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Murdered and Missing African-American Women: The Case of Ametra Bryant

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“You can’t remember your child’s life without remembering her death.”

— DEBORAH BRYANT, 2012

My friend Darlene Jones telephoned me in August 1996. When I answered, she declared immediately: “Ametra was killed.” Darlene was clearly shaken. Ametra Bryant was twenty-three, single, and had a two-year-old daughter. They lived with Ametra’s mother, Deborah Bryant, Darlene’s first cousin, in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Darlene lived not far away from them in Washington, D.C. “What?” I asked. Darlene repeated, “Ametra was killed. I don’t believe it.” As she continued to talk, my mind escaped somewhere to trying to process how *Ametra* and *killed* could be in the same sentence.

Darlene had to hang up the telephone to assist Deborah, who needed someone to comfort her. In the meantime, I called another friend and explained

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that Ametra's killer "was probably someone she knew because he covered her face." In my brief conversation with Darlene, I had ascertained that Ametra's face was covered. "It seems the person tried to hide what he did," I went on, recalling something I had learned from *Copycat*, a 1995 film about serial killers. When a killer covers a victim's face, according to the film, the killer possibly knows the victim and is remorseful. As my friend and I quibbled about other possible matters, we realized that movies such as *Copycat* were our only reference points for trying to understand why someone would kill Ametra. We wanted to believe that she knew her killer. If Ametra was the victim of a *random* killing, we too could be victims of random killings.¹

Ametra Bryant's killing represents the countless murders of African-American women that, because of poor investigative work and scant media attention, ultimately go "cold," or unresolved. This article situates Ametra's cold case in the larger body of scholarship on violence against African-American women. This article also sheds light on the overall impact that murdered and missing women can have on their family members, especially mothers and other female kin.

Ametra and Family

Ametra's mother, Deborah, was forty years old and divorced when someone murdered her daughter. Deborah had a second daughter, Stacie, who was twenty-two, and a son, Kevin, who was twenty. For years during their adolescence, Deborah had struggled to rear them on her own. She therefore returned to school, became a computer programmer, and eventually began working for the federal census bureau in the small town of Suitland, Maryland, located approximately eleven miles northwest of Upper Marlboro. Deborah's first cousin, Darlene, a thirty-five-year-old administrative assistant at the time of the murder, was another beloved family member. The two women previously lived together in Fort Washington, a smaller town in Maryland located approximately twenty miles northeast of Suitland.

Deborah Bryant's offspring came of age in Maryland, but they lived in other places as well. Kevin enlisted in the military. Stacie joined Job Corps and relocated to nearby West Virginia. Ametra went to college in Mississippi. She

1 *Copycat*, dir. Jon Amiel, 123 min., New Regency Pictures, 1995, DVD.

and Stacie eventually returned to Maryland where they lived with Deborah in a moderate-size apartment. When Ametra got a job at the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., she moved in with her boyfriend. Ametra was about twenty at the time. She soon gave birth to a daughter named Kenya. Ametra truly enjoyed motherhood, but her boyfriend and job soon presented issues.

Ametra and Kenya eventually moved back to Deborah's apartment. Ametra did not instantly find work, but Deborah made enough money as a computer programmer to take care of the family. With the apartment becoming cramped, Deborah set her sights on purchasing a house. Not unlike innumerable other single African-American mothers, Deborah always wanted her children to have someplace of their own to which they could return if necessary. A split-level dwelling in Upper Marlboro proved to be ideal for the family. Deborah, a lay seamstress with entrepreneurial aspirations, could use the upstairs area to start a sewing business while Ametra, Kenya, and Stacie occupied the downstairs area. The four moved in on May 30, 1996. Fewer than three months later, on August 23, someone murdered Ametra. If a man did commit this heinous act, as I presumed, his act was one of fifty-four committed in Maryland during the year 1996. Fifty-four ranked twelfth in the country.²

Race, Class, and Scholarship

Journalist and author Marilee Strong has researched and written about men who murder women or make them disappear. She says many of these "erasers" are successful because they hide all evidence of their crimes. The disappearance and eventual murder of Laci Peterson, a pregnant White Californian who went missing for eight months before her mutilated corpse was located, is a prime example. Peterson's case garnered much attention in North America and abroad on account of her ethnicity, nationality, and socioeconomic status: Peterson was White, American, and middle class. However, the crisis of murdered African-American women often receive scant attention, especially among scholars. Moreover, the overall impact of these murdered African-American women on

2 Deborah Bryant, interview with the author, August 12, 2016 (hereafter cited as Bryant Interview); Philip P. Pan, "Tragedy Haunts House: Families Appeal for Help in Solving Slayings," *Washington Post*, September 26, 1996; Violence Policy Center, "When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of the 1996 Homicide Data," <http://www.vpc.org/studies/dvmd.htm> (accessed August 26, 2016).

their family members is barely addressed in the scholarship.³

Serial killers have been responsible for the most notorious cases of murder committed against Black women. In the Dorchester-Roxbury area of Boston, Massachusetts, for example, twelve Black women and one White woman were murdered in 1978 and 1979. Their murders spurred the creation of a predominantly Black feminist organization called the Combahee River Collective. Ten Black women were murdered in Charlotte, North Carolina, from 1990 to 1994. The same number of Black women was murdered on the south side of Los Angeles, California, from 1987 to 1998. One woman was pregnant.⁴

The crisis of missing Black women is another subject to which scholars have given scant attention. The early February 2006 case of Ali Gilmore, a pregnant Black woman from Tallahassee, Florida, is one notable exception to this general rule. Gilmore worked for the state health department. One day she did not show up for work or let anyone know of her absence. Gilmore's colleagues knew instantly something was wrong; she never missed work without notice. As it turned out, someone had abducted her. Unlike most cases involving missing African-American women, Gilmore's case received national attention. Large billboards were placed in Tallahassee. Dateline NBC, MSNBC, and both the Montel Williams and the Nancy Grace shows covered Gilmore's abduction. Eventually a reward in the amount of \$30,000 was offered for information

3 Marilee Strong with Mark Powelson, *Erased: Missing Women, Murdered Wives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008). See also Christine Bold, *Remembering Women Murdered by Men: Memorials Across Canada* (Toronto, Canada: Sumach Press, 2006); Annette Burfoot and Susan Lord, eds., *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006); and Amber Dean, "Representing and Remembering Murdered Women: Thoughts on the Ethics of Critique," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 34 (June-September 2008): 229-41.

4 See "Crimes against Black Women: Four Cases," *World News Today*, August 29, 2007, <http://httpjournalsaolcomjenjer6steph.blogspot.com/2007/08/crimes-against-black-women-four-cases.html> (accessed July 16, 2016); Krista Gesaman, "How the Media Treat's [sic] Black Murder: Several Women Murdered and Missing in N.C. Case," *Assata Shakur Forums*, <http://www.assatashakur.org/forum/afrikan-reflections/40076-how-media-treats-black-murder-several-women-murdered-missing-n-c-case.html> (accessed July 16, 2016); and "Vicious Murder of Black Women in Cleveland," *Revolution*, November 29, 2009, http://www.revcom.us/a/184/Cleveland_murders-en.html (accessed July 16, 2016).

leading to her whereabouts, but she was never located.⁵

Race and class often play significant roles in the attention that the media and law enforcement personnel give to murdered and/or missing African-American women. These factors also contribute to whether first-time murderers are captured before they can kill again. Middle-to-upper class murdered and/or missing White women such as Laci Peterson get much attention; lower class White women, as well as non-White women in similar or slightly better financial conditions, do not get much attention. Some observers have speculated that several women in the Los Angeles serial killings mentioned above had histories of substance use and prostitution; therefore, officials were less dedicated to finding these women's killers. Had these officials acted more expeditiously in solving the first cases of missing women, the consequent number of murdered women might have been reduced significantly.⁶

Femicide as Homicide

Most femicides (sex-based killings of women) discussed thus far have been homicides. The United States Bureau of Justice Statistics defines homicide as "the willful killing of one human being by other." Homicides occur for numerous reasons, including but not limited to the escalation of disputes between

5 See "Missing Gilmore Case on Montel Williams Show Results in Several Sightings," *WCTV*, May 8, 2006, <http://www.wctv.tv/home/headlines/2765466.html> (accessed July 16, 2016); Nancy Grace, "Mesa, Arizona, Police Release Tapes of Calls Made to 911 . . .," *CNN*, March 1, 2006, <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0603/01/ng.01.html> (accessed July 16, 2016); "Remembering Ali Gilmore; Missing for Nearly a Year," *WCTV*, February 1, 2007, <http://www.wctv.tv/home/headlines/5507946.html> (accessed July 16, 2016); Sara James, "What Happened to Ali Gilmore?" *Dateline NBC*, May 8, 2007, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18561766/ns/dateline_nbc/t/what-happened-ali-gilmore/#.V4qHM9QrK4Q (accessed July 16, 2016), and "Pregnant Black, Murdered . . . and All but Forgotten," April, 14, 2008," *College Candy*, April 14, 2008, <http://collegecandy.com/2008/04/14/black-pregnant-murderedand-all-but-forgotten/> (accessed August 8, 2016).

6 On the broader patterns of race and class on law enforcement personnel's handlings of murder women in North America and elsewhere in the world, see, among other sources, Kristen Gilchrist, "'Newsworthy' Victims: Exploring Differences in Canadian Local Press Coverage of Missing/Murdered Aboriginal and White Women," *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (2010): 373–90; as well as Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young, "Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31 (2006): 895–917.

acquaintances and strangers; conflicts during illegal activities; and as byproducts of other crimes. Black Americans die from homicides at approximately six times the rate of White Americans. In 2014, for instance, Black women aged fifteen to forty-four were three times more likely to die from homicides than similarly aged White women (14:4/100,000 resident population), according to the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Intimate partners commit most femicides, but biological family members, friends, serial killers, and strangers also commit large numbers of femicides.⁷

Sociologist Leonard Beeghley thinks American homicides have become as banal as they are tragic. Unless homicides occur in public places, are mass, or have other stimulating characteristics, he writes, media reports are “sloughed off as part of the background noise that accompanies life in the United States.” Homicidal frequency since the middle twentieth century has attributed to this banality. More Americans have died from homicides since 1950 than from all the wars in which the country has participated. Though this article focuses on murdered and missing Black women, homicide rates among Black and White men are worth mentioning. The year 2014 is illustrative: Black men were killed at nine times the rate of White men (119:13/100,000 resident population).⁸

Violent Death, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Prolonged Grief, and Depression

The loss of a loved one for any reason is difficult. However, survivors of violent deaths face unique challenges when compared with those who experience nonviolent deaths. Violent deaths typically occur suddenly, “may leave survivors with a sense of untimeliness, injustice, and meaningless,” and are characterized by what one group of scholars refers to as “the three Vs.” Vio-

7 United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Homicide,” <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=311> (accessed July 16, 2016). See also Leonard Beeghley, *Homicide: A Sociological Explanation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Intimate Partner Violence: Definitions,” June 19, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/definitions.html> (accessed July 16, 2016); United States Department of Health and Human Services, *Health, United States, 2015: With Special Feature on Racial and Health Disparities* (Hyattsville, Md., U.S. Government Printing Office, 2015), 140.

8 Beeghley, *Homicide*, 2. See also United States Department of Health and Human Services, *Health, United States, 2015*, p. 141

lence is the first and most obvious V. Violation, defined as “a transgression against the perceived rights of the deceased and the survivors,” is the second. Volitional is the third. The death, that is, results from “an intentional . . . or negligent human act.” Survivors are left to cope not only with the loss of their loved one, but also with the “shock and terror” of how their loved one was lost. Hence they often experience symptoms of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and intense or prolonged grief that can be debilitating. Some survivors are able to recover without intervention, but others require clinical treatment. The intensity and length of these symptoms, as well as the necessity of professional help, routinely depend on the relationship of a survivor to the deceased as well as to the familial, personal, and nonprofessional support of the survivor. Of no surprise, mothers tend to exhibit the highest levels of depression, PTSD, and prolonged grief; but these conditions are common among widows, sisters, and other female relatives as well.⁹

African-American survivors of violent death are particularly vulnerable to depression, PTSD, and prolonged grief. The high rate of homicide among African Americans is one reason for this high level of vulnerability. One body of research conducted on African Americans and bereavement suggests that they report greater bereavement complications than do other ethnic groups. The same research also suggests that “the type of loss [often predicts] how well individuals cope with violent death, predicting more complicated grief symptomatology than non-violent deaths and death by homicide predicting the most problematic outcome of all.” In each instance, the quality of support that one receives during the bereavement process is crucial to one’s ability to handle depression, PTSD, and grief. How Ametra Bryant’s mother, Deborah, and other relatives handled her murder illustrates this fact.¹⁰

9 Rachel Hibberd et al., “Risk and Protective Factors for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Prolonged Grief, and Depression in Survivors of the Violent Death of a Loved One,” *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 15 (August 2010): 427–8. See also, among other sources, Laurie A. Burke et al., “African American Homicide Bereavement: Aspects of Social Support that Predict Complicated Grief, PTSD, and Depression,” *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 61 (August 2010): 1–24.

10 Burke et al., “African American Homicide Bereavement,” 4.

“Please, Tell Me That’s not my Daughter”

I interviewed Deborah two times in 2012. We had one long session on April 30 and one short session on May 5. She described her daughter as a trusting, forgiving, and appreciative person: “No matter what anybody did for her, it was a huge thing. . . . She was always grateful and never forgot it.” Deborah furthermore described Ametra as “quiet,” “very shy,” and a “loner.” Although Deborah did not believe that a potential abuser could have gotten away with physical abuse, she thought Ametra might have been a “really easy target” for mental and emotional abuse. Ultimately, though, Ametra suffered the worst type of physical abuse imaginable, murder.¹¹

On the date of Ametra’s murder, August 23, 1996, Deborah and two friends traveled to Craigsville, Virginia, about 200 miles from Upper Marlboro, Maryland, to buy fabric. The store they visited in Craigsville sold the type fabric and other material Deborah needed to make wedding gowns and men’s suits at wholesale prices. Although Deborah did not have much money after purchasing a house, she wanted to spend what she did have to buy the fabric she needed to launch her sewing business. Shortly before going to sleep on August 22, she thought about taking Ametra and her granddaughter, Kenya, with her to Craigsville. During the following morning, however, Deborah realized that she did not have enough money to buy them breakfast, lunch, or other things they might request; and telling them no was an act with which she did not wish to deal at the moment. In retrospect, she thought in 2012, this decision was “weird.” They normally accompanied her regardless of the family’s financial situation. Ametra simply packed “something—snacks and stuff” to take along for the trip.¹²

Deborah left home at 6 AM on the date of the murder (August 23, 1996). She returned home around 4 PM. Kenya greeted her. Deborah asked, “Where is ‘Mommy Metra?’” Kenya did not respond; instead, she requested grapes. Deborah asked her friend’s husband, who had accompanied them to the fabric store in Craigsville, to get the toddler a few grapes. Deborah herself then put the newly purchased fabric in the sewing room upstairs. Kenya followed her. Shortly thereafter, Deborah realized that Ametra had not spoken to her, which

11 Bryant Interview, April 30, 2012.

12 Ibid.

was unusual. Deborah thus repeated her question to Kenya: “Where is ‘Mommy Metra?’” Kenya still did not respond, so Deborah peered through a window close by, thinking Ametra might have company. But she soon dismissed this possibility, as there was no foreign vehicle outside, and walked downstairs. Maybe Ametra was there.¹³

When Deborah made it downstairs, she saw the door to the living room was closed. This sight was odd to her. Kenya was not old enough to open or close doors, and no adult generally closed doors unless something private was happening. Still thinking Ametra might have company and wanted privacy, despite no foreign vehicle being outside, Deborah knocked on the door. No one responded, so Deborah opened the door and looked around the room. She did not see Ametra but sensed that something was wrong. Then she looked at the floor. Red droplets of some sort were on the light-beige carpet. She thought aloud, “Why would they give this child that red drink? I told those girls when we moved in this house to only give her clear drinks; to not give her anything red, because I cannot afford to have this carpet cleaned and I am not going to have nasty carpet.” Deborah described to me what happened next:

So, I’m standing there and I’m actually thinking all of this stuff and then I look down again and I see that these drops, the size of a quarter are coming out of the door that I just walked in. And then I knew. I looked over to my left, in my peripheral vision, I saw something and it was like a mound. I thought that Ametra had taken a rug and covered up a pile. And I’m standing there looking at that pile and I’m thinking, “Well, why in the world would they do that?” And, in that instant, I knew. I knew that was Ametra and I slowly backed out of the room and I don’t know if I closed that door or not, but I backed out.¹⁴

Deborah knew she needed to get Kenya out of the house, but she simply stood motionless and repeated, “Jesus.” At the time Deborah was too shocked to cry or weep, but she eventually walked toward a nearby bedroom where fear replaced shock. “The person was still there,” she thought. Instantly, Deborah rushed back upstairs to get Kenya. Once Kenya was in her arms, she fell to her

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

knees and wept uncontrollably. Her friend's husband, convinced something bad had happened, rushed downstairs. A moment later he yelled upstairs and told his wife to call the police. While this was going on, Deborah took Kenya outside. A male neighbor then drove up, and Deborah ran to his car. As he opened the door, she sunk to the ground. "Oh my God!" he exclaimed. "It happened again." Approximately ten months earlier, a mother and her son had been murdered, execution style, in the same house that Deborah and her family now occupied.¹⁵

Deborah asked the neighbor if she could come to his house. Police officers concurrently arrived at Deborah's house, and someone told them she was with a neighbor. One officer went to the neighbor's house. Deborah, still in shock, was unable to comprehend fully what the officer asked. All she could do was pat him on the leg and utter, "Please tell me that's not my daughter." He responded, "Well, I can't tell you that because I don't know your daughter." Deborah, now aggravated, yelled: "There are pictures all over the walls! Look at the pictures!" He left and returned to her house. Awhile later Deborah went to Darlene's house.¹⁶

Deborah stayed with Darlene for a few days. By the time she returned home, it was as if nothing had happened. The critical cleanup crew (a unit within the police department that works with insurance companies) had come in and worked the site. The crew painted the walls, laid new carpets, and replaced every piece of furniture that had been broken or bloodied. The room where Ametra was killed looked new. The refurbishment was important to Deborah, as she did not want Kenya to recognize anything that might make her realize what had happened to Ametra.

Several neighbors approached Deborah in the coming weeks and months. Each person wanted to know the circumstances of Ametra's death. For almost a year Deborah had no definitive answer. She then went to the state attorney's office and read the chief investigator's official report. As it turns out, the murderer stabbed Ametra multiple times in her sides and back. The murderer also hogtied her hands and ankles, slit her throat, placed a plastic bag over her

15 See, for example, Pan, "Tragedy Haunts House: Families Appeal for Help in Solving Slayings."

16 Bryant Interview, April 30, 2012.

head, and covered her body with an area rug. Tragically, all of this happened while Kenya was in the house.¹⁷

Immediately following the murder, investigators had asked Deborah whether she thought it could have occurred during a botched robbery. A television set that Ametra had given Deborah, a microwave oven, a videocassette recorder, a call identifier and, perhaps most important of all, a knife were missing. Unfortunately, no reliable evidence was located to identify who had taken these items. Deborah suspected that Ametra's prom date from five years earlier, in 1991, had taken the items as well as her daughter's life. He was much older than Ametra, and Deborah always thought there was "just something creepy about him." Since going to the prom, Ametra had moved to Mississippi, returned to Maryland, and met Kenya's father; but, about one month before the murder, Ametra had begun to communicate again with her prom date. Police officers eventually questioned him, but they were unable to find enough evidence to charge him with the murder.¹⁸

"I Wanted to Die"

It took Deborah about a decade to learn how to cope with the murder of her daughter. She not only suffered from PTSD but also was paranoid and anxious. In her own words, she was "just crazy." Deborah began to look at everyone as a suspect. She would spend days on end convinced that this person or that person murdered her daughter. She suspected neighbors, family members, and even coworkers at the census bureau. Washington, D.C., truly petrified Deborah. In her mind, the person who killed her daughter lived there. (On the day of the murder, neighbors had seen a car in the drive way with a D.C. registration tag.) Deborah even imagined people in cars next to her holding signs that read: "I killed her." Deborah continued to live in the house for eight years after Ametra's murder but continuously feared that someone might break in and murder her as well. Ametra had been a shy loner who bothered no one; Deborah, on the other hand, "bothered people" all of the time.¹⁹

On occasion, someone would ask Deborah whether she considered mov-

17 Ibid., and September 2, 2016.

18 Ibid., April 30, 2012.

19 Ibid.

ing. “I did not want to run” was her usual reply. In the past, anytime she was unhappy with something—an apartment, a job, a relationship—she would just leave. This time, however, Deborah was determined to stay. Furthermore, she could not leave Ametra; the house was the “last place she was.” Deborah seemed trapped emotionally as well as physically. Ametra’s murder left her with no real desire to live. “Sometimes,” Deborah recalled during one of our 2012 interviews, “I would just try to see if I could just smoke as many cigarettes as I could just so I could hurry up and die. Or sometimes I would just drink as much as I could to get alcohol poisoning. There would be times I would be tempted to just cause an accident on the highway. There would be a strong desire, you know, to just pull in front of a big truck or something.” Deborah eventually abandoned this scheme. “What if I don’t die, but somebody else does,” she contemplated. She could not “put another family through” what she herself had experienced by losing Ametra.²⁰

Deborah was not the only family member affected significantly by Ametra’s murder. Stacie, Ametra’s younger sister of one year, was affected significantly as well. Immediately following Ametra’s death, when police officers thought a botched robbery possibly caused the murder, they asked Deborah to see if anything was missing. She was in shock, so Stacie searched for potentially missing items. An officer told Stacie not to go into the living room where Ametra’s body was located; but Stacie “needed to know” what happened to her sister and ran into the room anyhow. A police officer tried to block Stacie’s view, but she saw enough of the murder scene to cause her to have “a fit,” Deborah lamented.²¹

The image of Ametra’s dead body stayed with Stacie. Near the end of 1997, a little more than a year following Ametra’s death, Stacie tried to commit suicide. Deborah fortunately “got to her in the nick of time.” Stacie then started to use drugs, though she eventually recovered and had a child. From then on Stacie lived a relatively stable life before succumbing to lupus at age thirty-five.²²

I had numerous conversations with Darlene Jones, Deborah’s first cousin, during the years following Ametra’s 1996 murder. I conducted a formal inter-

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Deborah’s son, Kevin, also took Ametra’s murder hard. Kevin got some therapy while in the military, but his jovial personality changed. He often became angry due to reasons he once ignored or handled with calm.

view with Darlene on May 11, 2012. She remembered watching news reports about Ametra's murder on television before Deborah came to her house on the same date, August 23, 1996. Darlene kept saying to herself: "This is like watching somebody else's movie, like something out of a horror film. I know I am going to wake up. I know this is a dream. Ametra did not get killed. I'm going to wake up. This is crazy." When Deborah got to her house, Darlene immediately turned off the television. Others tried to turn it back on, but Darlene interceded. She did not want Deborah to see the news reports. Meanwhile, Darlene tried to comprehend why someone would "walk in your house, stab your [daughter], and roll [her] up." But this is exactly what someone had done to Deborah's daughter: killed her "child and rolled her up in a rug."²³

Deborah started praying as soon as she sat down in Darlene's house. "It was like she was having a conversation with God," Darlene recalled in May 2012. "She kept saying, 'Lord, Lord, I can't take it. Somebody stole my child. . . . Lord, somebody killed my baby.'"²⁴

Darlene wanted to be support Deborah, but it was difficult. Both women were hurting deeply, and Deborah was taking medication. She was in so much pain, Darlene recounted in 2012, asking me: "What do you do when she [Deborah] goes into darkness? When she goes into dark holes, you go." Darlene began to have seizures and retrospectively wondered if trying to support Deborah might have contributed to the seizures. Ever since Ametra's murder, Darlene admitted nearly sixteen years later, in 2012, "my heart has been so heavy. Before I used to get angry, now I get hurt, because when the news goes off, and others go on with their lives, you worry about your loved one. It was a nightmare"²⁵

Ametra's two-year-old daughter, Kenya, was too young in August 1996 to comprehend what she might have witnessed or heard; but Deborah said there were indications *ex post facto* that Kenya had indeed witnessed Ametra's murder. Kenya shook each time someone screamed, even when the screaming came from the television. Kenya also began to "hear things." One particular experience stood out to Deborah. She revisited it in April 2012: Kenya "was

23 Darlene Jones, interview with the author, May 11, 2012.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

on the floor playing with me [when] all of a sudden she just stopped like she heard something. She jumped up, ran into my arms, and whispered something I had never heard. She was trembling and said to me, ‘Grandma, make ‘Mommy Metra’ stop screaming. She’s scaring me. Make her stop.’” Another time, Kenya told Deborah “that man was hitting ‘Mommy Metra,’ and ‘Mommy Metra’ was falling and falling and falling, and he just kept hitting her.” Deborah surmised that, since the coroner’s report showed no major bruising from a fist, Kenya must have seen the stabbing.²⁶

Deborah Bryant is still trying to cope with the murder of her daughter, Ametra. In spite of the challenges that Deborah has faced, a combination of medication, therapy, and her faith in God have carried her through. She says, “When you can turn a situation around and see God in it, it makes it easier to bear the load.” Deborah believes that, if she did not believe strongly in God, she would not have survived Ametra’s death. Deborah does what she can to try to be happy, including thinking about her daughter when she was alive rather than dead, but often feels guilty about being happy: “You can’t think about your child’s life without thinking of her death.”²⁷

Conclusion

To this day, more than two decades after Ametra Bryant was murdered, I myself cannot think about this horrendous act without situating it in the history of physical and nonphysical (mental, verbal) violence against African Americans, especially women. In this article I have used the murder of one Black woman, Ametra, as a microcosm of countless other murders that have gone unsolved during the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century. A large percentage has been interpersonal, meaning directed at each other, and the evidence suggests that African-American women receive a disproportionate share of it. Ametra’s murder might not have been interper-

26 Bryant Interview, April 30, 2012. I interviewed Deborah Bryant and Darlene Jones in April and May of 2012. Even though Kenya was about eighteen years old, I decided not to interview her because of the sensitivity of the subject matter. I had just gotten to the place where I felt comfortable interviewing Deborah. It was uncomfortable asking her to remember and talk about something so painful. I was uncomfortable with potentially shaking Kenya up, so I did not interview her.

27 Bryant Interview, April 30, 2012.

sonal, but the evidence suggests that it was. At any rate, her unsolved murder and innumerable others have gone unnoticed in the popular press and among academicians because violence, including homicide, has become an everyday and seemingly acceptable occurrence in this country.

Since African-American and other women of color are at the bottom of the country's racial, class, and gender hierarchy, it is not surprising they do not hold a prominent place in existing scholarship about murdered and/or missing citizens. Part of this exclusion rests with the dearth of media attention given to these women. Their stories often do not make the national news, so locating reliable information via the Internet and other readily available means is difficult. As regards Ametra Bryant, I was fortunate to conduct personal interviews with family members. According to her mother, Deborah, the police did a "lousy" job investigating the murder. And, as with numerous other cases involving African-American women, Ametra's case remains cold. Someone, then, needed to tell her story. This is what I have attempted to do in this article.²⁸

Telling Ametra's story illustrates that the lives of murdered and/or missing African-Americans women matter. If similar stories are researched and told on more regular bases, the police and other law enforcement officials might act quicker to solve the cases on which the stories are based. Of equal significance, those responsible for murdering and/or abducting these women might be brought to justice sooner. Feminist and similar organizations devoted to violence against women might be more forceful in cases involving African-American women. And more local, state, and national policymakers might begin to see that valuing and protecting the lives of Black women is just as important as valuing and protecting the lives of middle-to-upper class White women. It is hoped that this article will spur much more research and storytelling.

28 Ibid.