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Bad deaths, good funerals: The values of life insurance in New Orleans

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This article explores the relationship between the value of money and the value of human life as it plays out in the financing of funeral ceremonies. It examines how these values are articulated through life insurance policies concerning violent deaths of working-class black Americans in New Orleans. The article draws on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork (2017–18) in New Orleans, which included participant observation at a black-owned funeral home and interviews with funeral directors, policyholders, and beneficiaries. By examining the role of life insurance policies in arranging good funerals after bad deaths, the ethnographic analysis demonstrates how life insurance policies are consumed and can produce value at a moment of loss. It explores the paradox that an insurance policy can at once become a resource for the affirmation of human value and a financial risk in itself.

Keywords Death; Grievability; Life Insurance; Value; Wealth in People

"My son was insured. He had one of the most beautiful funerals that you'll ever know about" (interview, November 16, 2017). When I spoke with Derek Williams about his son's death, which took place in 2013, a life-sized poster of Salim still stood watching over his father's shoulder from a corner in the living room.[1] Salim had been killed in a string of urban violence that has been holding New Orleans in its grip for four decades (Carter 2010, 87–88). Although Derek had a sound grasp of the structural conditions that fuel interpersonal violence in black communities, the loss of his own son defied understanding. "My son died of gunshot wounds that … he died as an innocent person. People just rolled [drove] up on the side of him and shot him eight times in the head. And you ask the person [who did it] 'for what?', they say: 'I just wanted to make people mad.' My son was twenty-four years old. Had a beautiful life ahead of him."

While his son's untimely and violent death continued to hurt deeply, Derek spoke of Salim's funeral with a sense of pride. "We had the horse and carriage. He had a turnout of maybe five hundred people at the funeral. Never seen anything like it." The cemetery had even allowed the crowd of mourners to hold a jazz funeral on the premises.[2] "We rolled in, went around the whole cemetery second lining [parading and dancing]! We threw down!" His son received the elaborate funeral that he deserved, and importantly, perhaps surprisingly, it was paid for in part through an insurance policy on Salim's life. "We paid $15,000 to get it done. It mostly came out of the insurance that he had. We had an additional $5,000 that we had to make sure that everybody was good [that all the bills were paid]."

Although most commonly viewed as a way for an income provider to protect dependent loved ones from the financial consequences of their death, life insurance is widespread in black, working-class communities in the United States to ensure dignified funerals. Rituals of mourning and burial—and what it costs to organize them—are especially fraught after violent deaths. The preceding example shows, for instance, how money generated by a life insurance policy allows the bereaved to address the injustice of a life cut short through a display of funerary wealth. The role of life insurance policies in these cases raises questions around how monetary value and human value come together in people's ability to grieve respectfully over the loss of their loved ones.

In this article, I draw attention to the insurance practices of ordinary people geared toward sustaining life within the context of structural disparities (Bähre 2012; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). I follow recent ethnographic work on the technical-moral dynamics of finance that explores life insurance's embeddedness in social relations. This work has shown how life insurance companies heavily rely on informal social networks to sell policies to the poor (Bähre 2012) and how life insurance policies lead to transformations in kinship relations (Golomski 2015). I thus frame the practices of people *outside* of the insurance industry as meaningful to the questions of who is insured, for how much, to what end, and in what ways a policy can produce value in practice. This is important, I argue, because even though life insurance is a powerful institution in American society, insurance companies do not only *act upon* people. I do not mean to imply that the everyday actions of people somehow lead to structural change in the life insurance industry. Rather, I aim to show how cultural notions of a good life and a good death constitute the consumption of life insurance, and thereby it both addresses and reproduces systemic inequalities. I focus specifically on violent deaths, because these bring out most clearly the intersections and contradictions between economic value and human worth.

This article is based on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2017 and 2018. Fieldwork included participant observation at a black-owned funeral home in a working-class neighborhood in New Orleans and forty-two in-depth interviews with life insurance agents, funeral directors, policyholders, and beneficiaries. In the following, I first introduce the concepts that I put to work in this article. Then, I describe the historical development of life insurance in the United States. I continue with an ethnographic analysis that explains, first, the role of money in organizing a good funeral after a bad death and, second, how policyholders and funeral directors articulate moral and economic values through life insurance policies. By examining life insurance policies in practice, I aim to show how they give rise to notions of a valuable life while at the same time reproducing systemic inequalities.

The valuation of life

The concept of value is about defining, calculating, and producing worth and wealth in market terms as well as in ways that are situated outside or on the margins of the economy (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). In this article, I focus on the ways in which different regimes of value—of dollar amounts and life itself—converge and come into conflict with one another. To do so, I draw from Jane Guyer's (1995) theorization of "wealth in people," and to that framework, I add an engagement with a critical theory of mourning, specifically Judith Butler's (2009) concept of "grievability." Together, these theories allow me to show how economic and human value conjoin in complex ways in people's attempts to produce good funerals after bad deaths.

As developed by Guyer, *wealth in people* refers to a principle of social organization that originated in precolonial equatorial Africa. It describes the dynamics through which social prestige and political power depend on the "accumulation of social relations" (Guyer 1995, 86) and in which people figure as repositories of wealth in terms of kin or dependents and followers. A key aspect of this concept is the notion that human beings can be valued in material terms, or, in other words, that wealth in things and wealth in people can be converted into each other (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995, 119). Daniel Jordan Smith (2018), for example, uses this framework in his analysis of the contemporary grand and dramatic display of monetary wealth at Igbo burials in Nigeria. Smith describes how Igbo families spend well beyond their means on burials and night vigils to "put on a good show" and to provide entertainment, food, and drinks for large numbers of invitees. He argues that these expenditures and ostentatious displays of wealth do not only convert money into status but also transform wealth in money into wealth in people. Smith (2018, 75) writes that burials "are tremendously significant symbolic moments for recognizing and celebrating the importance of 'having people,' and for renewing those ties as one individual departs the world of the living."

Insurance functions in similar ways at the interface of wealth in money and wealth in people (Maurer and Mireshghi 2013). Life insurance commodifies human bodies by expressing their value in terms of money (death benefits) and years of longevity (risk assessment) while simultaneously protecting family and loved ones from financial loss and thereby acknowledging membership to a social entity (Maurer and Mireshghi 2013, 89). Later in this article, I show in detail how these characteristics emerge in everyday dealings with life insurance. My research into insurance practices among black, working-class people in New Orleans suggests, however, that in addition to these aspects of "paying" for the loss of a life and bringing into being social relations, practices of mourning and their moral and political implications matter as to how human life can be valued through life insurance.

Human worth has an undeniable political dimension that shapes the expression of wealth in people. I refer here to the ways in which differences in death and life chances express how much a society values some lives over others (Fassin 2009; Kaufman and Morgan 2005; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). In New Orleans, as in the United States at large, an insidious and racialized biopolitics produces disparities in mortality rates along the lines of race and class. The combined racial and socioeconomic (de)valuation of life underlies the organization of urban space in New Orleans (Carter 2014, 243). Hierarchies of human worth are thus geographically anchored so that life expectancy between neighborhoods can differ by as much as twenty-five years (RWJF 2013). Although "ordinary" causes of death, such as heart disease and cancer, are mainly responsible for this excess mortality (Plyer and Gardere 2018, 45), the city's per capita murder rate has been seven to eight times higher than the national average for the past three decades, which disproportionately affects black, working-class residents (Carter 2014, 251). Much has been written about the relationship between structural disinvestment and interpersonal violence in American cities, but as Matt Sakakeeny (2013) so aptly notes, metrics of causes and reflections on personal responsibility fall short in attempts to understand the chronic presence of violent death in everyday life. Rather, "what is verifiable and palpable is the expendability of life, the experience of suffering, and the necessity of overcoming" (Sakakeeny 2013, 145).

The work of "overcoming" points to the tension between the way a society (de)values populations and how people themselves organize and attempt to realize a good life and a good death (Graeber 2001; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). In other words, whereas patterns of mortality express the structural valuation of populations, practices of social agents can give rise to alternative forms of value (Fassin 2009, 57). This brings me to the issue of mourning. As Judith Butler's (2009) concept of grievability highlights, funerary practices and expressions of grief are not just ways to cope with death but also raise questions on the valuation of life. *Grievability* refers to the eligibility of grief: both the right to be grieved over and the mourner's right to grieve (Zhang 2012, 277). While Butler developed this concept in reference to the global war on terror and conflicts in the Middle East, she explicitly frames her discussion in terms of a general concern with precariousness and vulnerability. Grieving, in Butler's vocabulary, has political implications. "Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear," she writes. "Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (Butler 2009, 14). Bringing this notion to bear on the case of bad deaths in a context of racial and economic marginalization means showing how practices of mourning provide cultural substance to the eligibility of grief. Death rituals, then, "are about the worthiness of life—for the dead as well as for the living" (Zhang 2012, 277).

The historical experience of "black death" (Holloway 2003) in the United States and the funerary practices that were born out of it exemplify this political notion of grief. For example, in her monograph *Passed On*, Karla Holloway (2003, 2) describes twentieth-century black ways of death, dying, and commemorating and argues that black Americans' "particular vulnerability to an untimely death" intimately affects black culture in general and mourning practices in particular. Holloway (2003, 185) frames the pomp and circumstance of funerals as "clearly deliberate attempts to make the 'home-going' ceremonies of African Americans underscore or encourage a view of each life as important and notable." Other scholars have similarly argued that the elaborate funerals and care for the dead traditional in black culture can be seen as posthumous attempts to provide human dignity to those who were denied it in life (Smith 2010; Stow 2010). Ambiguously bringing together deep sorrow and joyful celebration, black "home-goings" give expression to grief over the loss of a loved one while marking the transition of the deceased to a better place free from racialized injustice (Holloway 2003; Smith 2010; Stow 2010). New Orleans jazz funerals perhaps most strongly embody this significant merging of mourning and rejoicing. Helen Regis (2001, 755) argues that these public dance parades heralded by brass bands actualize moral values—“respect, fiscal power, order, solidarity, peace, community uplift and beauty”—that work against the structural devaluation of black life.

Black mortuary rituals thus provide insight into what it is to render a life valuable yet depend heavily on the availability of large sums of money. This prompts the question of the economics of mourning and grief’s entanglement with modern finance. In this article, then, I ask how financial products like life insurance underwrite—and perhaps limit—funerary wealth and culturally appropriate ways of mourning after bad deaths. Or, how is grievability financialized? Before exploring this question ethnographically, I provide a brief history of life insurance in the United States.

Insuring life, assessing value

Over its two-century-long history, commercial life insurance in the United States has always had to navigate the tension between monetary value and the worth of human beings. Historical sociologist Viviana Zelizer (1979), for example, has shown that life insurance was not considered morally palatable in nineteenth-century America. Critics worried that it “turned [hu]man’s sacred life into an article of merchandise” (Zelizer 1979, 50). Death benefits were considered dirty or profane money because the money supposedly came from a widow’s commercial speculation on her husband’s death (Zelizer 1978, 598–99). Early insurance advocates thus ran into a problem of commensurability, as putting death and life itself “on the market” offended a moral system that considered human life to be sacred and beyond financial considerations (Fassin 2016; Zelizer 1978). Human life was considered to be of absolute value, where one cannot be exchanged for another nor can one be replaced by anything else (Lambek 2008, 135). This clashed with the notion of money value, or price, as an expression of relative economic value that can fluctuate and that allows for the exchange of money and things (Lambek 2008, 135).

Life insurance companies countered the cultural resistance against their products by framing the insurance of one’s life as a key moral responsibility of a male breadwinner in relation to his dependent wife and children (Zelizer 1979). Marketing material aimed to convince men that death would not relieve them of their financial obligations and thus symbolically connected patriarchal economic provision for dependents with a concept of the good death (Zelizer 1979, 602–3). An insurance journal from 1882, for example, stated that only the careless father would leave “naught behind him but the memory of honest, earnest work and the hopeless wish that loved ones … might somehow find their needed shelter from poverty” (cited in Zelizer 1979, 603). This discourse stressed men’s worth and membership to their family and helped to make the monetization of human life morally acceptable (Bouk 2015; Zelizer 1979).

In the past two decades, historians have added a critical layer to this account of life insurance history by pointing out that the commodification of human life at the time that life insurance took root in US society was common practice in the form of slavery (Martin 2010). Another central issue in the public debate on the legitimacy of life insurance was the question of *whose* lives were commodifiable and whose were considered to be beyond price—not just whether a money figure *could* be set for the value of a life. In the time of slavery, insuring white lives would mean setting a price on something that ought to be priceless (Wolff 2006).

The question of which racialized lives were insurable and which were not again became an issue of public debate after the Civil War, yet the abolition of slavery had reversed its answer. In the 1880s, large commercial insurance companies developed new, affordable policies specifically geared toward the working class (Wiggins 2013; Wolff 2006). Industrial policies paid out just enough to cover funeral expenses and were funded through the weekly door-to-door collection of premiums of a few cents by insurance agents (Wiggins 2013, 3). This type of policy proved hugely popular among black Americans, who applied for coverage in large numbers—a development that had been unanticipated by the commercial insurers who introduced the policies (Wiggins 2013, 4; Wolff 2006, 88).

In black communities, industrial life insurance tapped into a tradition of southern community organizations, lodges, and secret societies based on mutual aid. Going back as far as the 1700s, these organizations had provided sickness and burial benefits to their members and fostered a sense of solidarity, independence, and pride among them (Beito 2000; Chapin 2012; Holloway 2003).

The unexpected and undesired applications of black clients led white-owned insurance companies to develop race-specific benefit tables that eventually justified the refusal of black clients (Wolff 2006). Over the course of the twentieth century, mainline insurance companies increasingly accepted black clients, becoming serious competitors to black-owned insurance companies (Chapin 2012). Most of these, however, did so based on racially segregated, dual-rate structures (Heen 2009). In other words, insurance companies' evaluations of the lives they insured—both the policyholders' economic value and their future years—hinged on racial classifications. Until the 1960s, race functioned as one of the main indicators of human value in insurance underwriting, a practice that was overturned under public pressure (Heen 2009). Currently, around 60% of American adults have some form of life insurance (Scanlon, Leyes, and Fan 2019, 23). This percentage is higher (up to 71%) among people who are married and who have children and/or a mortgage (Harris and Yelowitz 2018).

In the following, I shift the focus to the more quotidian moral and economic assessments of value that are also part of life insurance but that have so far received only scarce scholarly attention (see Bähre 2012; Golomski 2018). First, I describe how mortuary rituals of black Americans in New Orleans play a role in the expression of personal and social worth—or wealth in people—after a bad death and how money is a part of this expression. This is followed by two ethnographic cases that explore how life insurance policies are considered valuable or become worthless in a moment of loss. Finally, I explain how financing good funerals after bad deaths through insurance policies is constrained by a general process toward the corporatization and financialization of funeral homes (see also Sanders 2018).

A good funeral

Richard Young was fifty years old when he was shot dead in a suspected armed robbery in Central City. On the morning of his funeral, people poured into the small Methodist church until every inch of the hardwood benches was occupied. Mourners walked up to his body displayed in an open casket to say their final farewells. A large arrangement of white lilies adorned the casket. Overlooking the hushed gathering of mourners was a life-sized picture of Richard, standing up straight in front of the church's altar. Some family members wore color-coordinated outfits and T-shirts or ties with images of Richard printed on them. The obituary provided a modest overview of his life lived, but the bulk of the text was dedicated to listing all those people left to "cherish his memories" after his untimely death. An a cappella rendition of "A Change Is Gonna Come" by one of Richard's friends aroused the mourners and elicited cheers as well as powerful wails. The pastor, in a spirited and lengthy eulogy, assured everyone that Richard had gone to a better place as "God is a God of second chances"; he praised Richard for turning his life around after finishing a prison term for possession of drugs.[3]

Homegoing ceremonies like the one organized for Richard represent important moments for the restoration of personal and social worth. They are celebrations of life through death that emphasize self-esteem. In Richard's case, every speaker expressed his or her admiration over his hard work and willingness to overcome life's challenges. His body, moreover, functioned as a powerful signifier of personal value: a mortician had skillfully concealed from view the violence that had ended his life (cf. Holloway 2003, 27). "Laid out" in an ornate casket surrounded by lush floral arrangements, Richard's carefully displayed remains served "to restore the dignity of a destroyed human life" (Posel and Gupta 2009, 301). The valuation of social relationships—or wealth in people—manifested in a high turnout and in the obituary's focus on bereaved relations rather than individual achievements, but also in the availability of limousines to drive mourners to the cemetery and in the repast, the shared meal, after the services. In other words, such an extended gathering of large numbers of people who collectively face the death of a valued family and community member expresses the worth of the deceased in terms of the depth of his social network. The political commentary that is invariably part of funerals after a violent death moreover articulates the moral value of the life lived. Friends, family members, and pastors often offer a critique on the environment of poverty, race-based segregation, and joblessness in which people like Richard have struggled—and often stumbled—toward a good life (see also Regis 1999, 2001). These comments, in effect, assert that one's stumbles do not take away one's right to be grieved over (Zhang 2012).

Richard's homegoing is an example of how a bad death may produce a good, well-attended funeral (van der Pijl 2016), yet the imperative to symbolically redeem human value after a violent death also raises financial questions. Richard and his life partner did not have substantial savings, and his life insurance policy had lapsed. The responsibility for covering the funeral expenses fell to his retired father. Frank Young wanted to give his son a proper farewell, but even though he carefully considered all the expenses, the bills quickly added up. On top of the package of professional funeral services, the cemetery informed him that there was no space left in the family grave and that he had to purchase a new burial plot. Frank bought a triple lot at $6,000, which is more expensive than a single one, but less expensive per plot. In addition, Frank paid for the printing of memorial T-shirts and ties. In the end, the funeral expenses totaled $12,000. To pay the bills, Frank reached into his savings account and took out a loan at his bank; he was adamant that he would not appeal to other relatives for help. In an interview at his home about a month after the funeral, Frank explained to me, "In the [Young] family, we take care of our own problems. Whatever cost, we have to do that" (interview, May 19, 2018). Casey Golomski has described how finance can replace assistance from social networks. People living with HIV in Swaziland, for example, turned to life insurance to extract themselves from social commitments such as Christian burial cooperatives while still making sure that they would receive funds for a dignified funeral (Golomski 2018, 102). Similarly, Frank's savings account and bank loan allowed him to properly care for his deceased son and prevented him from putting a strain on other kin relations.

The median cost of a funeral in the United States is $7,360 according to the National Funeral Directors Association, which is a time-pressured expense well beyond the means of most working-class people in New Orleans.[4] Funerals therefore represent a recurrent moral-financial challenge. Upon whom does the social obligation to pay for the respectful disposal of a body fall? What are considered to be appropriate means to attain funds to do so? In a context of poverty, crime, and violent deaths, these issues become even more pressing. How does one organize a proper pageant funeral when money is scarce and death comes frequently, often violently? Since care for the dead is commercialized, money figures centrally in these questions. Many who face the persistent threat of untimely death have come to rely on commercial life insurance to be able to pay for good funerals. Next, I describe the insurance practices of a family matriarch to show what this entails.

Life-affirming money

Ms. Wanda is a commanding, resourceful, and warm woman. At sixty-eight, she is retired yet actively involved in community service organizations while taking care of a number of grandchildren on a daily basis. A longtime resident of a public housing project, Ms. Wanda is intimately familiar with the precariousness of life in her hometown. Her son Daniel was killed in 1995 and her grandson Jerome in 2016. A mutual friend introduced Ms. Wanda and me two days after another twenty-five-year-old grandson of hers had been shot. He had survived, but the bullets had left him paralyzed from the waist down. The circumstances of our meeting thus exposed even more clearly how urban violence and the risk of violent death punctuate the biographies of black, working-class people in New Orleans.

A decade apart, both her son and grandson died at twenty-four. Both had been hit by bullets meant for someone else, their deaths part of the endless stream of superfluous loss of life in New Orleans. At their times of death, both were covered by insurance policies taken out by Ms. Wanda. The small policies—$10,000 and $5,000, respectively—allowed Ms. Wanda to complete all the bills of the funeral home. The insurance money allowed the bodies of the young men to be embalmed. It bought caskets, flowers, newspaper obituaries, and food for the repast, and it paid for the opening and closing of their graves. All the "extra stuff"—the printed T-shirts and the life-sized posters—other relatives had to pay for. "All our thing is to bury our child without having to ask anybody" (interview, June 23, 2018), Ms. Wanda explained to me. Her comment echoed Frank Young's statement that it is important to take care of one's own family members and not to burden others with one's financial obligations.

For Ms. Wanda, it was self-evident to have insurance policies on the lives of her kin. Ms. Wanda understood her insurance practices as part of an economic tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. "We got the old policies our parents passed on to us," she said. "We never thought about increasing it, because we knew it was for burial." In addition to insuring her own life, Ms. Wanda added her five children to her policy shortly after they were born. The insurance of children emerged in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America as a financial strategy specifically meant for working-class families, but Zelizer (1985, 136) remarks that by the 1970s, this practice was denounced by financial experts as irrational and a waste of money, since the death of a child according to them constituted a personal tragedy, not a financial one. In New Orleans, however, premature deaths often lead bereaved families to delay funerals in order to raise money by selling food or soliciting donations on GoFundMe pages. To prevent this from happening to her, Ms. Wanda diligently kept up the small burial policies on her children's lives or pressed them to take out policies themselves after they moved out of the family home. Any grandchild who happened to come under her care Ms. Wanda also "put in insurance." Whereas her own insurance policy prevented her final expenses from becoming a financial burden to others, the policies on her children's and, later on, her grandchildren's lives held the wry promise of providing her with enough resources to bury her intimate kin.

Therefore Ms. Wanda maintained insurance policies on an ever-expanding cluster of kin by consistently mobilizing scarce money (cf. Golomski 2018, 103). This insurance practice thus constitutes a form of wealth in people by continuously protecting and acknowledging membership to a family (Maurer and Mireshghi 2013, 89). Moreover, through paying insurance premiums and keeping policies in force, Ms. Wanda ensured that her (grand)children would receive dignified funerals. In other words, through a financial product, Ms. Wanda asserted that the precarious lives lived by those close to her are in fact grievable lives: life insurance policies provide monetary resources in a time of need, affirming the value of a human life (Butler 2009, 25). This type of care—paying toward another's good funeral—is "predicated on the recognition of human worth" (Narotzky and Besnier 2014, S10). Life insurance money thus enables people to step out of certain relations of mutual aid by not having to rely on family and community members for gifts and loans, while the funerary services and products it buys can help to restore the dignity of the life lived after a bad death (cf. Golomski 2018).

The way that Ms. Wanda manages life insurance coverage in her family is quite common among working-class and poor families in New Orleans. In fact, her grandson Jerome was insured twice when he died. Ms. Wanda owned a $5,000 policy, and his other grandmother had a $10,000 policy. Typically, these small policies pay out just enough to cover basic funeral expenses. Ms. Wanda said she never thought of increasing the death benefits of the policies she kept up. Yet when I asked her about this in a follow-up interview, she explained that she would actually not want to raise the coverage amount to be more than the cost of a funeral. She said, "I don't want to profit off my child's death" (interview, July 12, 2018). Ms. Wanda, thus, made a distinction between money that was meant for the symbolic articulation of human worth and money as plain dollar amounts. By producing this divide between moral and economic value, she—and many others with her—prevents the value of her kin from being reduced to the money figure of the death benefit. The money value of policies, then, does not linearly convert into human worth. Ironically, by maintaining relatively low coverage amounts (typically between $5,000 and $15,000), Ms. Wanda and many like her try to ensure that the money produced at death only goes toward the deceased's funeral.

Risky policies

In this section, I explore what it means to use a life insurance policy as collateral for a funeral. I explain the process through which the beneficiaries of a policy can sign over the insurance benefits to a funeral home to cover funeral expenses. In addition, I show how certain developments in the funeral industry have changed the way this process is managed and how this affects the funding of funerals after bad deaths through insurance policies. The funeral home where I conducted most of my research prides itself on the close association it sustains with the community it serves. As Holloway (2003, 30) points out, the close relation between funeral parlors and networks of neighborhood families is typical for black communities and was historically generated by a shared economic-political history and a common understanding of the cultural specificities of living and dying as a black person. The business of black funeral homes — including the one I worked with — has thus historically relied on neighborhood loyalty and cultural familiarity, arranging burials for families from one generation to the next (see also Bunch-Lyons 2015).

Funeral homes usually allow people to pay for funerals in one of two ways (or a combination of both, as in Derek Williams's case) and have introduced measures to make sure they actually do so. The most straightforward means of payment is "cash," which is shorthand for the immediate payment of the amount due in the form of money, a check, or a digital transfer by way of credit or debit card. The second way to finance a funeral is through a life insurance policy. This is the preferred option for grieving families that have no other means to pay for the funeral charges. Mr. Pascal, a funeral director whom I shadowed for four months, told me that it used to be common for funeral homes to "work with families" if they lacked the funds to bury their deceased relatives. This could mean that the funeral home would set up a payment plan or, more informally, would arrange the funeral partly on credit, expecting the family to complete the bill at a later date. After the services were held and bodies were buried or interred, however, many "wouldn't come back to pay" (fieldnotes, April 6, 2018), he said. This used not to be considered a major issue and, in fact, contributed to the funeral home's sustenance of relationships with families. That is, as Holloway (2003, 43–46) also notes, black, family-run businesses could quite comfortably afford some financial leniency until they started to experience competition from white-owned, multinational funeral conglomerates trying to enter the black market in the 1990s. Market pressures and "the appeal of financial security" (Holloway 2003, 45) have led most funeral homes in New Orleans to adopt the general rule that payment is required before services. Signs saying exactly this are displayed in their meeting rooms. To indicate the intensity of these market pressures, bereaved families who do not manage to pay their bills on time are, for example, kept from viewing the body of their deceased relative or compelled to postpone funeral services (Reckdahl 2012).

Life insurance policies, then, can quite easily provide families with the required amount of money to immediately pay for a funeral; yet insurance assignments do set in motion a number of risk management strategies on the part of the funeral home. For beneficiaries to use a policy as payment for a funeral requires that they do not file a claim with the insurance company themselves after the death of the insured. Instead, they bring the paperwork of the policy to the funeral home, where its administrative staff checks whether the policy is "good." This means that they contact the insurance company to verify, among other things, that the policy is still in force and has not lapsed, that the policy is older than two years and has passed the contestability period, that the policyholder has not changed the beneficiaries listed on the paperwork, and that no loan was taken out against the value of the policy. To be sure, this only provides the funeral home with a summary of benefits and not with the guarantee that the death benefits will be paid out. Should everything be in order, the funeral home may choose to accept the policy as a form of payment. The beneficiaries then legally sign over the death benefits to the funeral home — a standard procedure in the funeral industry. When having accepted a life policy as collateral, the funeral home proceeds with making the funeral arrangements and waits for the insurance payout, which, as a rule of thumb, takes six to eight weeks.[5] This means that the funeral home prefunds the funeral services while awaiting the claims procedures. Whereas most life insurance professionals told me that it is extremely rare for an insurance company to deny a claim on a life policy, funeral directors mentioned numerous cases of delayed or denied benefits. These cases ranged from obscure bureaucratic maneuvers to letting beneficiaries believe that a policy had lapsed where it was kept in force through cash value built up in the policy. Other times, the fine print of a policy contained a "lifestyle clause," and the insurance company denied the claim because it had found proof that the deceased had engaged in a "criminal lifestyle," for example, because of past drug charges.

What complicates matters even more is that in their efforts to streamline business — to build up "cash flow" — funeral homes increasingly sign over policies to lending or factoring companies that release the money within a few days at a rate of 5%–10% of the benefits. Lenders provide money to a funeral home expecting a repayment, an expectation that is usually met when the insurance company pays out the death claim. In the case that the insurance company denies the claim, the funeral home has to refund the money to the lender. In contrast, factoring companies actually buy life insurance assignments at a discount and thus assume the risk of nonpayment. The funeral home where I conducted most of my research solely used a factoring company and charged families 10% for this service. A funeral that would cost $8,000 when paid for in cash thus costs $8,800 when paid for through a life insurance policy. The financialization of the funeral industry thus makes death more expensive for those who cannot afford to pay for funeral services out of pocket.

These arrangements and procedures usually run quietly in the background of daily business, but a bad, violent death brings their moral-financial regimes to the surface. Factoring companies generally do not accept an insurance assignment when the life insured ended violently. This is because an insurance company will always initiate an investigation after a homicide, which invariably delays the payout and might result in a rejection of the claim. Funeral homes, in extension, have become hesitant to accept policies as payment when handling services for someone who died a violent death, because it means they have to prepay the funeral awaiting the decision of the insurance company. Mr. Etienne, who is the owner of a funeral home, told me in an interview, "When I get that policy and it's a homicide … I'm a little wary to take that policy. … [If] we gotta roll the dice on 'em, we're very wary on doing that" (interview, October 30, 2017). The metaphor that Mr. Etienne used to describe this situation — to "roll the dice" — underlines the fact that life insurance policies, while designed to cover the risk of death, can in themselves transform into a financial risk.

For bereaved family members who face the immediate obligation to pay for funeral expenses, the policy in effect becomes worthless in the short term. Or, as Mr. Etienne will tell the family, "Listen, even though you got this $100,000 policy, if it pays, it's a blessing to you. But right now, you got this $10,000 funeral you gotta pay for" (interview, October 20, 2017). What happens in these moments is that the traditional moral-economic regime of wealth in people — acquiring as many loyal customer-families from the neighborhood as possible — comes into conflict with a market logic that values wealth in money and financial stability. The financialization of death care, from cash to insurance and factoring companies, changes the relationship between the funeral home and the families and communities it has served for decades. The rising pressure of funeral homes to financially perform well comes at the expense of care for some of the dead, especially those whose lives ended violently. Funeral parlors, factoring companies, and the insurance industry are entangled in a way that makes it nearly impossible for the bereaved to convert policies into dollars into mortuary care after a bad death, leaving them to scramble for funds to properly and respectfully grieve their loved one.

Conclusion

This article has explored the relationship between human and monetary value by examining how life insurance policies play a role in organizing good funerals after bad deaths. The elaborate funerals for Salim Williams and Richard Young testify to the restorative potential of mortuary rituals. Their cases also show the importance of gathering large amounts of money to organize a dignified send-off amid a wealth of people. Life insurance can offer the capital required to organize a good funeral without taking on debt or relying on the benevolence of others.

Ms. Wanda, who diligently keeps in force small insurance policies on herself and her dependent kin, illustrates this practice of consuming life insurance as paying toward the good funerals of others. I have argued that this is a financial form of care intended to affirm human value after death, or grievable life (Butler 2009).

Although the development of mainline life insurance in the United States is predicated on the patriarchal notion that it should allow a person to replace himself or herself in a monetary sense (Bouk 2015, 156), the insurance practices of working-class black Americans in New Orleans are meant to assert the absolute rather than the relative value of a human life. Keeping coverage amounts on policies as low as the cost of a burial is meant to prevent the value of human life from being reduced to the dollar amount of the death benefit. This practice offers an alternative regime of valuation of life through insurance policies, one that presumes that insurance money is converted into funerary wealth.

These investments into good funerals for others, however, are constrained by the way that funeral homes have come to manage life insurance assignments. While the body of the deceased harbors important symbolic value to the bereaved (Holloway 2003), to the funeral home, it is also an object of financial value—as a potential source of profit or loss. Increased market pressures since the 1990s have pushed black, family-owned funeral homes to streamline business. Rather than amass large numbers of loyal families and wealth in people, funeral homes now increasingly strive to achieve financial security and require that their services and products be paid quickly and in full. The use of lender and factoring companies allows them to expedite the collection of death benefits yet increases the price of funerals. In addition, and especially after a bad death, a life insurance policy can in itself turn into a financial risk as the insurance company may try hard to find grounds to deny the claim. In the words of Mr. Etienne, these developments have made funeral homes "wary to take that policy" (interview, October 30, 2017) on the life that ended violently as a payment for a funeral.

A widespread financial product in the United States, life insurance harbors key ways in which human worth and financial value converge and collide. Informed by a long history of mutual aid, life insurance consumption by working-class black Americans in New Orleans can be seen as an endeavor to provide human dignity against a political-economic system that devalues them. This becomes especially visible in the face of violent death, when the production of funerary wealth functions to restore and redeem human and social worth. While maintaining life insurance policies to ensure good funerals for oneself and others can be seen as a financial practice that underwrites the notion of "each life as important and notable" (Holloway 2003, 185) and thus "grievable" (Butler 2009), the moral-economic considerations of funeral homes are key to whether insurance money can become a vehicle for the expression of human value. Life insurance policies thus harbor the promise of a good funeral for the deceased and the bereaved as well as financial stability for the funeral home. This article has also shown, however, that bad deaths expose market pressures in the funeral industry that increasingly restrict people's ability to convert insurance money into funerary wealth into human worth.

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Notes

1 Please note that all personal names are pseudonyms.

2 This was exceptional. Historically, jazz funerals entailed a musical procession (also called a second line) from the place of the ceremony to the graveyard for a final send-off. Today, they mostly take place in the city's streets after which the hearse and the procession of cars drives to a cemetery outside city limits (see Atkins 2012; Regis 1999).

3 The existence of online obituaries makes it problematic to supply the date of fieldnotes taken at a funeral. Therefore fieldnote in-text citations have been intentionally omitted for confidentiality.

4 According to the most recent statistics of the NFDA from 2017, the median cost of a funeral with a vault (typically required by a cemetery) is $8,508. This excludes cash-advance charges such as for flowers, an obituary, funeral programs, and a police escort for the funeral procession. See http://www.nfda.org/news/statistics.

5 This lengthy waiting period is not just due to the internal procedures of insurance companies but also depends on the time it takes to acquire death certificates.

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