of the spirit."⁴³ That is why no matter who was disloyal to King along the way, no matter who was backbiting or snitching, no matter how many police Billie clubs he dodged, no matter how long the day—he pressed on. Dr. King's commitment was to his people both to have better and to do better; but, he was powered by the Spirit. He took his case to the streets in protest and resistance, and the black community followed. When he announced a Poor People's Campaign it was a rallying cry for change.

We are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses . . . We are going to bring children and adults and old people, people who have never seen a doctor or a dentist in their lives . . . We are not coming to engage in any histrionic gesture. We are not coming to tear up Washington. We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. We read one day, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists.

We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic nonviolent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible. Why do we do it this way? We do it this way because it is our experience that the nation doesn't move around questions of genuine equality for the poor and for black people until it is confronted massively, dramatically in terms of direct action . . . And I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion.⁴⁴

Our movements today are faced with those and even greater challenges, which compellingly require no less gravitas. Dr. King was a giant in his faith. However, it is the work of the "faithful ordinary" comprising a strong coalition of people from a plethora of faith traditions coming together under the universal commitment to justice and equality that moves the needle in communities such as Nashville. Protestants, Mormons, Jews, agnostics, spiritual-but-not-religious, and those in between formed the grassroots support for Nashville's Community Benefits Agreement. They recognized that, through the lens of faith, they could see greater possibilities for what Linell E. Cady describes as a common public life.⁴⁵

Modernity's panopticon—the surveilling eye—presents itself in the post-modern context as the protracted, super-masculine power of the nation-state spiraling out of control. Proliferating and propagating fiction versus truth, the nation-state of post-modernity manufactures social control through selective truth. America's criminal justice system evolved from this frame. Its prophecy is bondage. Its historical genealogy suggests, in the words of Stuart Hall, "what is at issue here is the foundation of truth that science has performed within modern cultural systems from the

eighteenth century onward.”⁴⁶ That foundation pushes human beings into the shadows of existence. That is why the rate of incarceration produced by the American criminal justice system far exceeds that of any other nation. The mass incarceration, largely of black people, therefore signifies the complex nature of existence for the incarcerated well beyond the period of incarceration.

The formerly incarcerated, their families and communities, experience any period of incarceration as a literal life sentence; severely impoverished, politically disenfranchised, and reduced to perpetual existential crisis. Social movements are an important aspect of how cities are called to moral responsibility. The Movement for Black Lives embraces this conceptual framework. The work of community organizing that embraces the fight for \$15 per hour as a living wage, the dignity to work, prison abolition, immigration reform, fully funded public education is a religious response to racist governance. It is religion as orientation toward justice where participation means an articulation of the “temporal and spatial dimensions relative to systems of oppression.”⁴⁷ We all must get in where we fit in and work. That is why Nashville formed a coalition with the work progressing on the justice front to address the issues of marginalized racialized segments of the population who are left out in city planning. Stand Up Nashville is a coalition of community organizations and labor unions committed to equality for the working people of Nashville; it tries to ensure that community growth through development offers opportunities for all Nashvillians through accountability demanded from elected officials to guarantee “that all communities may benefit from the growth of our city.”⁴⁸ Maura Lee Albert, a leader with Stand Up Nashville reflects that:

Our Union (SEIU Local 205) did not directly benefit from a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) with Nashville Soccer Holdings. However, it is paramount that for our community to do better we all need to do better; this was understood by all the leaders within SEIU. We also understood that if there is a large project that is receiving tax payer incentives or financing, it is crucial that we demand basic standards in exchange for this public help. It was out of this idea that we were able to engage with other community organizations and labor unions to unite under the idea of a CBA. Any written document that we could legally defend was better than hoping for a benevolent contractor and a few low-paying hospitality jobs.

As Maura Lee Albert suggests, the connection between labor unions and the fight for a Community Benefits Agreement that Stand Up Nashville launched signifies the intersectional nature of the work they each do. The labor unions saw a nexus between the city’s plans to allow Nashville Soccer Holdings to develop a soccer stadium as an opportunity to lock down job opportunities for Nashvillians. Moreover, the agreement built in affordable housing, childcare opportunities, entrepreneurial opportunities, and jobs. In coalition, local clergy from Islamic centers, synagogues, churches, and Jewish temples offered prayers, often on the courthouse steps, to move the agenda of the Community Benefits Agreement.

Conclusion

The focus upon racial injustice in this essay is to illuminate the disparities seen by racial minorities over the course of the last half-century from the perspectives of academia, clergy, activism, and concerned citizens. Remembering the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. after 50 years serves the dual purpose of theological reflection that offers a platform for cross-disciplinary review of the issues surrounding the murder of black genius. This phenomenon provides a segue into the mounting communal engagement that represents the communal response to racist governance. The academy and the community have the unique opportunity to exchange

wisdom from the lived experience of black people in cities across America in tandem with the intersectional components that bear witness to the events giving rise to disproportionate representation of racial minorities in the criminal justice system, as impacted by gentrification, in educational displacement, and by income and housing inequity.

Today's social movements are many and multifaceted to meet the attacks from an ecosystem of oppressions which are strategic and multivalent. All over the country there is a move to re-segregate public schools, to gentrify neighborhoods, to corral undesirables. The plan dispatched over a significant period of time is most advanced in Little Rock, Arkansas, the home of the Little Rock 9. There, the State Board of Education has taken over the predominantly black school districts, refused to honor teacher contracts, and statutorily extended their time with which to declare all of the schools as underperforming so that they can then favor "public choice" vouchers.⁴⁹ That move gives select people the ability to privatize public education. The same move is underway in Nashville and in other cities in America.⁵⁰ In higher education, another example involves the ultra-conservative, right wing lobby having succeeded in pitting one minority group against the others to favor Asian-American plaintiffs in lawsuits against Harvard University et al. to eliminate race as a factor in admissions. That is to say, this lawsuit makes the claim that the consideration of "race" as an admission criterion should be eliminated because it unfairly privileges certain minorities' admission to these Ivy League schools.⁵¹ This is a direct attack on affirmative action and one that, in the long run, could cause a significant decline in minority student admission in higher education. Further scholarly investigation is indicated to draw parallels in the historical record that point to the dialing back of certain freedoms. The nexus between the gains won during the Civil Rights Movement and the changing, increasingly conservative landscape in all branches of government indicates a growing trend toward reinscribing racial prejudice as the dominant norm for how governments operate. The public theological response that Nashville's faithful ordinary demonstrate is a model for others to follow. The responsibility assumed by the faithful ordinary in Nashville proved Dr. King's axiom that "*the time is always ripe to do right.*"⁵² Religion that is oriented toward justice effects social change in cities through coalition-building among like-minded people—the people who have a mind to work.

Notes

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- 6 Nashville I-40 Steering Committee et al., Plaintiffs=appellants, v. Buford Ellington, Governor et al., Defendants=appellees, 387 F.2d 179 (U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit 1968).
- 7 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).
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- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 214.

- 10 Charles H. Long, "Passage and Prayer: The Origin of Religion in the Atlantic World," in *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption*, eds, Quinton Hosford Dixie and Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), pp. 11–21.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 12 Ray Waddle, "Days of Thunder: The Lawson Affair," *Vanderbilt Magazine*, Fall 2002, pp. 34–43, <http://hdl.handle.net/1803/3279>.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Civil Rights Digital Library: Documenting America's Struggle for Racial Equality, "WSB-TV Newsfilm Clip of an Interview with Civil Rights Lawyer and City Councilman Alexander Looby after His Home Was Bombed in Nashville, Tennessee, 1960 April 19." Accessed October 24, 2019, http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/crdl/id:ugabma_wsbn_40260.
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- 17 "Complaint of the Estate of Jacques Scott Clemmons, Deceased, against The Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, and Danny Satterfield," Case 3:18-cv-00133, February 9, 2018, <https://scotblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Clemmons-Complaint.pdf>.
- 18 Ted Alcorn, "Who Will Hold the Police Accountable?," *The Atlantic*, July 25, 2019, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/07/battle-over-police-accountability/594484/.
- 19 "Photo Gallery," The Promise: A Special Podcast Series from Nashville Public Radio, accessed October 24, 2019, <http://thepromise.wpln.org/photo-gallery/>.
- 20 *Bobbi Negrón*, accessed February 21, 2020, www.facebook.com/bobbilynnegron/videos/d41d8cd9/10162575853670006/.
- 21 Sekou Franklin, interview by the author, September 20, 2019. Dr. Franklin is Associate Professor, Political Science and International Relations, College of Liberal Arts at Middle Tennessee State University.
- 22 Ted Alcorn, "Who Will Hold the Police Accountable?"
- 23 Louis Benjamin Rolsky, "Charles H. Long and the Re-Orienting of American Religious History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (September 2012): pp. 750–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfs045>.
- 24 *Estate of Daniel Hambrick v. Metropolitan Government of Nashville-Davidson County, Tennessee*, Case No. 3:19-cv-00216.
- 25 Sekou Franklin, interview by the author September 20, 2019.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Charter Referendum (via Citizens/People)*: The Charter allows an alternative to the Metro council referendum process. The people/citizens can place a Charter revision on the ballot for a popular vote. However, the petitioners must collect thousands of petitions equivalent to 10% of the total number of voters in the previous local, general election. All petitioners must be registered and their addresses on the petitions must match the addresses on their voter registration information at the election commission. Based on the property tax assessor race (the last local, general election), a citizen-led petition drive will mostly likely require 6,500 *valid* petitions. If this is accomplished, then the election commission will have three weeks to verify them. If they are verified, then it goes up for a county-wide vote in the next election. The challenge is four-fold: the legal language on the petition has to be strong; all petitions must be valid (this is much harder than one thinks) because the bar for validating petitioners is actually higher than used in non-Charter Referendum elections; the group has to prepare and raise money for a popular election; and the state can still overturn the referendum. *Briefing Package prepared by Rev. Sekou Franklin*.
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- 30 *Ibid.*

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- 36 Jorge, Kaylin, “Nashville Police Chief Anderson Retiring Amid Calls for Resignation,” June 18, 2020, <https://fox17.com/news/local/nashville-police-chief-retiring-amid-calls-for-resignation>.
- 37 Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, First Edn (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1997), p. 255.
- 38 Abby Goodnough, “Harvard Professor Jailed; Officer Is Accused of Bias,” *The New York Times*, July 20, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/us/21gates.html. Henry Louis “Skip” Gates is a prominent, long-term Harvard scholar of African American History who was arrested at his own home by Boston police while investigating an alleged robbery in progress. Gates, who had just returned home from a trip to China, was presumed to be an intruder. After insisting to the officer that this was his home, he was placed under arrest despite supplying the officer with his Massachusetts driving license and his Harvard identification. Charges were later dropped.
- 39 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 1.
- 40 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, pp. 1–2.
- 41 Marian Wright Edelman, “The Time Is Always Right to Do Right,” Children’s Defense Fund, April 1, 2016, www.childrensdefense.org/child-watch-columns/health/2016/the-time-is-always-right-to-do-right/.
- 42 Ibid.
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- 44 Wolfgang Mieder, “*Making a Way Out of No Way*”: *Martin Luther King’s Sermonic Proverbial Rhetoric* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 126–7.
- 45 Linell Elizabeth Cady, *Religion, Theology, and American Public Life*, SUNY Series in Religious Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 99.
- 46 Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, ed., Kobena Mercer, The W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 56.
- 47 Rolsky, “Charles H. Long and the Re-Orientation,” pp. 750–74.
- 48 “Who We Are,” Stand Up Nashville. Accessed October 25, 2019, <https://standupnashville.org/about/>.
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