

THE BUSINESS OF DEATH:
COMMUNITY, CULTURE & CHANGE IN DURHAM, NC

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ABSTRACT

Indaia Whitcombe: The Business of Death: Community, Culture & Change
in Durham, NC

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How are communities resilient in the face of disruption and dislocation? What institutions and traditions hold fast in the wake of change? Displaced by urban renewal multiple times, family-owned funeral homes have proven to be some of the longest-surviving African American businesses in Durham, North Carolina. These institutions have survived physical dislocation and social disruption by engaging in the oldest of occupational traditions: caring for the dead and comforting the living. This paper looks at the history of African American funeral homes and explores how these businesses have weathered the forces of change through the strength of tradition.

PREFACE

When I first moved to Durham, North Carolina 10 years ago, long-term residents of the city spoke of Hayti as a place and community that existed only as a memory—a thriving African American neighborhood destroyed by urban renewal and the construction of the 147 Freeway beginning in the mid-50s. The stories about Hayti that people shared with me and the ways they spoke about its character drew me in. I set out on a journey to learn more. I wanted to know what the Hayti neighborhood was like before it was devastated and how people felt about it today. Against rapid recent urban development of Durham, the Hayti Heritage Center is today the only surviving structure from historic Hayti, and it was in the Heritage Center that I met neighborhood community members, organizers, and activists who helped guide me on this research journey. In conversation with them, I learned about the complexities of Hayti’s history—how it rose and fell and was one piece of a larger story—about urban renewal as a mechanism for power and control in an effort to further marginalize people. I found that Hayti is very much alive today—in people’s memories and stories of the community. Often, when conversations would come to an end, people would tell me, “You should really speak to Skippie Scarborough—the funeral director—and you should also speak to Chris Fisher and come to think of it, he’s a funeral director too.” Again and again I was referred to African American funeral directors as keepers of the neighborhood’s history, as community anchors within a changing city.

One by one, as I met them, the six African American funeral directors of Durham opened their doors and shared with me the stories of their families, their businesses, and the people they serve. What I aim to set forth in these pages is a reflection of the life and work experience of this group—the stories about how they came into this profound occupation and why they do it. What follows is a set of distinct voices that share in a collective experience of African American business and community-making in the urban American South. Within the context of mainstream American culture, where death is not a matter of discussion, my hope is that this work will challenge accepted cultural dialogue. And why does it matter? What would be lost without these voices heard? For me, we would lose a connection to a place, a history, and a people—an experience and perspective that are specific to this city, which I call home. We would lose knowledge of the hard work and service that these individuals and families have given to a city that did not recognize their place in it. For others, these stories will reveal a model of successful economic networking built upon community solidarity and sustainability. What is the business of death? It is the family work, community tradition, fixing of the body, viewing as a social gathering, home-going, funeral home as refuge, the leadership of a director, and so much more.

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CHAPTER 1: BEGINNING

“It is a curious fact that with the exception of that of caterer there is no business in which Negroes seem to be more numerously engaged or one in which they have been more uniformly successful.”

-Booker T. Washington on the success of the African American funeral home from his book *The Negro in Business* (1907, 94).

Largely originating in the historic Hayti neighborhood, African American funeral homes have become well-established community anchors throughout Durham today. They are businesses built upon strong leadership, a segregated marketplace, and the elevation of a family name. In this work, I argue that these businesses have survived the forces of physical dislocation and social disruption due to the deeply rooted function of their proprietors’ traditional occupation, and the role that these local institutions play in maintaining social cohesion within their communities. This thesis explores how funeral home directors have extended their role as businessmen beyond that of a financially stable proprietor to serve as leaders, activists, and mediators, providing spaces of refuge, counsel, and care to protect, maintain, and strengthen the health of their communities.

The story begins with the death of a grocer. Mr. Wiley Lowrey was a prominent black business owner that had served the African American community of Kingston, South Carolina,

for many years.¹ He was an important public figure, respected by his workers and patrons alike. However, when he died at the end of the 19th century, the town's white funeral director held his viewing in the basement rather than the chapel and put his body in a crude wooden box that was then hauled away on the back of a donkey cart. The lack of care and disregard for Mr. Lowery outraged his community and his good friend Mr. Joseph Crooms Hargett in particular. Mr. Hargett vowed to open his own funeral business, the kind of institution that would bury his friends in an honorable way, one that would give all people dignity in death (Lee 2017).

Soon after, a young man by the name of John Clarence Scarborough came to work for Hargett. Mr. Scarborough didn't have a father and had been raised by his mother on her own. He worked hard and Hargett saw in him a strong work ethic and dedication to serving the community. The young man became Hargett's protégé, then son-in-law, and finally, his business partner. Hargett sponsored young Scarborough's education, first at Kittrell Business College and then at Reounard Training School for Embalmers in New York, where he was the only African American student. Upon graduation he became the first licensed black embalmer in the country (Scarborough 2019).

Hargett provided the capital for Scarborough to open a funeral home and, in 1905, he did so in the Hayti district of Durham, North Carolina. Hayti was founded as an independent black community shortly after the Civil War on the southern edge of Durham by freed slaves coming to work in tobacco warehouses in the city. Hayti took its name after Haiti—the first black free nation. “Hay-ti” was a southern tongue tribute to the country that had fought for its independence

¹ This early history comes from my interviews with Durham's funeral directors and other community members.

and succeeded. As a community that was born out of necessity, Hayti grew to be the largest and most prosperous African American neighborhood in Durham. At the time of Scarborough's arrival in the city, Hayti was home to more than 200 African American-owned and operated businesses and institutions where residents worked shopped, worshipped and went to school (Lee 2017).

On a national scale Hayti was seen as a mecca for African Americans seeking a middle-class lifestyle, independence from the white power structure and for entrepreneurial opportunity (Shabu 2017). In 1912, W.E.B. Du Bois described his first-hand account of what was occurring in this southern city in his article, *The Upbuilding of Black Durham*. In it, he stated:

Today there is a singular group in Durham where a black man may get up in the morning from a mattress made by black men, in a house which a black man built out of lumber which black men cut and planed; he may put on a suit which he bought at a colored haberdashery and socks knit at a colored mill; he may cook victuals from a colored grocery on a stove which black men fashioned; he may earn his living working for colored men, be sick in a colored hospital, and buried from a colored church; and the Negro insurance society will pay his widow enough to keep his children in a colored school. This is surely progress (Du Bois 1912, 338).

For Mr. Scarborough, the ability to provide a much-needed service to a community built on black capital and self-sufficiency allowed his business to flourish. When the influenza epidemic of 1918 hit North Carolina, Mr. Scarborough was ready and not alone. While he assisted families in need in the surrounding counties, his wife, Daisy Hargett Scarborough, who was by then a trained embalmer herself, took care of the people in Durham (Scarborough 2019). As a leader in the funeral industry, Mr. Scarborough went on to found the Funeral Directors and Morticians Association of North Carolina, serve as a director of the Mechanics and Farmers

Bank, and in 1925 open a school. The Scarborough Nursery provided supervision and instruction for young children of working mothers, focusing on the health and well-being of its attendees and teaching responsibility and self-reliance. Mr. Scarborough's mission to build a life and business that showed dignity and care to all people had come full circle (Scarborough 2019).

In the segregated South, the Hayti district continued to develop, growing to be a tightly-knit, self-sustaining, educated and highly respected community. Business was booming in the 1930s and while Mr. Scarborough had exercised full market dominance until then, that would soon begin to change. Ellis D. Jones opened his funeral home in 1935, around the same time that Scarborough's grandson was born. J.C. Scarborough III (or Skippie as he would later be called) took to learning the family business from a young age. At five years old, this young Scarborough was accompanying mourning patrons, riding in the family car on the way to their way to the funeral. By the age of seven, he was walking to the office with his grandfather, walking downtown to the health department to pick up the signed death certificates and carrying them back to the funeral home. Skippie Scarborough says that it was these walks with his grandfather that proved to be most influential, more than any other aspect of the family business. Walking together, the elder Scarborough talked to his grandson about Durham and talked to him about Hayti. It was a bustling neighborhood then and they passed many shops and people along the way—there were three car repairs shops, two shoe shine parlors, the Regal movie theater, Cox barbershop, the drugstore where Mr. Jones had worked before opening his funeral business, and the donut shop (Jones 2018). There was a saying that you could buy anything in Hayti except a new car, and in the mid-1940s this was surly true. On these walks, people would call out to Mr. Scarborough and tip their hats his way. Passing the homes of Cox and Wheeler from the

Mechanics and Farmer's Bank, the Algonquin Tennis club, the grocery store, and White Rock Church where Reverend Miles Mark Fisher preached, the young Scarborough learned about the community and what a well-respected and revered figure his grandfather was in it (Scarborough 2019).

By the age of 10, Skippie Scarborough was working at his grandfather's funeral home. It was around the same time that Grover C. Burtney, a gifted artist and sculpture, was working on opening his own funeral business on Fayetteville Street in Durham. He opened the doors to Burtney Funeral Services in 1947 while continuing to teach art at Hillside High School. Mr. Burtney's training as an artist would help establish him as a uniquely skilled embalmer who could restore a corpse to a life-like appearance. Eight years later, James, George and William Holloway moved their business, Holloway Memorial Funeral Home from Hillsborough to Alston Avenue in Durham. Business had been slow in Hillsborough, but James had heard that there was good patronage in Durham and convinced his brothers to make the move (Holloway 2019).

The 1950s brought a period of divestment to the Hayti district and there were whisperings of a new highway and urban renewal project coming soon. 1957 marked the first segregation protest in North Carolina; it took place at the Royal Ice Cream Parlor on Roxboro St. in Durham. The 1960 Greensboro sit-ins sparked the national movement that would follow. The fight for integration had just started, and while some African American patrons would soon begin to shop at other places in Durham, it had little impact on the Hayti business district as it had remained a self-sufficient community for so long. The 147 freeway construction had also started downtown, working its way back toward Fayetteville Street; yet the final outcome of the project was still unknown to most African American residents. In 1963, another mortuary business opened in

Hayti, this one established by Reverend Fisher's son Elijah, who went by "Pookey" and had always dreamed of owning his own funeral home. Fisher Funeral Parlor sat on Fayetteville Street across from the White Rock Baptist Church where Reverend Fisher preached; the Fisher slogan was "Service for all within the means of all" (Fisher 2018).

By 1970, most of Hayti was gone. The freeway project took down houses and businesses in 200 acres of the community and split it with the highway down the middle (Jones 2018). Many residents and businesses were permanently displaced and never fully compensated for their property. They had been promised progress; they had been led to believe that the highway would bring new opportunity and a better way of life. People lost not only their homes and their livelihoods, but their social and cultural ties as well (Shabu 2017). While many African American funeral homes were forced to relocate, their business, which for so long had relied on the color-bound economy, remained strong. In 1975, Bishop Franklin Hanes arrived in Durham from Winston Salem to work at Mr. Burtney's funeral home. Bishop Hanes would go on to open the final African American funeral home, Hanes Funeral Home, in East Durham off Pettigrew St., not far from the new highway (Hanes 2019).

The Scarborough & Hargett Funeral Home has served Durham's African American community continuously for 118 years. Today it sits on the corner of Holloway and N. Queen streets, close to downtown Durham—its fifth address since the Scarboroughs have been forced to move again and again because of urban renewal and city development projects. Skippie Scarborough and his wife Queen are there nearly every day. Skippie Scarborough's memory is fading, but he talks about Hayti as if he and his grandfather were walking there just yesterday. He will tell you a story filled with the gentle ease that comes with time and consideration, and

he'll tell you, without hesitation, that he "wouldn't take nothin' for the journey" (Scarborough 2019).

Some 50 years later, what is left of Hayti? How has this community been resilient in the face of physical and social disruption, and what role have funeral homes played in maintaining social cohesion? This story is about the funeral homes that make up the mortuary business community in Durham today. These family-owned funeral homes have proven to be some of the longest-surviving African American businesses in the city, as they honor the strength and unity of the community they serve by engaging in the oldest of occupational traditions: caring for the dead and comforting the living.

From the early days of Hayti through Jim Crow segregation, various phases of urban renewal, and now transformations of the city by rapid gentrification, what has changed for this group of African American funeral directors, and what has stayed the same? This thesis examines the function of the family business and funeral practices, the significance of the funeral home as a space and place in African American communities, and finally, the identity of the funeral director as a leader, activist, and mediator to his people. I explore questions such as: How did these businesses benefit from a color-bound economy and simultaneously fight against racial segregation? What is the historic significance of rituals such as the body viewing and the home-going ceremony? What role does the family unit play in sustaining the business of funeral homes? How have funeral homes functioned as spaces that support community health? And finally, how have funeral directors influenced the long-term well-being of their communities?

CHAPTER 2: THE BUSINESS

In the following section, I introduce the structure of the family business in the funeral homes in Durham, from the young directors' early memories and on-the-job training to embalming practices and other African American funerary traditions. As with any business, the path of the family-run funeral home was not entirely seamless. The business took time to grow, to establish its name and clientele. But for all of these funeral directors and their families, there was always a commitment to making it work.

I begin with a story of Michael Jones of Jones Ellis D & Sons Funeral Directors Inc. Thirty years after Scarborough & Hargett opened its doors, Ellis D. Jones left his job at the pharmacy in Hayti, took out a loan from Mechanics and Farmers Bank and built the funeral home he'd always dreamed of having. A little more than a decade later his grandson, Michael Gardner Jones, was born. Today, Jones' funeral home still stands on the same corner of Dowd and N. Elizabeth St. in Durham. Michael Jones is at the front desk most days; his son and daughter are there too learning the family trade. The business was passed from Jones' grandfather to his father and on down to him, though he started training at young age, as most funeral directors do.

Death—that's what we did. That was the family business. I was always in it; ever since I was about twelve years old I've been working in it. We ran the ambulance service—my brother turned 16 and just started driving—there wasn't any training. We were picking up bodies, working funerals. We rented out hospital beds, wheel chairs, I mean you name it—we did quite a bit. [Jones laughs remembering this] (Jones 2018).

The young directors' early training was informal, on the job, and in the home, but for all looking back it was a formative time that affirmed their role in the family business and paved the way for their future post. These young men would go on to enroll in mortuary school, get licensed in embalming and funeral directing, and enter into a year-long apprenticeship while also navigating an alternative career path along the way. These early memories of funeral home operations reveal much about the important role these businesses played in southern communities during the Jim Crow era.

It is a common remembrance among the directors as boys growing up in the funeral business- driving the ambulances with an uncle, brother or cousin, picking up bodies, and delivering them back to the home. For many of these men, it is their earliest memory, their first duty, and even how they learned to drive. It was not unusual in this region for funeral directors to operate hearses that were also equipped to act as ambulances, and these combination vehicles were often put on standby to respond to accidents involving African Americans (Holloway 2002, 36). Chris Fisher, whose brother started Fisher Memorial Funeral Parlor in 1963, remembers this as one of the most challenging aspects of the job:

You might get a call at two 'o clock in the morning - and somebody either got shot or somebody was in a car accident, they're bleeding and you've got to take them to the hospital. The training was—you've got to pick them up and take them to the hospital. It was a service—you weren't making any money, it was just something you did. If you didn't pick them up nobody else was going to pick them up (Fisher 2018).

In the South at this time, segregation meant segregated emergency services, physician care, and hospitals. Funeral directors and their mortuary staff were the only mode of emergency

transportation and first responders for African American people, sometimes delivering them to the hospital, sometimes to the morgue (Holloway 2002, 36-37).

Training

Funeral homes were in many ways dependent upon their patrons to help sustain and grow the business. Unfortunately, in this line of work, growing the business meant burying the community. Such was the case for Mr. Fisher: “When we started out, just about everyone we buried, I knew. So that in and of itself was interesting to deal with as a young person. I remember the first body I picked up in 1963 and I remember the first body I saw autopsied” (Fisher 2018). Most men going into the family business had first-hand experiences like Mr. Fisher’s and went on to apprentice under their father, uncle or brother; such is the case still today. However, for some, it was not that their family had chosen this line of business; nor had they made the choice on their own. Rather, the business chose them.

Bishop Franklin Hanes, for example, grew up in Winston Salem, North Carolina, the youngest of eight children. At the age of 14 he started cutting grass at James Johnson’s funeral home. He cut grass the whole summer. Mr. Johnson would often set the telephone out on the front porch so he could answer it when he was out. When school started, Mr. Johnson took the boy home and told his father: “If you let him stay five days a week, I’ll send him to school and bring him home on the weekends. You won’t never have to do nothing.” So, my dad had eight children and he just said, ‘Okay.’ That’s one he didn’t have to take care of. And Mr. Johnson, he took care of me real good” (Hanes 2019).

Bishop Hanes lived in the funeral home by himself and Mr. Johnson stayed across the street in an apartment. In the morning, he’d bring the boy breakfast and take him to school. In the

evening, Bishop Hanes would sit up at the front desk and do his homework and Mr. Johnson would bring him dinner and put him to bed. The young man stayed with the funeral director all through his school years, cutting the grass, answering the telephone, driving the ambulances, and helping with funerals. Mr. Johnson taught him how to run the funeral home and when he graduated high school, he went on to work with Howard Robertson at Robertson's Funeral Home. For Bishop Hanes, though he was not born into the funerary business, it became his home. His early years were shaped by his daily experience of the funeral home, which ultimately resulted in a very formative training.

Fixing the Body

While the mortuary aspect of the funeral business may indeed be off-putting to the layperson, the mechanics of embalming a body is at the heart of the funeral home. For Bishop Hanes this knowledge, like so much of his early training, came at a young age. At Mr. Robertson's funeral home Bishop Hanes learned how to fix the body, specifically how to embalm: "Mr. Robertson taught me everything down in that embalming room. It was an old-fashioned funeral home and there were no machines back then. I learned embalming with a bucket- the old way" (Hanes 2018). Embalming is the art and science of preserving the body with a chemical process to aid in warding off decomposition. The actual method entails removing the blood from the body and replacing it with embalming fluid through the veins. The mixture of formaldehyde, methanol and other chemicals assist in preserving the body for several days. Filler may be injected into the corpse to help make the body more presentable if it is emaciated. And then there are the cosmetics. This entire process is considered a great restorative art and what funeral directors often refer to as, "fixing a body" (Burthey 2019). Though "fixing a

body” is not only about preservation. This practice, particularly within the African American tradition, encourages aesthetics to highest degree.

Bishop Hanes left Winston Salem and went to work for Mr. Grover Burtthey in Durham, a highly respected mortician who was well known for his expertise in the restorative arts. He was a gifted artist and sculptor and had turned to the mortuary sciences, which at the time seemed to ensure a more stable career than that of the artist’s life. Mr. Burtthey had the ability to make corpses look life-like, asleep, and at peace, which in turn brought peace to many a grieving family member (Burtthey 2019). For Mr. Hanes, he was also a good teacher:

When I came here to Mr. Burtthey, he really, really taught me the business, and I learned a lot of cosmetics. He was an artist. He was good at fixing bodies. I learned all that from Mr. Burtthey. Him and his son, Burtthey Jr., he taught us side by side; we worked together for about twelve years. He used to sit us down at night and he’d just fill your head, all this stuff, telling you how to run the funeral home (Hanes 2019).

Mr. Burtthey’s teachings were incredibly valuable to the young aspiring funeral director, as “fixing a body” well and preparing it for viewing was the first step towards building a strong reputation in this line of business.

The Viewing

It is difficult to know how and when the tradition of viewing the deceased came into practice and why it was deemed so important within African American communities in particular.² A common claim amongst funeral directors was that a successful viewing of the body could aid in the grieving process and for this reason appearance mattered greatly. Also, there was

² There’s much more to say here about fixing the body and the way that appearance and style have historically been important in black communities—particularly in moments of presenting a final vision to families and loved ones. While this is indeed worthy of a lengthy discussion, it is however, not within the scope of this thesis which is centered around the life history narratives of these particular funeral directors.

money to be made. African American scholar, Karla Holloway explains the open-casket custom and the mortician's relationship to it, which became a tradition in African American communities beginning in the 1900s:

A laying-on of hands, touching, kissing, and expressing one's grief by viewing the remains have traditionally mattered deeply. African American morticians certainly encouraged these practices because they made more money when families decided to embalm a body and make it available for viewing (Holloway 2002, 25).

Of the funeral directors I spoke with, nearly all of them expressed that it was the pride of the family business to have someone who showed particular expertise in the ability to "fix a body." Algin Holloway, shared the memory of his uncle who started Holloway Memorial Funeral Home in 1954 and had substantial experience and success in the tradition of "fixing bodies" to be viewed:

My uncle was a great person in the restorative arts. We hardly ever had any cremations at all cause black people don't really believe in cremations. I don't know why- I guess they want to look at the people; it's a great thing with black people about viewing the body. They want them laid out and to come and look at them. I do not know how far it goes back or what, I do not really know... (Holloway 2019).

While viewing the deceased may be thought of as an experience that is both personal and intimate, this was not always the case for African Americans, particularly during the Civil Rights era, when the open casket viewing was used as a tool of courage and resistance and had a profound impact on the national psyche. In conversation about the Civil Rights era and the history of violence toward African Americans, Mr. Holloway made reference to Selma and the attacks on student protestors, Rodney King, and Emmett Till, of course. When Emmett Till was lynched in Mississippi in 1955, his body was sent back to Chicago, where hundreds of thousands

lined the streets to view his remains. In receiving her son's bloated and mutilated body, Till's mother insisted on an open casket, "so that the world could see what they have done to my child" (Smith 2010, 125). Till's open casket was meant to imbue as much shock and horror as was felt by his death. It is perhaps the strongest example of an open casket being used as a point of protest. Historian Suzanne Smith argues that in the wake of such horrendous crimes, African American morticians were often left with the complicated task of restoring the bodies of slain victims in a way that made them presentable to viewers, while at the same time preserving the individual's humanity by not masking the horror of what had been done to them (Smith 2010, 124).

Durham's African American funeral directors have not been shielded from the ways and means of black death. Gun-related deaths are not uncommon in the city today, and for some directors they make up a large portion of the bodies and burials they prepare. As Holloway states, "The generational circumstances may change, but the violence done to black bodies has had a consistent history" (Holloway 2002, 27). With the common expectation of a traditional viewing, African American morticians are challenged to employ their skills of preservation and presentation while simultaneously holding space for a multi-generational grief that is specifically connected to violence and violation.

In the days before the funeral, the body is set out for public viewing. Typically, a sign outside the funeral home will display the name of individual laid out inside. Often there is more than one name, sometimes two or three. The viewing room may be divided by partitions, allowing visitors some privacy, or sometimes there are none and the bodies lie in state together. The formality of a wake has given way to a public viewing, where a loved one's body is on

display at the funeral home for several days in advance of the funeral and visitors can come and go as they please. The visitation, a time to come and pay respect to the family, usually takes place a few hours before the funeral, what has traditionally been called the “home-going celebration.”

Home-going

The term “Home-going celebration” is all-encompassing of the African American experience: life, death, and freedom. As historian Suzanne Smith explains: “Historically, death in African American cultural imagination was not feared but rather embraced as the ultimate ‘home-going,’ a welcome journey to a spiritual existence that would transcend the sufferings and injustices of the mortal world” (Smith 2001, 18). From slavery through the antebellum period, death was always imagined as the truest freedom and absolute salvation. For this reason, death was a time of mourning while also a cause for celebration, as an individual was now released from the clutches of oppression and finally—home-going.

The first day is a day of mourning. The next day, and every day after, is a celebration.

And there is waiting too. Mr. Hanes explains:

When somebody dies in the community, it’s a sad occasion and everybody’s sad and everybody’s coming home. Church people, they come around to the house, they sing songs and pray. After the sad day is over, it’s time for the party to start. People gather, go up to the house, bring food, eat and talk. And then after the funeral, still another party. For a lot of people, it helps them to cope. That was the tradition, way back, that’s what they did. When somebody died, there was probably going to be ten days before you had the funeral—cause we couldn’t do the airplane thing, we used to have to ride the greyhound buses from California, so it was going to take a long time to get here. But the party’s going to roll—for nine days... Every night, when I was a little boy and somebody died, they’d shut down the community [laughs]. You could sit on the front porch and listen to them, they’d party every night. But it has changed through the generations... (Hanes 2019).

Historically the purpose of preserving the corpse was twofold—the first was to present the family with a final “memory picture” of their loved one; and the second was to keep the body intact long enough for distant family members to travel to the funeral gathering. In *Passed On*, Karla Holloway touches on the strong African American tradition of going home for a funeral. She includes the reflection of one funeral director on the expectations surrounding death in his southern family: “We went home for a funeral. No questions. Nobody worried about what it cost or what we were doing with jobs or whatever. When somebody died—I don’t care how you were related—if you were family you went back home where you were supposed to be. With your family” (Holloway 2002, 29).

The ceremony itself is often held in the sanctuary of the funeral home or a church, where people gather to mourn the dead and celebrate their life; it is a space where grief is mixed equally with joyful remembrance. The service may include a sermon, hymns and gospel songs, shared memories, and scripture readings. Funeral directors are in charge of organizing and orchestrating the service and holding space for the “expressive emotionalism” that is common in African American funerals (Smith 2010, 85). The funeral home is also required to support the communal ideal of a respectable home-going ceremony by supplying the proper goods and services. This requisite pageantry includes: elegant caskets, large floral arrangements, and a funeral procession lead by stylish hearses and limousines. [new paragraph:] A funeral director’s fleet is of the utmost importance and always noted in conversation. The size and style of one’s “rolling stock” has been a point of competition among funeral homes since the arrival of the automobile (Smith

2010, 87). But every funeral director would agree that a successful home-going ceremony is not merely a sum of all the important elements, but that it is the service behind the service. Chris Fisher of Fisher Memorial Funeral Parlor, like many of the funeral directors with whom I spoke, believes that it is the way he conducts his business that sets him apart: “I treat everybody like they’re the best and the last. I see my role as being able to do something that nobody else can do for them in their time of grief. So, when they leave, it’s a death experience, but it’s not a bad experience” (Fisher 2018).

The first step in orchestrating a home-going is the planning, and for most funeral directors that begins with a visit to the home of the deceased. For Queen Scarborough, this visit is about being in the environment of the person who has passed, listening to the family, and building the story of the life the person lived:

You go to their home so that you can be in their environment. Sitting there, you look, you observe, maybe you see something you think would help represent who they were. With loved ones, we want to personalize—what were her hobbies, what is it that she really enjoyed, what music, what flowers, what colors? Did she have a favorite dress? We try to meet with the family and find out what that person was all about. We do it with pictures so that we can see their full life and get a feel for what that person was about. Say he loved fishing—can we borrow the fishing rod? He was a football player—you get some of his trophies, you get his uniform, you put it on display—you’re putting together a story for the celebration. What was your mother’s favorite song—whatever it was, let’s have it at the celebration, that’s what we do (Scarborough, 2019).

For Queen Scarborough, this role as storyteller is an aspect of the job that she feels the Scarboroughs excel in and one she believes sets them apart from the other funeral homes in town. When asked about some of the more memorable services, Queen Scarborough pauses and then shares her memory of a service they held for a baby:

There was a little baby that we had once. It was sad, but the family made it a beautiful experience; they brought toys, they brought balloons. I guess they were trying to think of everything that they had not done for the little one and they wanted it to be special. They didn't have to do that, but they did. We ordered this beautiful little casket, just so. They were just so appreciative. And you know, we don't charge for babies (Scarborough, 2019).

Queen Scarborough's remembrance represents the tenderness and profound sorrow that is undeniably a large part of this work and how it is intertwined with the pragmatic business-mindedness of the funeral trade. "We don't charge for babies" was a common refrain repeated by nearly all of the funeral directors. It was offered up without any initiated inquiry. This policy is both voluntary and unanimous among African American funeral directors. It is done for both the sentiment and the possibility of ensuring future patronage. A funeral director and officer in the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association once explained this by saying that funeral directors were encouraged not to charge for a child's funeral as it was more than often an unexpected loss and there was no insurance to cover the cost of a burial. While some directors were hesitant to enter into this agreement because of the loss of revenue, others saw it as a way of building loyalty and ensuring future income. As this director told Karla Holloway: "If you do the baby well, when the mother or daddy dies, we'll get them on down the road" (Holloway 2002, 52).

Another service that has stayed at the forefront of Queen Scarborough's memories was the home-going ceremony of a well-known, revered teacher and athlete from Durham. Dr. Leroy Walker was the first black president of the United States Olympic Committee and the head coach for the North Carolina Central's track team. He was a local and national hero, and had a great impact on both the university and Durham's African American community. When he died, the

Scarboroughs knew it needed to be special, and they made it so. Young track runners ran with torches from the chapel where the ceremony took place to the cemetery where Dr. Walker was buried. There was a horse and carriage in the procession, and the service was concluded with the release of doves. Such a service is representative of the celebratory spirit and impressive pageantry that is often present in African American home-going ceremonies. Queen Scarborough reflected upon the service and the impression it made on the audience:

With his home-going celebration, we tried to incorporate his life story—that was important to us, not necessarily to his family, but it was important to us. It's not just cut and dry—it's bigger than this. And when it's all over, can you imagine all the folk that talked about his home-going celebration and all the folk who came. It was worth everything we did—it was worth it, all the time and effort, it was truly worth it. We don't take any of the people we serve for granted, and just as we put forth that effort for Dr. Walker, that's what we'll do for whomever comes through our doors, cause your family does not have to come to us. They come for a reason, and so we feel we can't let you down. That's why we come to work every day (Scarborough 2019).

Scarborough & Hargett is the oldest funeral home in Durham. The Scarborough name carries the weight of class, professionalism, respectability and belonging. It means something to have a “Scarborough funeral service,” and for Queen and Skippie Scarborough, the success of their business is rooted in that notion—that burying your family means serving their community, no matter who you are. While Queen Scarborough married into the family later in life, she is deeply connected to the mission of the work, playing a vital role in the day-to-day operations of the Scarborough family business.

I'll Marry You if You go to Mortuary School

Skippie and Queen Scarborough met at church, but Queen Scarborough had known of the Scarborough family long before. Going to school at N.C. Central, she used to see the funeral processions coming down Fayetteville St. The Scarborough name was emblazoned on the hearses and hymn music played from the lead cars. Scarborough was the only funeral home that played music. Years later they met at church in person and started dating. Soon after, Skippie Scarborough told Queen, “I’ll marry you if you go to mortuary school” (Scarborough 2019). So, she did. She would be retiring soon from a long career as a public school teacher and thought, “why not go to mortuary school?” It took two years. She completed her program in May and they were married in July. Almost two decades later, Queen Scarborough still talks about the Scarboroughs with a kind of reverence and considers her place in the family and the family business:

It was almost as though they knew they had to achieve. And so, I think I fit into the picture cause I’ve always felt that way. The Scarboroughs have been compassionate people, sympathetic to the needs of their clientele. We’ve been married 17 years and we’ve never turned a family away—never, never since I’ve been here. They’ve figured out how to make things happen for folk; they think enough of the people who come to them to provide a service, so you just figure out how to make it happen. You treat people how you’d hope to be treated and everybody doesn’t have the top dollar. You don’t have to spend a fortune on a home-going celebration; it’s the way it’s presented and the way it’s handled. Presentation is important to us because when we serve family, I think, it’s my family. If it’s not good enough for our family, then it’s not good enough for your family (Scarborough, 2019).

Women, and the wives of funeral directors in particular, have played an integral and strategic role in the business since the early days of the African American funeral industry. Once known as the “mortician’s nurse,” these women were thought of as the backbone of the home-

going ceremony, often attending to bereaved family members and working to maintain a level of decorum throughout the service. Funeral directors' wives were thought to be indispensable to the functioning of the business because they were capable of being positive negotiators and communicators while also being emotionally sensitive to a family's needs (Smith 2010, 86).

For Grover Burtthey, this lesson came when he introduced his future wife to his father:

My wife is the one that's, I'd say, 80% of the time engaged with all of the family interaction in terms of the planning; and that was based on my dad—he was insistent because he always thought that women had the potential to be the best interactor in the funeral service. He was trained by women and he respected the fact that women are relationship-oriented and a woman is just always going to be better than a man in terms of interacting with the families. He did his apprenticeship with the two women-owned firms in Philly, and from that day he said, “You know, a woman will always do better in this than a man, if the woman has something, if the woman has the gift.” My wife had the gift because she came from a huge family in the country. She can immediately connect with whoever she sits down with at the table. So that has been a particular blessing that we have, that she has the gift—of discernment, of people, and she has a natural presence that people just love. Her whole thing is—this is the last thing you're doing with your loved one and I want to make sure it's everything you want it to be. So, she goes out of her way.... My wife, I don't think there's ever an arrangement that she's done in less than 2 hours, and by the end of it they're all laughing and joking and she's a new family member. My dad loved it; he recognized it right away—he said, “you are a natural, you need to go get your license.” If anything, he realized this is the person that can carry this business forward. He had more confidence of her carrying it forward than me (Burtthey 2019).

While male funeral directors are more than often the face and name of the business, their wives are undeniably the heart.

A Segregated Marketplace

The Civil War marked both the end of slavery and the beginning of what would become the modern funeral industry. In turn, the funeral profession emerged parallel to Jim Crow segregation. Beginning in the late 19th century, the Jim Crow era impacted every aspect of

African American life, particularly in the socio-economic sphere. African Americans saw the funeral business as a promising avenue for economic independence and social uplift, and in doing so actively shaped their communities and the development of the modern funeral industry (Smith 2010, 18). In Booker T. Washington's book, *The Negro in Business* (1906), he devotes an entire chapter to black funeral directors entitled "The Negro Undertaker." In it, he profiles several successful undertakers across the country, illustrating a major trend in black capitalism that had specific implications for the developing field of funeral directing: the growth of a segregated marketplace (Smith 2010, 44).

When Mr. Fisher's uncle started his funeral home in Hillsborough, the powers that be were all white. The business was struggling in the rural county, and after convincing his brothers, they moved to Durham where they'd heard good things about a more cohesive clientele base. The business flourished. His nephew, Algin Holloway, who helps run the business today, reflected on how the business was able to grow and sustain its independence in the segregated economy:

In the funeral business and in other businesses in Durham and in Hayti, you had some kind of insulation from overt racism and dependency on the power structure. You know, you had your own economy and you didn't have to depend on the power structure for everything. It's something that many people have aspired to do, but not so many can get in it, cause it takes time and money—well it takes time and being able to weather the storm until you can build your business up. Funeral directors have been looked up to cause they were independent. The power structure doesn't have anything to do with it—you have state regulations, but pretty much you're on your own and you never have to deal with it—the powers that be, they didn't need anything from it, and that was a matter of independence (Holloway 2019).

For the first half of the 20th century, the insulated world of black business gave African American funeral directors a secure base of African American consumers. With their economic

independence, funeral directors were respected for their professionalism and leadership, making their voices influential in their communities:

They were independent. Frankly speaking, even these days, in the South, it's still a black business that serves black people. Funeral homes are still one of the few places in the black community that handle thousands of dollars on a weekly basis and do it being in business for themselves. Because these guys made money that allowed them to feel a certain amount of independence and not beholden to anybody, it was a mentality that made them feel like they could be more vocal, cause they didn't have to worry about anybody boycotting them or not giving them business cause they offended someone. Cause they had their clientele and the families they served and so forth, and they didn't have to worry about getting fired on the job cause they had their own business. So, I think that had a lot to do with maybe some of them going into politics (Burtney 2019).

Because segregation denied African American entrepreneurs the opportunity to grow their businesses outside of their race, funeral homes remained small and family-owned. It was a complicated reality—their economic security was bound to Jim Crow in a way that would always limit the scope of their success. And yet similar to places of worship, integration did not have a strong impact on these institutions.

Michael Jones, funeral director of the Ellis D. Jones & Sons, makes this point in talking about the funeral industry in Durham: “Integration hadn't hurt us any. I tell people, 11 o'clock Sunday morning is probably the most segregated time in America. And funerals and churches go together, so if they stay segregated, they will stay. You know we've been able to survive because we haven't been affected by integration” (Jones 2018). For Jones, integration was a force that had the potential to break apart the business and the community. He sees the unity and strength of the community in the traditional practices of worship and death, and that segregation in many ways ensures the longevity of the funeral home as an institution. Christopher Fisher, manager of the Fisher Memorial Funeral Parlor echoes this sentiment when describing growing up in Hayti

as the son of a pastor: “My father used to preach that integration was a white man’s trick, which has turned out to be true. In integrating, yeah, you got some benefits, but you lose a lot of your identity too” (Fisher 2018). For Mr. Fisher, the loss of identity is more about a diminished sense of solidarity—the kind of solidarity that comes with growing up in a successful and economically self-sufficient African American community such as Hayti.

After urban renewal and the destruction of Hayti, most places went out of business because they couldn’t survive. But this hasn’t been the case for the funeral homes, and Mr. Fisher attributes this to the fact that as a business model they have remained mostly segregated. Today, it is a common refrain among funeral directors to attribute the longevity of their businesses to the loyalty of the African American community that makes up the almost the entirety of their patronage. “Some black folks just wanna deal with their own” (Fisher 2018). This may be true, but it also can’t be ignored that white funeral homes simply would not take black bodies. Mr. Fisher spoke about the silent agreement between African American and white funeral directors—when black bodies arrived at the nearby white funeral home, the director would send them to Mr. Fisher. In the last decade, some white funeral homes have just begun to accept African American corpses (Fisher 2018). For some funeral directors, like Mr. Burthey, this is not surprising, but he also acknowledges the deep class divide which is so inextricably intertwined with race:

I think it is a fact that integration didn’t really mean that white funeral homes were going to start burying black people. And frankly speaking, I think most white funeral homes would cost more. So that still is a factor as well, ‘cause you are dealing in a segregated economy that unfortunately people don’t have much money. So, it’s not necessarily that a black funeral home makes a lot of money, cause black people do not have a lot of money (Burthey 2019).

While Durham’s funeral business was a deeply segregated market, it was not always an open market—particularly when it came to outsiders. When Bishop Franklin Hanes arrived in town from Winston Salem, the message he received was that he was not welcome—not in the business and not so much in the community. Though he was met with suspicion from the local business owners, he still managed to secure a position as an apprentice to Mr. Burtthey, where he worked for many years. When Bishop Hanes decided to open his own practice, he was met with opposition: “Who told you you could open a funeral home in Durham without asking us?” the other funeral directors told him. Mr. Hanes took himself down to the Health Department and asked them to show him how to fill out a death certificate, so he knew he was doing it right. “I had to learn because nobody black wanted to help me. I wasn’t from Durham. Everyone was satisfied. Everybody took over their daddy’s place” (Hanes 2019). Bishop Hanes’ position as an outsider surpassed the racial unity of the segregated marketplace that existed in Durham at the time. Ironically, the individual who came to Bishop Hanes’ aid was a white funeral director nearby in East Durham. Tommy Hudson gave Bishop Hanes whatever he needed and helped him get started. He shepherded him through the certification process and showed him how to set his pricing. Mr. Hudson became both his mentor and his friend, counseling him on business matters and helping him build a clientele base and a strong reputation. They are still friends today.

Though it would seem to be a thing of the past, a segregated marketplace is still very much the reality of the African American funeral business in the South today. This goes beyond the family-run business and encompasses much of the industry. Even today, the National Mortuary and Funeral Directors Association Conference is a segregated affair—one black convention and one white. Mr. Holloway sees both the strength and limitations of how the

African American funeral industry has developed over time: “Even today—we could care less about the white power structure. Part of the white power structure is black now. Well I’d say we’ve been blessed to do what we’ve done, but we’ve not really expanded the bounds of black enterprise cause we’ve stayed where we are. So, we’ve not done no great things in doing what we do” (Holloway 2019). For Mr. Burthey, while the market has remained largely segregated, the face of Durham has changed and continues to do so. Today he sees outsiders entering his community as less of a threat and more so potential clientele. He sees his business as being not so much about the color of his skin as it is the service he provides:

I guess it’s a whole mix of your religious culture, your neighborhood culture, in terms of living in certain parts of town—you’ll notice most black funeral homes are still in the “historically black” part of town, whether they had to move or not—they still moved in another part of the historically black part of town. We serve a lot of other cultures—most of the time, mostly people who have no historical connection to the place—then you may get the business. So, a lot of it still has to do with how you carry yourself and how well you handle the business that you’re in (Burthey 2019).

African American funeral directors operating their business in Durham today are faced with maintaining a traditional occupation in a transitioning landscape. While the foundational culture of the occupation has remained much the same, these proprietors see the future of their business in their ability to provide a quality service to those who they served before and the newcomers along the way.³

³ In the case of Burthey Funeral Services, roughly 97% of their clientele are African American. The remaining portion of their business is made up mostly of other people of color—Latinx and african refugees were included in this group.

Making it Work

While African American funeral homes have become well-established community anchors throughout Durham today, it took time, hard work, strong leadership and often a supplemental income to grow these businesses. Mr. Holloway recalls the occupation as a respectable and yet tenuous business undertaking:

It had prestige back in the day. People who owned funeral homes, they got to wear a necktie everyday. When you started out—it was not a stable income; it took a while to build it. Back in the day, we had a smile and that was it. Now we have a smile and vehicles that can go from here to California without breaking down—back then we couldn't get across town without breaking down. So back then, we were just nice and personable until we could do better (Holloway 2019).

Mr. Holloway speaks to the air of respectability and independence that was embodied by the funeral director—it was seen as an occupation that was both honorable, and at times lucrative even though the income was not always stable. However, for many funeral directors, the path to the funeral home was not always a direct one. It is in fact not uncommon for undertakers to have dabbled in other careers before entering the funeral industry, or to have simultaneous side-gigs while running the business. As Holloway writes, “A circuitous route back to the family’s funeral home was not unusual. There were third- and fourth-generation morticians who had worked as flight attendants, office workers, school counselors, and even ministers before, late in life, coming ‘home’” (Holloway 2002, 54). While Skippie Scarborough was a mortician-in-training from an early age, nearly all of Durhams’s other funerals directors have worked time and again in other trades. Mr. Michael Jones was an employee of State Farm Insurance Company in Florence, South Carolina, before returning home to Durham to work with his father in the family business. Mr. Grover Burtney followed up his training in mortuary school with a law degree. He

would practice law by day and embalm and dress the bodies at night, while his wife took care of the day-time arrangements and directing funerals when he was not able to do so. Bishop Franklin Hanes became an ordained bishop and started preaching when he was 19 years old. He drove trucks for 30 years and when he opened the funeral home, he stopped driving during the day and started driving at night. Mr. Chris Fisher holds two degrees—one in accounting and one in education; and, Mr. Algin Holloway used to drive cabs.

Mr. Holloway's uncle came home from the war and decided to start a taxi cab service. It was called Veterans Cab Company; he took his brothers along for the ride. Eventually he used his earnings to go to mortuary school in Nashville, Tennessee. He returned to North Carolina, apprenticed at some funeral homes, and went on to open his own. In the beginning, business was slow, so he drove cabs at the same time to supplement his income. His brothers and their sons took part in both family businesses from early on. Mr. Holloway remembers:

I drove cabs and if we had a funeral that day, I'd get up early in the morning and try to go make some money before the funeral. I'd run home, change clothes, put on a suit, have the funeral, then go back and drive cabs some more. We've done everything, from dig graves to whatever, we've done it all, as far as the funeral home goes. At that time, we were really, really small, so everything you could do yourself you wouldn't have to pay someone else to do. So that's how we did it (Holloway 2019).

For many funeral homes, the growth of the city has meant the possibility for a more stable business. Even so, such stability takes time and the ability to establish the family name and reputation for the business to stand behind. There are certainly hard times, times when the uncertainty of the business' survival is palpable. Mr. Holloway explains:

It's a traditional business. As people have moved, the funeral business has gotten better. You could open a funeral home now and maybe in 2 or 3 years be doing enough to support yourself. Back in the day, you had to sit and have a part-time

job for 20 or 30 years. We moved on a wing and a prayer. Just before we got foreclosed on my Daddy's house—we propped it up and time was on our side and business picked up. He evaded being homeless and we prospered from that point. But it was close. The funeral home was being foreclosed on, so he put up the house to finance the funeral home (Holloway 2019).

In Durham, African American funerary decisions have often been dictated by familial traditions—trusting in the path that was taken before. This history of habitual patronage to select funeral homes cannot be understood without the context of place and time and the fact that the market was relatively uncrowded by the middle of the century, with only a handful of competitors. When a loved one died, it was both easy and comforting to turn to the funeral director that had been in charge of burying the last elder who had passed. Holloway recalled that, “Back in the day, when everything was more stayed and everybody grew up in Durham and didn't leave, they kept going to the same funeral home, like they go to the same church. My family's been going to the same church for 150 years. People go to Scarborough cause their mom and grandma and great-grand mom and everybody went to Scarborough” (Holloway 2019). Once a funeral director had embedded himself and his business into the lives, hearts, and minds of his patrons, he was no longer necessarily bound by the constraints of his location. Mr. Burtthey explains:

Mr. Scarborough's buried more than any, 'cause he was already three or four generations deep. When you've been burying people since the 1800s, they don't know anybody else to call but you. So that was the advantage. Frankly, he could've moved in the middle of Rougemont and he'd still have his following 'cause it's not based on location per se—it's based on the fact that his granddad and his daddy and aunt had buried so many people 'cause they'd been in business so long (Burtthey 2019).

Funeral homes rely heavily upon one another and depend on the network to ensure the smooth running of their own business. Even a strong foundation within the market place does not

always mean having the full supply of goods to meet every demand. The spirit of reciprocity is an invisible pillar in the foundation of Durham's African American funeral industry. Directors give and take when needed, whether it is a dozen folding chairs now or a fleet of hearses later—there is always help to make it happen:

You've got to depend on people. Tomorrow we've got four funerals—pretty much at the same time. Now my nephew, at some point today or if he's already done it, we've got to have six limousines and my nephew's going to find them. We borrow, we lend, we borrow, we do whatever. You call your friends, that's how you get it done. And when they need to get it done, we send people up there—they come get a car, a hearse or whatever (Holloway 2019).

In addition to all the necessary parts that are needed for a service, the home in which to plan, orchestrate, and hold space for those that have passed is essential.

CHAPTER 3: THE HOME

The directors' early memories of the family funeral home reflect the familiarity of a shared cultural space, community, and sense of belonging. Mr. Holloway recalls his uncles' funeral home from when he was a young boy:

It was a pretty cool place—you'd meet some interesting people. My father laid bricks and my mother worked at a hospital, and going to school, you know, you got up in the morning and you'd eat quickly and run and get to school. But whenever I was sick or had a cold or something and it was in the wintertime, my father wasn't working so we'd go over to the funeral home. And my uncle would get up around 9 o'clock in the morning or 10 or whatever—it wasn't rushed. He'd cook you eggs like you liked them, and you'd have a slow, leisurely breakfast—like people do on Saturdays and Sundays. I really enjoyed that, being there and meeting a lot of interesting people. You see, people like to hang around funeral homes. Retired people that you'd know would just come and sit and talk—the patrons and the cab drivers, so there was someone pretty much coming and going all the time. It was a gathering place (Holloway 2019).

African American funeral homes have served as a refuge for their communities from the time of slavery, through Jim Crow segregation and the Civil Rights movement, offering a meeting place to memorialize, socialize, and strategize. While the offering of such sanctuary was similar to that of the local churches, funeral homes were distinct in that they accepted different types of social gatherings, lending them more inclusive atmospheres. While the space and the service provided inside these institutions have proven to be invaluable to those who use them, the grounds of these homes have never been entirely secure for their African American owners due to greater municipal and bureaucratic forces on the outside.

The significance of the term "the home" is not by accident. It is, in fact, rooted in the deep history of the African American slave trade and the Jim Crow era. The funeral space, both

in the physical sense and the abstract, existed as a safe haven for African Americans from early on. As Smith describes: “The African American slave funeral from the colonial era through the antebellum period was one of the most central ways the slave community was able to assert its essential humanity” (Smith 2010, 25). The funeral ceremony allowed many recently enslaved Africans to honor their cultural heritage through their own spiritual practices as a way of maintaining a sense of connection to their homeland. Throughout the 18th century, the funeral was one of the few formal occasions when slaves had some measure of autonomy from the control of their master. Smith goes on to say that throughout these times, “the funeral was a powerful communal refuge where slaves found shelter from the horrors of enslavement and where they reasserted the bonds of family and community at a time of loss” (Smith 2010, 26).

The connection between the funeral home and belonging could not be any stronger for Bishop Hanes. Growing up in Winston Salem, the local funeral home became his actual home. Bishop Hanes recalls Mr. Johnson’s funeral home, as a place where the community gathered. It was a big old house with a large front porch where men would sit and talk for hours and Hanes would sit and listen. Kids from the neighborhood would come by, as would the ladies from church—it was natural stopping point in the neighborhood: “Funeral homes used to be called “Funeral Homes” because they really were *in* the community then” (Hanes 2019). Hanes explains that these days most establishments are focused on the funeral service business more than anything else.⁴

⁴ The notion of the funeral home as a community home merits a deeper and more thorough discussion to unpack what exactly such a home meant for the community and looking at how these spaces operate today.

When African American funeral businesses were formed, they emerged in communities in conjunction with well-established black churches. With this, funeral homes became associated with certain churches and shared in memorializing the passing of parishioners as well as in the tradition of community outreach. In Bishop Hanes' experience, the funeral home has always been aligned with the church as a place of refuge. Today, he sees this as true with his own funeral home, observing that, "it's not just a funeral home—it's a ministry" (Hanes 2019). And his community treats it as such. Hanes describes his place of business as being a space where people go to talk—preachers, husbands, wives, and more. At Hanes Funeral Service, Bishop Hanes is there to listen. The funeral home, similar to the black barbershop, has played the role of providing both a service and a kind of informal and unconditional counsel (Daniel 2019). In doing so, like its fellow cultural institutions, it has played an important role in helping to support the health of the community.

While today Bishop Hanes uses his office to serve and counsel his community on a one-on-one basis, funeral homes have also historically provided space for organized meetings. Bishop Hanes recalls church groups along with the NAACP convening in Mr. Johnson's funeral home when he was growing up there. While the church also extended its building as a meeting place to community gatherings, a distinction was drawn during the Jim Crow years. As Smith writes: "While local black churches offered public meeting spaces to community groups, they did not allow social gatherings that might involve dancing and drinking. So as an act of community outreach and as a business strategy, funeral directors rented out spaces in their funeral homes for meetings and social events" (Smith 2010, 90). By the 1950s and early 60s funeral homes and often hearses were used to hide and protect activists and facilitate community

movements (Smith 2010, 203). However, even with the deep community roots that they had, these institutions could not always be shielded from the power structure that prevailed in the South at the time (Boger 1996).

The Scarborough & Hargett Funeral Home has been forced to relocate five times since it opened its doors in Durham. The funeral home moved in the 1920s from its location in downtown Durham to Hayti. When highway construction displaced the businesses there, many, along with Scarborough & Hargett, moved into a nearby cluster of hastily erected shacks called Tin City. With the 147 freeway complete and Hayti demolished, the funeral home then moved to a new location at Roxboro and Dillard. Skippie and Queen Scarborough recall the building that had been designed as the Scarborough & Hargett Memorial Chapel and Gardens: it was white circular building with an African motif constructed to resemble a hut with an accompanying chapel and gardens, as the name indicated. After so many moves, the family had built it to be the final resting place for the business; however, their time there was cut short. In 2010 the building was taken by eminent domain by the city and razed for the construction of a new parking garage for the city's courthouse. Scarborough and Hargett moved back to Tin City, where they stayed until just a few years ago, when they moved to their current location on Queen Street in an old school.

For the Scarboroughs, being forced to relocate time and time again has been trying, to say the least. It is a reoccurring dislocation, being faced with starting over again and then again, and then again. While the family has been compensated for these moves, there is no amount of money that can make up for the personal trauma that this continued disruption has caused. They have found it to be destabilizing to the strength of the family name, the business, and the cultural

institution of funeral homes as a whole. Queen Scarborough says that when you move so many times, people think you're unstable— "It's the perception—people think there's something wrong with you," she said. Still, there is a tremendous amount of empathy and respect for Mr. Scarborough among the other directors. People admire him for his strength and steadfast perseverance with everything he's been through. For Mr. Fisher, the moves are unfortunate but not unexpected. Should his business follow the same fate, he's confident that his customers would follow him. After all, he quips, they have for Skippie Scarborough. "It's not the walls burying people; it's the service inside," he says (Fisher 2018).

CHAPTER 4: THE DIRECTOR

From the time of slavery, through the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights Movement, up to the present day, African American funeral directors of the South have played an important leadership role in the communities they serve. Through outreach, political activism, and mediation, these business owners have used their social standing, economic power, and influence to build strength and independence for the communities they serve. In *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (2010), Suzanne Smith offers an in-depth portrait of funeral directors as some of the most respected and economically-secure members of African American communities. She describes how funeral directors often gave financial assistance to black sharecroppers when they were in need of a small loan or had to post bond when they had been jailed by the all-white law enforcement on some trivial falsehood. At the height of racial tensions in the South, funeral directors were admired by their community for their ability to live and work as independent business owners and be seen by local whites as reliable mediators in uncertain times (Smith 2010, 9). Smith writes:

The public perceived local undertakers as heroes because they not only helped families at a time of loss but also often supported local politics, culture and education through philanthropy. Moreover, African American funeral directors used their businesses and community standing to improve the public image of black Americans. Most notably, they maintained a high level of decorum at their funeral homes in an effort to cultivate respectability for the race (81).

The active role these funeral directors have played in their communities is still relevant today, as is their image. In many ways connected, these together have had a strong and long-lasting impact on the people they serve.

As African American churches and funeral homes have been inextricably linked from the beginning, so too have the preacher and the funeral director. Many of the directors pointed to this as evidence of the very prominent position they have always had in the community, stating that, historically, the church leader and the undertaker have stood side by side. As Karla Holloway writes in her book *Passed On* (2002), “The close association of pastor and mortician represented a consummate merger of cradle-to-grave services as two institutions that were both consistently defined through their racial exclusivity shared clientele for the most critical ceremonies in life” (Holloway 2002, 23). Holloway goes on to discuss how the role and perception of the funeral director in the African American community were interconnected with issues of class and status:

As the twentieth century began, the black undertaker emerged as a businessman in a community of few independent black-owned businesses. Sometimes, he was the only one, other than the preacher, who wore a suit during the week, and the fact that it may have been his only suit mattered less than the fact that his business gave him license to wear it on some day other than Sunday (Holloway 2002, 23).

For Mr. Burtthey’s father, the attire was as important as the attitude and played a central role in the growth and development of his business. Mr. Burtthey remembers this about his father:

He was a salt of the earth kind of guy, a hard worker focused on doing his business and minding his business. He was looked at like a no-nonsense businessman that always was going to do the funeral right—proper. He started wearing day formals way back—a day formal outfit is hickory-stripped pants, tails, vest, bat-wing shirt—so he incorporated that as a uniform. So, because of that, he always appeared to be more formal than everyone else and he carried himself more formal than everybody else. So he was a “professional,” and to this day that

is the comment we get more than anything else—that we are “so professional and we handle things so professionally.” So that’s been another tradition that we’ve carried on from him. Didn’t drink, didn’t smoke, but he loved to dance. His reputation was solid (Burthey 2019).

The first trade journal for African American funeral directors, *The Colored Embalmer*, published a 1928 article that echoed this sentiment in their advice for funeral directors: “As a professional representing dignity, cleanliness and intelligence, it is your duty to present yourself in a state of cleanliness each day. A clean collar, a clean shirt, and a pressed suit certainly add to your business influence” (cited in Smith 2010, 94).

While appearance was one part of how black funeral directors earned their status as business professionals, their acquisitions were another important piece of the picture. Their accumulation of cars such as hearses and limousines, and their possession of property, set them apart in their communities where such expansive ownership was not commonplace (Holloway 2002, 24). In a 1953 issue of *Ebony Magazine*, alongside a photo spread entitled, “Death is Big Business,” funeral directors were described as among “the most influential men in Negro society” (cited in Holloway 2002, 24). The image of African American funeral directors was indeed striking, but their reputation and social standing were not built on their attire and acquisitions alone. The funeral director’s role of providing leadership, counsel and outreach in their community is long-standing and legitimate. Mr. Burthey Sr. was a lawyer in addition to running the funeral home. He would often assist in answering legal questions for families after a death, and became known for helping people in this way in their time of need. In addition to funerary services, his funeral home became a place where people could seek advice and where he

would offer it freely, cementing his stature as a successful community leader, respected by many. But in this, he was not alone.

When Mr. Scarborough opened the Scarborough Nursery in 1925, the focus of the center was to serve women and their children. The school provided both pre-school and kindergarten for children, as well as evening classes in parenting, nutrition, literacy, and politics for the mothers. As a funeral director, Mr. Scarborough came into contact with African American families of all different means. He saw first-hand the issues connected to poverty in his community and the limited options people had to help address them (Brown 2008, 276). Supported by funds from the funeral home, and from state and local women’s clubs, the school served mostly working mothers and operated on a sliding scale. The health and character of the child was of the utmost importance and central to the school’s educational principles for early development. In a 1939 *Carolina Times* article entitled, “Work of Scarborough Nursery Plays Important Role in Life of Durham,” Daisy Hargett Scarborough states, “The training of the mind and heart is of vital importance in the nursery school. It is not so much the content the pupils remember from the learning process but the character that is formed through the process of learning that is so valuable an asset” (Scarborough J. C. 1939) Mr. Scarborough’s school—founded on his belief in, and dedication to, the racial uplift of his community—supported Durham’s African American children and working families for almost a century before closing its doors in 2018.⁵

⁵ Services for African American children were substandard at this time in Durham, as were support systems for working mothers. The Scarborough Nursery was the first licensed nursery of its kind in the state of North Carolina making the Scarboroughs progressive visionaries in their own right.

Today, Mr. Hanes sees the same issues connected to poverty and the racial inequity in his own neighborhood of East Durham. He sees his work as a funeral director to be about taking care of people, and he has always thought of it this way:

That's what they told me when I was young—we do it to help the community. Really, this is our community and we got to help people with money or without, we've got to help them. There's a project called Macdougall Terrace—it's a bad project. And all those children that's in 20s and early 30s—I took care of them when they were little children walking through here and couldn't find their mom and didn't have food. I took them down to the store and bought them hot dogs. I bought a lot of hot dogs. 'Cause the thing is they're gonna be grown one day. They won't forget you (Hanes 2019).

Bishop Franklin Hanes says it has to be in your heart to be a good funeral director, that you have to feel what the people feel. He talks about his reputation, commenting that in the hospital, when the doctors and nurses see someone in need, they'll say, "Call Mr. Hanes, he'll help you." Bishop Hanes is the person you call when you can't go anywhere else. But Bishop Hanes insists that all funeral directors are like this—in fact, many funeral homes used to be suppliers of bail bonds and some, particularly in the rural areas, still offer this service. In general, and as a whole, funeral directors work to support their communities in many different ways, whether it be through education, outreach programs, politics, or activism. "We do a lot more than what people think," Hanes says, "We work with churches, speak at schools, work with the city council and do community outreach. That's what you have to do—you have to get involved in the city" (Hanes, 2019).

Nearly all of Durham's funeral directors and their families have participated in civil and political activism in one way or another. For the Scarboroughs, this was the case from early on. Skippie Scarborough and his father were plaintiffs in the case *Blue v. Durham* (1951), a suit that

focused on school equalization within a segregated educational system, arguing that school officials violated students' Fourteenth Amendment rights under the US Constitution because the educational facilities provided to black and white children were not equal. The case underscored economic bias by examining the differences between Durham High and Hillside High, where Skippie Scarborough was a junior high student. The suit was victorious and monumental for the time, making it a precursor to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) (Winford 2020, 92).

Whether it was working for the NAACP, running for city council or participating in demonstrations and sit-ins, African American funeral directors made an impact with their actions. In the late 50s and early 60s, African American funeral homes played a pivotal role in the get out the vote movement. While much of the community relied on buses as their main mode of transportation, these funeral directors volunteered their cars and drivers to take people to the polls. Other directors remember organizing and arrests and the sit-ins at the Howard Johnson's restaurant. In the early 1960, on the heels of the Greensboro sit-ins that caught national attention, students in Durham staged a large-scale sit-in of their own at the Woolworth's lunch counter on Main Street downtown. A week later Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., came to the city to show his support to the student activists. He spoke at the White Rock Baptist Church, where Mr. Fisher's father was the pastor. He told the crowd: "Let us not fear going to jail. If officials threaten to arrest us for standing up for our rights, we must answer by saying that we are willing and prepared to fill up the jails of the South" (Gershenhorn 2015,).

Over the next three years, activists continued to take a stand against segregation, protesting at theaters, hotels and restaurants. The 1963 demonstration at Howard Johnson's was the largest protest in Durham's history and for many, the most memorable. "We had the freedom

songs,” Mr. Holloway recalled, and in the next breath sang out a tune as if he had been practicing it yesterday: “I’m gonna eat those 23 flavors at Howard Johnson’s one of these days...” Mr. Jones also remembered this time fondly—he remembers protesting in downtown Durham and protesting at the Howard Johnson’s: “Yeah, we protested out there, they had to take us away in buses,” he said gleefully. While Holloway and Jones were young men at this time and not yet funeral directors themselves, their engagement is relevant here in that they came from funeral director families. Through their participation in demonstrations and other activism efforts, they signaled to the wider community what the family and business stood for. But while funeral directors and other African American entrepreneurs used their financial independence and social prominence to fight for civil rights and racial integration, it was in some ways a complicated matter. The goal of racial equity on all fronts could threaten the economic security of a segregated marketplace that they had benefited from and that was still very much in place (Smith 2010, 49). But still they fought.

Today, so many years later, while the color-bound market for funeral directors has remained, racial equality and economic security is still the fighting cause. Gun violence in Durham is a very present reality, in some neighborhoods more than others. For Bishop Hanes, gang related deaths are a big part of his business: “I’ve seen a lot in 25 years—I’ve buried two or three in the same family—young men who’ve been shot” (Hanes 2019). Mr. Jones has had his fair share as well. Before his wife passed, she worked to start a Durham chapter of an organization called Parents of Murdered Children. Mrs. Jones gathered people in the neighborhood who had lost children by homicide and helped families work through grief with

counseling. Death by homicide is unlike any other, Mr. Jones says, and affects families in a completely different way (Jones 2018).

In East Durham, where Bishop Hanes has his funeral home, such deaths are fairly common. “Since I bury all of them, I know all of them,” he says. In preparing the body of a young man who has been killed, he often finds himself negotiating the viewing with fellow gang members. He will say, “I know you want to see your friend. You can come in, but five at a time and no guns.” Funerals often have police in the church and on the outside as well. Bishop Hanes goes on to say that most of the time, whoever has killed the person is in the church with everyone else. He says people usually know that the killer is there, but that they’re scared. In this way, Bishop Hanes has, at times, taken to playing the role of a mediator, and at other times, a father: “When I talk to them, they act like children,” he says, “they ain’t nineteen or twenty anyway...” And they talk. For these young men, Mr. Hanes is one of the few community members who will talk to them and that they feel they can trust. After all, he often knows these kids; he’s watched them grow up. They are the same kids from the projects, the kids he bought shoes when they didn’t have any, the kids he fed when they were hungry. “I talk to them, like a daddy talking to their child—I tell them to find a trade, get a job, don’t just go around shooting stuff.” When they get jobs, they come in to tell him; they want him to be the first to know. He’s told them that he’ll be their reference, that they can count on him. They are eager to make him proud. “Just like a child,” he says (Hanes, 2019).

Hanes Memorial Funeral Home is located at 560 South Driver Street. It is less than a block from the train tracks that run parallel to East Pettigrew Street, not far from the 147 Freeway. Just after noon on a Friday in early August, the small front office is crowded with

potted Peace Lillys and rotating fans. Two red felted armchairs sit adjacent to the front desk, the armrests well-worn. The air smells of cleaning solution and the words “Cherish Yesterday, Celebrate Today, Dream Tomorrow” are framed on the wall. For Curtis Peaks who works at the funeral home, it is not the business alone that presented the calling, nor the suit and the fleet of hearses. It’s about the service, the devotion, the people. Peaks says that Mr. Hanes is different than the other funeral directors, that he is the most dedicated to outreach, the most devoted to the people. Mr. Peaks wanted to be a funeral director from the first time he saw Mr. Hanes. He lives a few miles down the road from the funeral home, and used to see Mr. Hanes, dressed in a suit and tie, stopping for gas on his way to the office:

I used to see him pumping the gas in the hearse and I’d run over to the store before he’d leave and ask him for a job. He told me to come back when I turned fourteen. When I turned fourteen, I saw him over there again and I’d run over to the store—this is how it’s happening—I run back and forth to the store for years. One day I just told him that I was coming, and I was hanging out and I put on a suit and came and that’s how I started working. I made myself a job (Peaks, 2019).

Curtis Peaks has been there for five years and he says it's been good. Mr. Hanes recently helped him get his license—they went all the way to South Carolina, and he made him drive the whole way. Mr. Hanes has taught him everything about the business and more. Though he’s just an attendant now, he hopes that someday, he too might be a director. In more than one way, Bishop Hanes has acted as a leader and mentor to the community of East Durham, whether by tending to the young children of the neighborhood or in providing a neutral space for young gang members, he serves his people every day in the interest of a better future.

CHAPTER 5: A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

In the last five years, Durham has experienced major economic and population growth (Yorgancioglu 2018). The changes in the city are visible at nearly every block. Today there are new condos and parking garages going up in all directions, along with breweries and boutique hotels. In the wake of urban renewal, African American communities now face real issues related to gentrification—namely, affordable housing, increased property taxes and rents, and larger competitors for small business owners. Many in the community see these new changes as merely a continuation of the destruction of Hayti—a way of pushing African American residents further out of the city center. Mr. Jones talks about the changes in his neighborhood, how the homes have gone from working-class ownership to the rental market, and now, to half a million-dollar houses. This, in addition to an urgent need for more jobs, can make the choice to leave the neighborhood not much of a choice, says Jones. Mr. Burtney echoes this sentiment, saying, “It’s evident now, if you go look downtown, how many people of color can afford half a million-dollar condos. How much affordable housing do you see? Not much” (Burtney 2019). As Durham is slowly becoming a city that is less accessible for many African American long-term residents, it is easy to wonder how the funeral home business will continue here.

Durham’s African American funeral homes are well-established institutions embedded within their communities. The security of these homes, however, has not been absolute for many of the owners. A few blocks east of downtown on Queen Street, the Scarboroughs are still settling in to their newest location. While, in the past, notices of eminent domain have come

through the mail, today, the developers come right to the front door. They come every week, telling the Scarboroughs that they'd like to buy the property; they come with the plans for new condominiums already draw up for them to see, but the answer is a firm "no." Skippie and Queen Scarborough have no plans to move again. In fact, they are expanding their services and planning for an innovative future. Queen Scarborough sees strength in their ability to serve the community in many different ways. The change comes with a new name too: The Scarborough & Hargett Celebration of Life Center. The vision is a place that provides space to both celebrate life and pay respect to the dead—a multi-use community center for adults, elderly and children. In many ways, the Scarboroughs are inviting a return to what the funeral home used to be in African American communities. In order to continue the business and carry it forward, they are bringing the funeral *home* back to life. While the city of Durham has changed dramatically since the days of Hayti, the culture of the funerary industry has more or less stayed the same. For most funeral directors living and working in Durham today, the belief is that the future of the business will live on through the family and the community as it always has, with some subtle shifts along the way.

Who is being buried and how they are buried are some of the slow changes taking place in Durham's African American funeral industry. While embalming and the traditional viewing still play an important role in funerary practices, cremations are on the rise. This, Mr. Holloway reasons, is more an economical choice than a cultural or religious one—an embalming and burial can cost three times the amount of a cremation (Holloway 2019). Today, like across much of the South, Durham's funeral homes, like its churches, remain fairly segregated institutions. Many of the directors still see value in this color-bound economy, but they also recognize the changes of

the times. For Mr. Fisher, though the idea of integration was always, in some way, threatening, his beliefs differ when it comes to his business. While his brother has expressed anger at him for burying white bodies, Fisher is ambivalent about it, saying that he doesn't turn away anyone: "I don't care what color you are as long as you bring green" (Fisher 2019). He says that with the younger generations and his son taking over the business, he believes they will hold more and more interracial burials, and that's fine by him: "Give them the same service and keep right on going" (Fisher 2019).

For all of the African American funeral homes in Durham, the family-run model has persisted. Having successors is one way of ensuring the longevity of the business, although sometimes this does not always work out as planned. In fact, the only African American funeral home that has not survived in Durham was Mr. William Amey's. While William Amey had inherited the home from *his* father, neither his son nor grandson chose to take over the family business and so he was forced to close. Mr. Burtthey sees these changes in tradition with his own business:

Black funeral homes have been family-run businesses, but that's fading. I'm an attorney; I didn't have to come back and run this thing. In the '40s and '50s and '60s, they did make money where you might have been one of the upper middle class or middle class businesses in the black community, so you could send your kids away to school; they could go be doctors, lawyers or work for a company and not necessarily want to become an embalmer. I have three sons—none of them went to embalming school. It's 2019. There so many other options than running a funeral home. They'll keep it, hire on other people. But they'll never be embalmers...(Burtthey 2019).

Mr. Burtthey is pragmatic in thinking about the future of family-run funeral homes. He sees them surviving and believes they will continue to do so, but also knows that there may come a time to let go:

The black funeral homes appear to have business; you're still burying those families you've been burying, and as new people come to town, they may call you as well after they learn who you are and something about you. So just as funeral homes have always been around, they will continue to be around, though it may be that you're doing different things for folks... I'm all for culture and tradition but when you run the numbers and it doesn't make sense anymore, it doesn't make sense. My sons all worked in this funeral home and the funeral home put them through school, so I'm happy for them to go on and do something else... just don't forget where you came from (Burtney 2019).

Most African American funeral directors today might not recognize the Durham in which they grew up, and find that the new development in the city does not always bring positive changes for the people who have been there the longest. However, for Bishop Franklin Hanes in East Durham, where he has been located for the last 25 years, seeing people fixing up houses in the neighborhood *is* a positive thing. He is well-informed about the prolonged effects that gentrification can have on a neighborhood, but still believes that the changes he's seeing are good for his community.

Still, he's seen the rise and fall of many businesses and recognizes that, with rising rents and property taxes, his own could someday be in jeopardy. He talks about what that could mean, if he had to move someday and his hope for the funeral home. He'd like to build his own place, he tells me, with an office, a viewing room, and a nice chapel. He sketches it out in his mind: "You got to dream," he says. Bishop Hanes is cognizant of how much the community depends on him and how he too depends on them: "The people out here feed me," he says. But ultimately, he is hopeful about the future, for his own business and for African American funeral homes in general: "Wherever we go, our people will follow. People know that they need us. We have families that know us and trust us. So, wherever it is, we're going to be there. The funeral homes survive; they just move somewhere else and keep going" (Hanes 2019).

From the early days of Durham's Hayti through the years of Jim Crow segregation and urban renewal, and now in a city that is being transformed by rapid gentrification, African American funeral homes have continued to serve African American communities in powerful and far-reaching ways. Through the tradition of home-going celebrations in the sanctuary of the funeral home, and through the directors' acts of leadership, activism, and mediation, these family-run businesses have protected, maintained, and strengthened the health and well-being of their communities, and they continue to do so today

ENDNOTES

Given these rich life histories of African American funeral direction and community sustainability in the face of change, many additional questions arise, questions such as: What role did white funeral homes play in the history of Durham, and how did they affect the African American businesses? How are white funeral homes distinct in their model, image, and role within their communities? What qualities and practices do African American and White funeral home businesses share and where do they diverge? What is the relationship between these two kinds of institutions today? Lastly, how is the funeral business changing in contemporary Durham (how are the services, clientele, and traditional practices shifting in the changing landscape of today's city)? While not within the scope of this thesis project, all of these inquiries are worthy of future research as important pieces of the conversation about coming together in the face of loss in a volatile social and physical landscape.

APPENDIX 1: BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

Three areas of study serve as a foundation for this research: urban folklore; occupational folklore; and oral history. In this bibliographic essay, I briefly review the literature in these areas as they are relevant to my work. My intention with this piece is to help frame my research for the academic audiences I hope to reach.

Urban Folklore

The field of urban folklore supplies an appropriate contextual frame for which to explore the life and work of funeral directors in Durham, North Carolina. Urban folklore narrows the field of folklore to the urban domain and presents a multi-faceted approach to looking at place and community through both historical and contemporary lenses. In the area of urban folklore, my research has been informed by scholars who have explored how urban environments are sustained, revived, and modified by communities and how those communities respond to socio-economic and political events. In “The Future of Folklore Studies in America: The Urban Frontier” (1983), Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett provides a foundational exploration of the field, defining urban folklore as an inquiry into how people shape deeply-held values into meaningful forms in the realm of urban living (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983:175). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett charts the emergence of urban folklore in the field, examining how folklorists of the 19th century looked to “popular antiquities” in the city, and then moved their interests to the rural areas. In the 1980s, however, the focus shifted back to urban spaces with an effort to address the “urban character of city life and its expressive implications” (176).

Within this history of urban folklore, the following themes have been central to the focus of my research: sense of place, place attachment, and the politics of space. In “Understanding

Ordinary Landscapes” (1997), Dolores Hayden unpacks these themes within the context of the urban landscape. Hayden explores some of the ways that social history is embedded in urban landscapes, viewing the space as a medium through which social life is produced and reproduced. Pointedly, Hayden connects this cultural landscape to the economy, making reference to the production of space in terms of a “working landscape.” Hayden emphasizes that workers, business owners, and businesses themselves make up the economic and social fabric of urban communities, a relationship that directly contributes to “place making” and “place attachment” (Hayden 1997).

Lynne Manzo and Douglas Perkins, continue the conversation of “place attachment” by looking at disruptions to this bond in discussing the perceived threat of development projects and their potential to change the physical fabric of a neighborhood. In “Finding Common Ground: the Importance of Place Attachment to Community Participation and Planning” (2006), Manzo and Perkins argue that people’s attachments to place are intertwined with their sense of community based on shared interests, concerns, and a shared history. In her essay, “Conservation of Place” (1997), Seta Low narrows the focus of this discussion by exploring how the political aspects of place and place attachments can be seen in communities that have been empowered or disempowered. Examining the socio-economic processes of urban renewal and gentrification, Low joins the chorus of scholars who argue that the fate of a neighborhood is almost always inherently political. Together these scholars chart the development of urban folklore as a field, address the pertinent themes of place attachment and the politics of space, and bring the discussion into a timely, contemporary context. My thesis furthers this conversation with an

occupational lens by examining how African American funeral directors have sustained, revived, and modified their businesses over time in Durham, North Carolina.

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Occupational Folklore

Occupational folklore is a second lens through which I have framed my research. My understanding of occupational folklore as a field of study has undoubtedly been most informed by the work of Archie Green. As a folklorist, Archie Green developed relationships to work and workers that illuminated labor history, worker identity, occupational culture, consciousness, and struggle. His research serves as the foundation of the field he termed "laborlore." As a pioneer collector of industrial folklore, Green devoted his career to the study of specific labor groups and worked to bridge the divide between scholars and union activists. In his 2012 biography of Green, Sean Burns describes Green's process and intention with his work saying, "At its best,

laborlore begins with open examination of workers' culture and provides research tools to gather relevant information and present that information to workers and nonworkers alike. This is laborlore as a pedagogy of culture—a set of tools for learning and teaching about workers' culture toward the aim of deepening democracy and fostering egalitarianism” (Burns 2011, 130).

In his 2006 essay “Lessons of Work and Workers,” Robert McCarl, a protégé of Archie Green, argues that occupational folklore consists of three connected parts: skills and techniques, workers' narratives, and customary behaviors. McCarl believes that the interconnected relationship of these parts is where folklorists should focus their studies. Furthermore, McCarl asserts that folklorists can never fully comprehend the complexities of the work experience without examining the group within its historical and wider political context (McCarl 2006).

While Archie Green's scholarship focuses almost exclusively on industrial folklore and labor unions—male dominated resource-based occupations such as mining, logging, fishing and boat building—he did not see the field of laborlore as beholden to this scope alone in which he had spent half of his life working. Of the term ‘laborlore,’ Green wrote in *Torching the Fink Books*, “I have used this coinage narrowly to cover union material and broadly to include the expressive culture of all workers. Laborlore can be as particular as the job custom of picking up one's tools five minutes before quitting time, or as complex as matters of class and caste identity” (Green 2001, 211). As the founding father of laborlore, Archie Green left the door wide open for the many folklorists who would follow in his footsteps.

Honoring Archie Green's seminal investigation of working communities, occupational culture and working life, this research contributes to laborlore by expanding the field in new directions, introducing the labor of African American business owners and the labor of caring for

the dead, which has been examined in religious and ritual contexts but not through an occupational lens. This research addresses work culture as part of the larger socio-cultural context— from a post-Jim Crow South to a gentrifying Durham, and looks at the role of business owners as laborers in that context. In addition, this work adds a new perspective to existing scholarship by considering the role of African American-owned businesses in the construction of place identity and community formation, through both a historical and a contemporary lens. While the work of scholars such as Smith (2010) and Holloway (2002) provide an extensive and broad account of the social and cultural history of African American funerals and funeral homes, neither narrow their focus to a specific place to examine the role of the funeral business as a community institution across time.

In his essay "Industrial Lore: A Bibliographic-Semantic Query" (1978), Archie Green poses the question, "How does work lore simultaneously reflect the stability within a bonded community and the trauma of social conflict?" His inquiry, though made in the interest of industrial folklore, could not be more fitting a frame to apply to the work of African American funeral directors and the family business of funeral homes in Durham, North Carolina.

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Oral History

Oral history has been influential to me as a theoretical approach and methodological practice. Seen as the original mode of transmission for history—information passed down in narrative form—oral history is a dynamic and age-old medium. Italian historian and scholar Alessandro Portelli has written extensively on the work of reinterpreting the past, with an emphasis on the value of process as much as historical product. Of the medium, Portelli says, "Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did" (Stille 2001). In this sense, oral history serves as a testimony, not

just of factual information about a person, event or time, but of the human consciousness surrounding a lived experience.

The field made strong advances as an independent discipline after World War II when the use of memory as a source for historical research was thought to have great potential. However, in the 1970s, the modern-day oral history movement came under scrutiny- *How reliable could people's memories really be?* Traditional historians feared the politics of a “people’s history” and therefore questioned the role of personal bias and subjectivity, nostalgia in old age, and deterioration of the mind. These critics argued it was impossible to eliminate the influence of these factors from personal oral testimony and historical documents based on such accounts (Thompson 2010, 4). But researchers and oral historians such as Michael Frisch pushed back arguing that oral history was a relevant field *because* of these factors and not in spite of them. Frisch made the claim that oral history could be “a powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory— how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them” (5).

Through the work of oral history, scholars have been able to better understand the intricacies and depth of the lived experience. The study of folklore has also helped bring light to the many layers and dimensions of the human experience— through exploring values, traditions, and ways of thinking and behaving, we are able to learn about how we form identity and how we make meaning out of the world around us. The two fields, though separate, are very much connected, most notably through the act of interviewing. While oral history interviews are formal, structured, and in-depth, a folklorist’s ethnographic approach may involve many casual

semi-structured interviews as well as the collection of materials documenting one's field research. In oral history work, as in that of ethnography, the interpretive role may be shared. The distinction here is that with oral history, the emphasis is placed on the interview itself, more so than ethnographic fieldwork and such is the case with my research.

Historian and scholar, Valerie Yow, has written extensively on the significance of the interview itself. "The in-depth interview," she says, "offers the benefit of seeing in its full complexity the world of another" (2015). Other scholars have placed strong emphasis on documents of oral history, more specifically that they are representative of a relationship—the relationship of the narrator to themselves, to their life and to the interviewer. Michael Frisch led the call to view oral history as a true collaboration or a co-created memory narrative. Frisch coined the term, "shared authority" that which is widely accepted and used among scholars today (Thompson 2010, 2).

Historians and scholars of oral history have found that in constructing a life history, the human habit to gravitate toward narrativization is pervasive- to tell not just the facts of our lives but the story of our lives. Many scholars explain narrative theory as a system of meaning-making. Alistair Thomson describes it as "an attempt to create meaning for our lives and coherence in our self" (15). The use of narrative is thus intrinsically tied to identity as we organize the events of our life, our subjective experience and how we understand ourselves in relation to both. From the accessibility of tape recorders in the 1960s to the explosion of narrative storytelling as performative medium, narrativization is an intrinsic part of processing the human experience. As a qualitative method, the life history and narrative approach to conducting research using oral history supports the building of *context*, the ability to chart

change over time and provides insight to the formation of the narrator's *identity*. While life histories begin with an individual's interpretation of his or her own lived experience, the oral history is co-created, marrying the interviewee's narrative with the interviewer's effort to illuminate the context of his or her life and make connections with larger historical themes (K'Meyer and Crothers 2007).

In pursuing oral history as a methodological practice for my own research, I contextualize the lived experience of those I work with to illuminate the dimensions of community life in a rapidly gentrifying city in the contemporary South. The areas of urban folklore, occupational folklore, and oral history have proven to be fruitful grounds for developing this work. Together they have offered me contextual, theoretical and methodological frameworks both in the field and on the page.

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APPENDIX 2: IMAGES

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4.



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