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# "If You Stand On This Corner, People Know What You're About": Powerful Geographies Of Airline & Goodwood in #JusticeForAlton

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“IF YOU STAND ON THIS CORNER, PEOPLE KNOW WHAT YOU’RE  
ABOUT”: POWERFUL GEOGRAPHIES OF AIRLINE & GOODWOOD IN  
#JUSTICEFORALTON

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by  
Shannon Kathleen Groll  
B.A., Case Western Reserve University, 2014  
August 2018

For:: the Sterling Family. The Resistance & Redell. For Doc & Donney. Shamaka. Maggie.  
Joseph. Jaime. Coach. Courtney. Ash. Gage. Emily. those who took to the streets & those who  
did not. those who show up time & time again. those who have grown weary.

For the ways in which we constantly redefine politics & justice & activism & citizenship. the  
kindness & ferocity with which we hold each other accountable. the infinite ways in which we  
build & become community.

For this city, may it be a home to our wildest dreams.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand the multiple geographies of Airline & Goodwood, a site of protest occupied nightly during a part of summer 2016 in response to the police shooting of Alton Sterling. Through a methodology of observant-participation, interviews, and oral histories, I make the case that the politics of this site differed from other contemporaneous protest sites in the city through specific place-making activity which highlighted the site's powerful contemporary and historical geographies. I connect protest at this site to the precarity of Black life and death in Baton Rouge through interviews and oral histories which discuss the historical geography of birth and segregation in Baton Rouge. Further, I examine the ways that the place of this site extended beyond its space, extending into flood relief and other organizing efforts post-summer 2016.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND ETHICS

### 1.1 Protest at the Intersection: Saturday July 9, 2016

The atmosphere is tense as I make the left turn from Lobdell Avenue to Goodwood Boulevard. Another Legal Observer (LO) and I are heading out in response to a text message request from the LO Coordinator (below), and begin the short drive from my home in Mid City. We are newly trained and eager to be of use.

8:19pm, LO Coordinator: Please let us know how many LOs can make it to Airline? Are folks there? There's been an ask from organizers.

We pass the public library, a slew of churches and nonprofit buildings. The parked cars begin to build up in the church parking lots, side streets, and driveways along Goodwood Boulevard. My friend reads the barrage of incoming messages<sup>1</sup> out loud as I drive.

8:23pm, LO #1: BR police special response team van at the corner of vine and airline diverting traffic

8:30pm, LO #2: Can we give out the hotline number?

8:31pm, LO #3: Here on the northeast corner of goodwood and airline. Where's our point person or other LOs?

8:40pm, LO #2: Can I put out that number? I've seen several folks snatched and grabbed.

8:45pm, LO #1: We need more LOs.

We are a half mile from the protest. There are flashing red lights a quarter mile ahead. Seven police vehicles speed past, blue lights blazing. We park in the last open spot in the Hosanna Christian Academy parking lot, a few hundred yards from our destination (Figure 1.1). The two

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<sup>1</sup> These messages are excerpts from a Legal Observer group text. For description of the Legal Observer program see Chapter 1.4 and Chapter 2.1.1.



of us check our bags for our notebooks, pens, water bottles and a bandana each. We walk the rest of the way.



Figure 1.1: Airline & Goodwood from above, Google Maps Satellite View, July 2016.

It is dark and hot. Dim lights of street lamps line Goodwood Boulevard and the parking lots of the gas station on the corner and the car dealership behind it. The looming police building across the street is usually dark at this time of night, but now there are floodlights, erected quickly in the lawn and driveways. There is a small patch of grass between the gas station and highway, the kind that is only a buffer.

The air can't hold all of the humidity of a Louisiana July, and I'm already sweating as I take in the scene in front of me: hundreds of people gathered in the loudest quiet. There was no chanting, no sirens. I scan the crowd for leaders- someone in a vest, someone holding a megaphone or a sign. No such luck. There are hastily made signs. There are restless clusters of people talking. I scan the crowd for the LO coordinator, someone in a neon green hat that can

give directions. I scan the crowd for someone, anyone that I know. The intersection offers no guidance.

Most of us came to this space because of a text message on a screen. Many are here because they saw the protests emerging on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. I am here because I wanted a role in the movement and someone told me being an LO was a job that would help. I do not know who came here first, who posted on social media and started this snowball effect. I do know why this place: this patch of grass, roughly 25 feet by 40 feet, faces the headquarters of the Baton Rouge Police Department.

There are police across the street, a chain of nameless bodies clad in riot gear. Linked together, the shifting of individual feet becomes a collective action. We are watching an organism breathe, clench a collective fist, reach for the weapon at its belt. The police have not yet moved, but potential energy demands release. They came here dressed for more than standing still.

This is beyond the scope of what we were trained for, and there are only two of us. The other Legal Observer and I talk it through: What did the training say? We were supposed to check in with the point person. Where are they? Who is the organizer? Where are the other LOs? Someone has to be here, check the group text.

Earlier in the day, we had been trained as Legal Observers with the National Lawyers Guild (see section 2.1.1). Along with more than one hundred other people, we had crammed into a too-small lecture hall at Southern University law center. The room buzzed with tension, energy, and determination. The Friday night protests had turned violent; videos and witness accounts of police macing and tackling young people at Airline & Goodwood had spread. Most folks who found their way to this room had questions about civil liberties and protest rights. There were so

many questions that the official training portion was condensed from two hours to a rushed forty five minutes. Armed with incomplete information, a notebook, our smartphones and makeshift arm bands (the local NLG chapter had run out of their signature neon green hats quickly) we set out to answer the call for LOs at Airline & Goodwood.

After a few minutes of scanning the crowd, we find other LOs. There are eight of us on-site, all newly trained, and no coordinator. We pool our information. There have been at least 20 arrests so far. Someone says “snatch and grab.” Someone else says the people who were arrested are being put onto waiting prisoner buses to be booked off-site. We know there are East Baton Rouge Sheriff Officers and Baton Rouge Police Officers present. There may be other police departments represented, from Jefferson Parish or Mississippi, but we aren’t sure. Anyone who got close enough to see a badge number has been arrested. Someone is working the hotline and we need to call them. We are supposed to be in pairs. We are supposed to be observing the police. We are too far back and grouped together. Time to make a plan.

We disperse into four groups of 2 people, one partner to take notes and one partner to take pictures. We spread out: two groups facing the police headquarters across Goodwood Boulevard, two groups on the border of Airline Highway. My partner and I move through the gas pumps of the Circle K, across the lot to our spot along Airline. We weave through families, groups of teenagers, people holding up their phones to record the scene around them. We approach the groups of people with sharpies, offering to write the National Lawyers Guild Hotline number on their arms in case of arrest.

The crowd has swelled since the last arrests. Someone shouts, “They will take you if you step into the street.” The people close enough to hear take a half step away from the curb. A noise

shifts our attention to the left, north towards the police station. Heads turn to the sound of boots advancing down the highway. A man near me says “This is what they did before, they are coming to make more arrests.” There are too many people on any side for us to move. Without a closer look, we cannot count the number of police coming towards us. The overwhelmingly white police force fills the intersection three rows deep, facing a crowd primarily composed of black parents, children, and young adults (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2: Police officers occupying Airline Highway south of the intersection with Goodwood Boulevard. Photo taken July 9, 2016 by Scott Clause of *The Advertiser*, Original Caption: “Law Enforcement maintain order at the intersection of Goodwood and Airline Hwy. July 9, 2016.”

The police rush across the empty highway lane - the line between the citizens and the enforcers. The protesters rush back, almost ready for this tactic but not quite. Two of us are thrown against the hood of a vehicle parked at the gas station pumps by the quickly retreating crowd. We climb off, bouncing off each other and the people who were shoved against us. We run to the front of the gas station convenience store to regroup. To count the number of people

who were arrested in the most recent police rush. To collect witness accounts, names, dates of birth, medication needs from any friends of the arrested that we could find.

Before Saturday night ends, the police will arrest 102 peaceful protestors. Over the course of the weekend, more than 200 protesters will be arrested at multiple locations throughout the city. Many of those arrested will be denied food and medical treatment. Some will be injured in the course of both arrest and transport to parish facilities. There will be inconsistencies in paperwork which make it nearly impossible to properly track individuals through the system. Ultimately, through the course of at least three separate lawsuits, many will have their records expunged and receive a few hundred dollars in settlement, paid by city and parish authorities. Eighteen months later, legal proceedings are ongoing.

This weekend, July 8-10, 2017, marks the beginning of a 35-night occupation of the lawn at Airline & Goodwood. During this time, coalitions are formed and fracture. Citizens navigate increasingly militarized public spaces. Police patrol in heavy-duty riot gear. Later in July 2016, the city will be under curfew. In August, flood relief will mean that national guard troops monitor and guard public spaces and shelters. "Politics" stretches itself to uncomfortably accommodate the collective of individuals whose nightly gathering refuses the operational spaces of liberal democratic action. The occupation will end on August 11, 2016 with the beginning of regional flooding caused by torrential rain. The flood affected over 100,000 homes, closed schools for nearly a month, and damaged or closed approximately 34% of businesses in the parish (Advocate 2017).

## 1.2 Introduction

The pages before describe my first night at Airline & Goodwood. Since that night, I have sought to make sense of those experiences, to contextualize the embodiment of panic and fear, the perpetuation of state violence at the individual level, and the terror experienced as a collective whole. There is a complex relationship between people and place, place and power. In this thesis, I examine these relationship with special care to the place of Airline & Goodwood: a site of protest in the #JusticeForAlton movement. Through an examination of this place, I explore the powerful geographies which shape and are shaped by racial segregation and violence in Baton Rouge, LA.

I situate this thesis at the nexus of cultural geography and urban anthropology, and draw from Black studies, Black feminist geography, activist anthropology, imaginative ethnography and feminist anthropology. I take an ethnographic and geographic approach to the multiple meanings of #JusticeForAlton protests which took place at the corner of Airline Highway and Goodwood Boulevard in the summer of 2016. In this chapter, I introduce the city of Baton Rouge demographically and geographically, drawing heavily on the work of scholar Chris Tyson who connects the geography of Baton Rouge to sociopolitical events, as well as health and economic outcomes. I briefly overview the case details of Alton Sterling's murder which precipitated the #JusticeForAlton movement. Next, I situate myself within the geography of this city and my participation in #JusticeForAlton. I introduce this thesis in current framing, past evolution, and future directions to contextualize the ethical decisions made. I conclude with a look ahead to the following chapters.

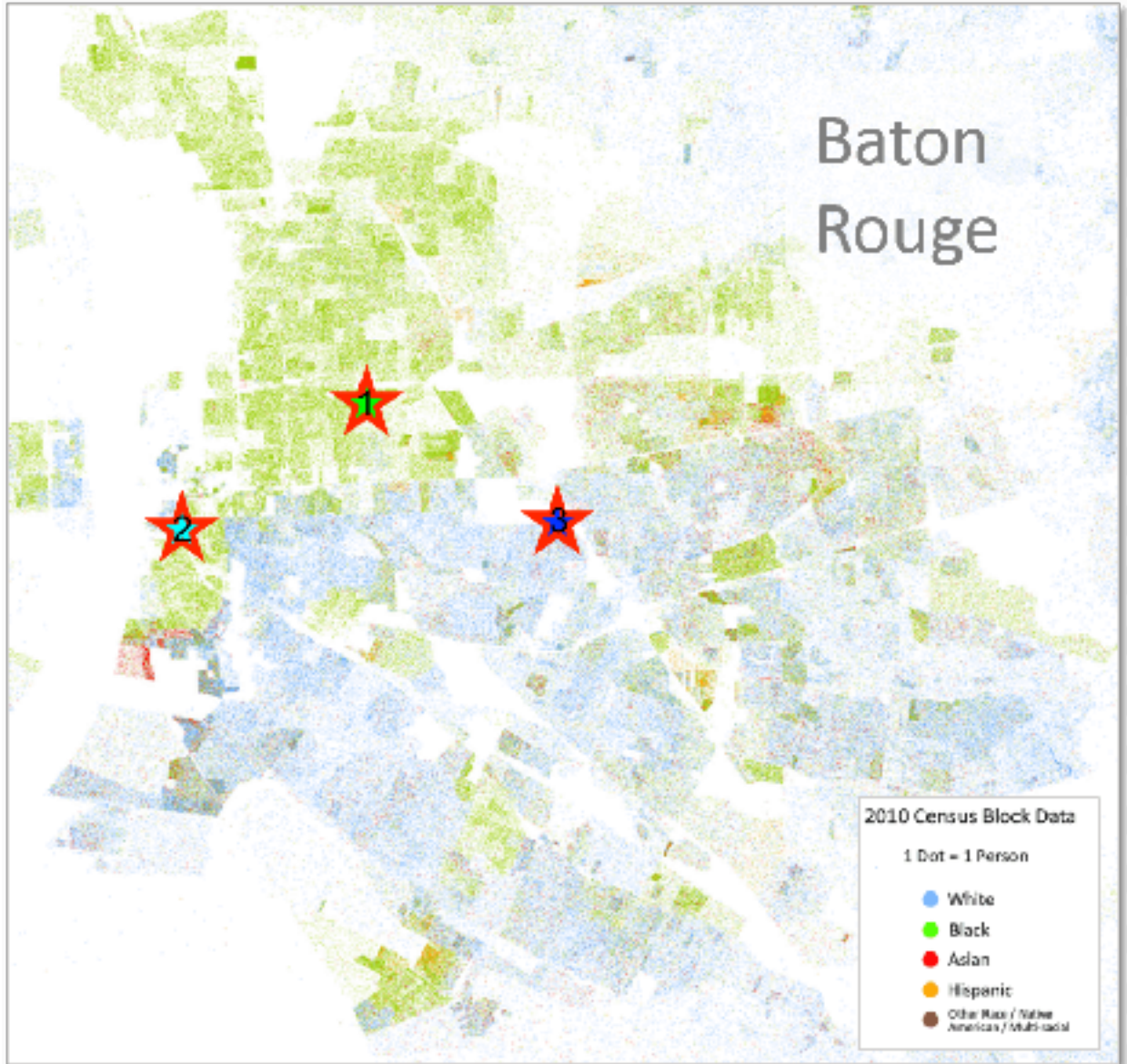


Figure 1.3: Map of Baton Rouge color coded based on 2010 Census Block Data. Map created by Dustin Cable, stars representing selected sites of protest added by author. Original map published at <https://demographics.coopercenter.org/racial-dot-map>.

### 1.3 Segregation and Inequity in Baton Rouge

Located along the Mississippi about 80 miles west of New Orleans is Baton Rouge, the political capital of Louisiana. With a population just under 500,000, the city is not large, but has outgrown the overburdened and underfunded public infrastructure (Tyson 2017). The city and

parish are governed by a single Metro Council, which is responsible for the greater metropolitan area (city limits and surrounding unincorporated areas). Based on 2016 Census Bureau Population Estimates, East Baton Rouge Parish is 45.1% white, 46.4% Black, 4.0% Hispanic and 4.5% “Other” (US Census Bureau 2010). The city is segregated into very clearly delineated areas along white and Black lines. Florida Boulevard serves as a north/south divider, with the exception of a few historically black neighborhoods throughout south Baton Rouge (see Figure 1.3). The police force is 67% white, while the metropolitan area is 55% Black. For the past 37 years, the police force has been non-compliant with federal Justice Department consent decree and affirmative action directives (Mustian 2017).

In October of 2017, Chris J. Tyson, Law Professor at Louisiana State University and recently appointed President and C.E.O. of the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority addressed the local chapter of the Rotary International Club about the divides in Baton Rouge:

Whether we are willing to admit it or not, those of us from here and who live here know that we are anything but an equitable community. Quite the contrary – we are a model of racial and spatial stratification. **We are North and South Baton Rouge with a Mason Dixon line called Florida Boulevard or Government Street, depending upon who you talk to.** According to a study by 24/7 Wall Street, we are the 13th most racially segregated metropolitan area in the nation. That finding is influenced by our racial income gap – the typical black household earns \$34,000 a year to the \$65,000 earned by the typical white household. Black poverty is 27.9%; white poverty 10.8%.

**Racial segregation is the mother of sprawl**, and accordingly to Smart Growth America we are the most sprawled out metropolitan area under 1 million in population and the 6th most sprawled out metro of any size. Furthermore, our chart-topping AIDS rate and a top ten murder rate in past years is largely tied to the experiences of people living in 2 or 3 zip codes, all of them majority black and poor (Tyson 2017).

In this address, later published on nonprofit news outlet Bayou Brief, Chris Tyson connects the geographic segregation of Baton Rouge to disparities in health and economic markers. He



connects Baton Rouge's sprawling size to racial segregation, and later in his address (not quoted above) connects the segregated sprawl to the last century of federal housing development. Tyson asserts that six major components contributed to racial segregation: 1) explicit residential segregation laws passed by cities in the early twentieth century (outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1917); 2) racially restrictive covenants meant to preserve housing values (outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1948); 3) the design of public spaces "served to reinforce black subordination" in the form of connective infrastructure design (bike paths, sidewalks, etc.) and major infrastructure (bridges, highways, public parks); 4) the Federal Housing Administration's promotion of redlining, a series of consciously racist policies controlling the government-backed mortgage finance market; 5) exclusionary zoning which used minimum lot sizes and prohibitions on apartments to block black access to white neighborhoods; and 6) local police and politicians who "openly or tacitly endorsed vigilante violence" to keep black residents/potential buyers out of white neighborhoods (Tyson 2017). Tyson connects the national history of segregated housing markets to local infrastructure, particularly transportation infrastructure:

All of this has local relevance. Like many cities we intentionally ran our interstates through black communities, disrupting their social fabrics and undermining property values. We stunted the development of our parks to avoid integration. We treated our schools the same. Our quest for racial segregation has driven an urban form dominated by unconnected streets and one-way-in-one-way-out developments that leave us all sitting in one of the worst traffic jams in the nation (Tyson 2017).

School and transportation segregation are commonly occurring themes in dialogue with my collaborators (see Chapter 3 for more ethnography specific discussion). Inwood et al. (2015) connects the geography of transportation and the Civil Rights Movement to the history of the Baton Rouge bus system. The 1953 Baton Rouge Bus Boycotts were the first example of city-

wide protest to segregated public transit, laying the foundation for later boycotts around the southern United States (Louisiana Public Broadcasting 2005; Hanson 2011; Alderman et al. 2013). Inwood et al. connects the often overlooked history of the Baton Rouge Bus Boycotts to the development of CATS (Capitol Area Transportation Authority) over the last 60 years:

The quality of service provided by the CATS bus system itself has declined in the past 60 years, largely due to dwindling sources of revenue from state government and even federal government. These funds must pass through state and regional bodies which, since desegregation of public services, have become less and less open to funding public transit in Louisiana and many other states.

While the busses in Baton Rouge have officially desegregated, the city has not. Restricted funding, fewer routes, clogged highways and urban sprawl making Baton Rouge a city of racialized roadblocks. For further discussion of city-wide transportation infrastructure, see Chapter 4, where I connect transportation and healthcare access in the segregated geography of Baton Rouge.

#### **1.4 #JusticeForAlton**

On July 5, 2016 Baton Rouge made national and international headlines with a viral video of two white police officers firing multiple close range shots at a Black man who had not drawn a weapon on them. Those two Baton Rouge Police Officers were dispatched to the Triple S Store, a convenience store on N. Foster Drive. They were sent with reports that someone was waving a gun outside the store. The reality was that a man, Alton Sterling, was selling CDs outside the store. He was a regular fixture, friends with Abdul Muflahi the owner, and known to many. He had a gun, kept in the pocket of his pants. Witness reports and surveillance footage do not show him waving it.

What the witnesses did see, and what the cameras did capture, was that upon arriving at the Triple S store, it took the officers only a few minutes to end Alton Sterling's life. The murder of this man, a father, a nephew, a son, was filmed by bystanders and the surveillance footage at the Triple S store. That night, the video was sent to Arthur "Silky Slim" Reed, a local community activist and founder of Stop The Killing, Inc. Silky Slim and his collaborators distributed the footage to news media sources overnight. When the city and country awoke, the videos and news of Alton Sterling's death had gone viral. The gathering of local community members, as well as the swarming of politicians and news media had begun.

While some protested at the Triple S Store (Site 1, Figure 1.3), the site of Alton Sterling's work and death, others gathered at politically significant places around the city. There were demonstrations at the State Capitol, City Hall, and the Governor's Mansion. The largest demonstrating during July 2016 was a march between a church on Government Street and the State Capitol (Site 2, Figure 1.3). This march will be discussed further in Chapter 3. A large number of people gathered at the intersection of Airline Highway and Goodwood Boulevard (Site 3, Figure 1.3). Airline & Goodwood (Figures 1.4 & 1.5, next page) became a visibly contested space during this time.

By property rights, this place is the lawn of a Shell Gas Station/Circle K Convenience Store, seen on the left side of Figure 1.4. It is across Goodwood Boulevard from what used to be Woman's Hospital and is now the headquarters for Baton Rouge Police. This tall building is almost entirely obscured by trees in Figure 1.4, but is a large complex extending hundreds of years down both Airline Highway and Goodwood Boulevard. The patch of grass where protests

took place is across Airline Highway from the majority white residential neighborhood around Broadmoor High School. Here, 150 people were arrested over three days from July 8-10, 2017.



Figure 1.4: Shell Station and lawn at the corner of Protest Site #2: Airline & Goodwood shown from the southeast corner of the Shell Station bordering Airline Highway (camera angle facing north/northwest). On the Northwest corner of intersection, the Baton Rouge police Headquarters can be seen behind the trees. Google Maps Street View, July 2016



Figure 1.5: Shell Station and lawn at the corner of Protest Site #2: Airline & Goodwood shown from middle of intersection (camera angle facing south/southwest). Google Maps Street View, July 2016

While the nightly occupation and protests ended in August of 2016 with the beginning of the flood, people returned to this space at the time of the non-indictment in the first week of May 2017. In this thesis, I ask: What brought hundreds of people to this location in the summer of 2016? What meaning and connection did they make while at this intersection? How did people resist the social, political and economic forces of Baton Rouge through the powerful geography of this intersection? What are the broader implications of protest practices at Airline & Goodwood?

### **1.5 Positioning the Researcher**

When news of Alton Sterling's murder spread, I was in Texas visiting family. On Tuesday July 5 and Wednesday July 6, 2016, I was in phone contact with the education and arts communities to which I was connected. There was a vigil on that Wednesday night, and friends described it to me via text. Social media buzzed. The viral video of another black man's murder was trending, only this time it was filmed in the neighborhood where some of my students lived. There was a level of separation, a distance more than the 500 miles removing me at that moment from Baton Rouge, or the 3.4 miles from my Baton Rouge home to the Triple S Store, the site of Alton Sterling's murder. It is the distance between my experiences growing up as a white, northern, female-bodied queer individual and the experience of southern black grief.

At the time I began researching, it was an investigation of curiosity and happenstance. I was new to graduate school, having started courses as a non-degree seeking student in January 2016, and I had chosen to study community-based approaches towards adolescent sexual and reproductive health education for my thesis work. My undergraduate degree was in Medical Anthropology, and while I was a graduate student in the LSU Department of Geography &

Anthropology in the evenings, by day I was a seventh grade science teacher at a large public middle school in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Immersion in this educational space, as well as a background in the anthropology of medicine and the body, led me towards an investigation of adolescent sexual and reproductive health education. The Louisiana Department of Education advocates an abstinence-only sex education, and the East Baton Rouge Parish School System does not include the reproductive system in the human anatomy unit of Life Science or enforce that Health/Life Skills classes include medically accurate information about sexual health. I was a young educator out of my depth, and out of ideas. This is not a thesis about adolescent reproductive and sexual health, community beliefs about sexual health education, or the development of community-based curricula for such. However, my fieldwork and collaboration with people in #JusticeForAlton did draw clear connections between health access and the racialized police violence in this city.

### **1.6 Evolution of the Project & Ethical Considerations**

This project began out of my own need to make sense of the events of summer 2016. Anthropology has been my way of studying, and of distancing myself from what I hold most dear and from what I find most incomprehensible about the world. I found myself increasingly involved in protests and direct action situations. Before July 2016, I was located solidly on the fringes of organizing communities, acquainted with some organizers and signed up for meetings, but not responsible or implicated in the projects or processes of the activists around me. I held an organizing position with a collective of poets who run an open mic/poetry slam venue. I knew educators doing radical youth development and organizing. I had aspirations of being a part of that work. I was also a full time classroom teacher working 60 hours a week and taking 9 credits

of graduate coursework in the evenings. That is not a lifestyle which leaves itself open to the tireless and sometimes thankless grind of community organizing and local activism.

Then, July of 2016 happened to this city. Like many well-intentioned people, I was moved to action by the murder of Alton Sterling. The viral video of his death left me searching for something to *do*. This impulse towards action may be a particular aspect of whiteness, or what is left of my liberalism, or that of the academically conditioned over-achiever. On my kindest days, I like to think of this as not a bad quality, the ways in which I sprung to action (perhaps too fast), and got involved (haphazardly at times), and made mistakes (and make them still). But mistakes can happen, and for many people in the community July of 2016 was a wakeup call. One collaborator described this collective moment of education/awakening:

Organizing right now, and I am gonna wrap the summer and the election together when I say this, it feels educational. It feels like getting people up to speed. They need to understand some basic things and understand the severity of this. It feels like it is just educational because you can't do anything unless people know.

The process of political engagement, especially in concert with research, often feels like holding something to a hot flame, trying to cook without burning, wondering why I'm not wearing gloves, and probably using the wrong utensils.

There is a clumsiness to this process. I watched (and watch still) as the political awakenings of the moment meet people in waves, and the varying ways in which they(/I/we) respond. That summer, in 2016, I was one of many who showed up in a tidal wave of *doing*. I am grateful for the community members who held and hold me accountable to processing my experiences *doing*, who encourage me to slow down, and who advocate for the community before the ego or impulse of any one *doer*.

## 1.7 Initial Research Questions

I had been at Airline & Goodwood every night for two weeks before I talked about it as a site of research. I had begun field notes the first night I arrived, but did not want to appear exploitative, and I do not fully know what exploitative behavior looks like in ethnography, or in engaged “anti-racist” work. I know now, nearly two years later, I would have begun the research process differently, and with greater attention to collaboration from the foundational stages of the project. I would have directly asked my collaborators what they wanted to know or research from the beginning. As events actually happened, I had begun a vague “ethnography of resistance” before generating questions alongside community members. This researcher-directed approach led me down a number of different paths, but took a circuitous route to researching the geographic connection that my collaborators had drawn immediately: Airline & Goodwood had powerful geographies and has multiple meanings to Black life in Baton Rouge.

When I did begin to map the dimensions of research in the #JusticeForAlton movement, I began with a large set (six) of enormously broad research questions, outlined below:

- Question #1: Where have people gathered to organize and exchange ideas in the contemporary Justice for Alton Sterling movement in Baton Rouge?
- Question #2: Where did people gather to organize and exchange ideas in the 1950s leading up to/during the Baton Rouge bus boycotts? How do historical sites of resistance compare to contemporary sites of resistance?
- Question #3: How did these spaces/places come to exist through intentional and accidental place-making activities? How have these spaces facilitated or mitigated the organizing that has taken place?
- Question #4: How does the geography of infrastructure and public investment connect to the geography of resistance?
- Question #5: Where and how do digital places intersect with and diverge from contemporary political geographies?
- Question #6: Where do we go from here? What spaces are needed for the future of local racial justice organizing?



Despite overwhelming evidence (and warnings from faculty members) that this was an unwieldy set of investigations, I persisted in the delusion that I could anthropologically “have it all.” With the patient guidance of faculty, advisers and peer reviewers, this project has narrowed its focus from a broader analysis of “sites of resistance” within the #JusticeForAlton movement to a multi-faceted approach to one key contested space: Airline & Goodwood. The entry point to this site was through protest, which led to deeper understandings of how the site has been situated within the multiple geographies of Baton Rouge.

Ultimately, Questions #1 and #3 became an ethnographic look at the distinctions and commonalities between three significant sites of protest in July 2016: the Triple S Store, Downtown/Beauregard Town, and Airline & Goodwood (included in Chapter 3). Question #5 became a part of chapter 3 as I examined the ways digital mobilization contributed to Airline & Goodwood, reading Bonilla & Rosa’s (2015) “#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States” against the events of July 2016 in Baton Rouge. Parts of question #3 and #4 shifted into the examination of health and transportation infrastructure in relation to Airline & Goodwood (included in Chapter 4).

### **1.8 Current Research Approach**

I situate Airline & Goodwood within my own resistance experience; the experiences of my interlocutors through fieldwork, interviews and oral histories; and the geopolitical infrastructure of Baton Rouge. My thesis will approach this subject in two ways:

Approach #1: As site of protest and police violence

Approach #2: As symbol of the precarity of Black life/death in Baton Rouge

Through the first approach, I connect the protest and police violence of July 2016 across sites of the city, including Airline & Goodwood, the Triple S Store and downtown/Beauregard Town neighborhoods. In the commonalities and shared context of these protests, we see that Airline & Goodwood in many ways typifies recent popular uprisings such as #Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Arab Spring (Fosshagen 2014; Bonilla and Rosa 2015). While Airline & Goodwood was not unique in Baton Rouge as a site for protest or police violence, I contend that Airline & Goodwood has come to symbolize Black life and death in Baton Rouge due to its infrastructural connections and geographic and historic significance. In this way, the transgressive presence of protest at Airline & Goodwood is a crack in the facade of hegemonic police and state power, and ultimately allows for a nuanced look at the ways in which economic and political power, protected by policing, has spatially invested itself in Baton Rouge.

### **1.9 Ethical Considerations**

This thesis began as personal political engagement in protest and Legal Observer activity, but quickly transformed into engagement formed and constrained by both leadership roles and research objectives. At various points in time, I acted alone, but also as a comrade within a collective, a member of an organization, an ally in a coalition, a researcher in a collaborative project, or a coordinator relaying messages between organizations and Legal Observers. In the nearly two years since the onset of this thesis, my personal politics have evolved. My connections to and within the Baton Rouge community have intensified. These connections are not simply positive, and that intensity cannot always be harnessed for a purpose, singular or collective, nor should it be. I understand this work as messy. I have grown in the formative and formal positions that I can point to and clearly summarize. Yet the quiet moments of

conversation and shattering moments of conflict have pushed me more. There is not a purpose at the onset of that push, but one that is discovered along the way, in the process of deep engagement and messy entanglement.

For theoretical and ethical purposes, I understand organizing (and my fieldwork in organizing spaces) under the lens of anthropologist Tim Ingold's "zone of entanglement" (2008, 1797). The knowledge that I gained, represented here and in my own personal growth, flowed through the exchanges of my "entangled relationships" with the human, nonhuman, natural, social and virtual environments in which I was engaged. If I reveal too much information about the wrong thing, I have failed my community. If I reveal too little information about the right thing, I have failed my community. These are true of my roles as a Legal Observer, a community organizer, and a researcher.

Legal Observers (LOs) are individuals who attend actions with the purpose of documenting police action that violates first amendment rights. The National Lawyers Guild (NLG) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) both coordinate LO programs nationally, though the majority of LOs in Louisiana are coordinated through the NLG. I discuss Legal Observers further in Chapters 2 and 3. For the purpose of an ethical discussion here, it is significant to understand that one of the first times I entered a protest space in Baton Rouge was the first time I went to Airline & Goodwood. This was also the first time I acted as an LO for the NLG. In July of 2016, I observed two dozen different actions, in addition to the actions that I attended as an individual or organizer outside of a Legal Observer capacity.

At the end of April 2017, rumors began to spread about the release of new information in the federal investigation into Alton Sterling's death. During the following month, I acted as an

ad-hoc co-coordinator for the Legal Observers in Baton Rouge, dispatching LOs when organizers sent a request, and debriefing with LOs when necessary based on their confidential notes and experiences. However, this co-coordination was under intense advisement and direction from the coordinator, who was a lawyer and former board member of the Louisiana chapter of the National Lawyers Guild. She moved away from Baton Rouge during the summer of 2017, at which time I stepped into the role of Baton Rouge LO coordinator.

As an LO, I am not to share or document information which could, upon discovery in a court case, adversely affect the individuals expressing their first amendment rights through protest. As LO coordinator, I may know of events or actions before the public and potentially before the police. My role is to receive the logistical information about those actions from organizers, understand their needs with regards to LO support, and to dispatch enough LOs to fulfill that need with a level of discretion that matches the security of the event.

When I arrived at Airline & Goodwood for the first time, I did not call myself an organizer. I organized, for a local poetry slam & open mic, and I taught. I attended community events, but had only been to a single protest. I was interested in political conversations, but did not take part in what I understood as political action. I did not know what a Legal Observer or a Street Medic was. I did not know how to use Signal or ProtonMail, or what those names even meant.<sup>2</sup> There is a technical language and set of best practices to most disciplines, activism and organizing included. More than a checklist of things to learn, there is a way of being in the world. Or, in the case of people and organizing and community, many ways of being. There are

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<sup>2</sup>Signal and ProtonMail are two free, encrypted messaging systems popular amongst organizers who want to ensure that their texts and emails cannot be unconstitutionally searched by law enforcement.

folks with demeanor that announces itself entering a room, whether through volume, stature, or the gravity of charisma. These individuals might be the type of person who takes up space. Then there are others, the organizers who are involved, diligent, smoothly integrated, whose motivations quietly churn away behind their actions for the whole. They will share both secrets and space when it is appropriate for them. There are quiet folks, questioning folks, folks who lead and organize by example, folks who walk into every conversation like an argument, and folks who approach everything like a compromise. There are an infinite number of ways to hold space for yourself and others when organizing, and the process of observing and practicing some of these has made me more intentional with the ways I hold the edges of myself.

It may or may not be a best practice to document organizing or LO activities in certain ways, and this can conflict with the ways a researcher is expected to make clear their way of knowing. As someone already trained in ethnography before entering the LO role, I had questions in “the back of my mind” going in, the kind of questions that anthropologist Quetzil Castañeda (2006, 78) points out are shaped by my own lived experience *and* my entanglements with academic and ethnographic training. I wondered about the LO program, its efficacy, how I could assess it or evaluate outcomes like a public health practitioner or medical anthropologist interested in public health programming might. These questions were not only different than the questions that NLG folks or LOs were raising, they were of a different category entirely. Further, research into the LO program never felt ethically sound. There were a number of competing and conflicting personal interests in the community, questions of security and financial motivation, and entanglements with law enforcement or elected officials. While I have engaged with these situations as a community member, LO and LO coordinator, I have not engaged with them as a

researcher because the risk of telling the wrong thing (or the right thing the wrong way) has far reaching consequences for dedicated individuals providing a vital public service to protect first amendment rights.

Likewise, the subject of my research is not the organizations or organizers in this community. When I began to deeply engage as an ethnographer at Airline & Goodwood, I interviewed a number of my fellow activists. I documented the meetings of organizations, who attended, what was discussed, where it was and how many people were there. These notes, interviews, and oral histories are rich with detail and context of how and why individuals found community and purpose in that place and time. I intentionally do not quote some of these materials in this thesis. The context they have provided is invaluable to my experience of the community, but I would not be doing my job as a community member if I told what should not be told. Sociologist and Black Studies scholar Simone Browne discusses the ways in which Blackness is known through surveillance, stating “Racism and anti-blackness undergird and sustain the intersecting surveillances of our present order” (Browne 2015: 8). This thesis proposes to study the multiple meanings of place without necessarily identifying people or organizations which would not have benefitted from implication in this research.

### **1.10 Overview of Remaining Chapters**

This chapter serves to ground my work in the local context of Baton Rouge, the #JusticeForAlton movement, the evolution of this thesis project, and ethical considerations. Chapter 2 reviews project methods and explores the theoretical nexus between anthropology, geography and black studies to which this work contributes. In Chapter 3, I begin with a narrative ethnographic account of Saturday July 9, 2016 at the site of Airline & Goodwood. This

narrative begins with my approach to the site, mirroring the ways in which I have approached the site theoretically. I conceive of this project as a way of recursively returning to Airline & Goodwood, with each trip unraveling a layer of meaning. Chapter 3 continues by recounting activist actions throughout the city of Baton Rouge during the week of July 5-10, providing geographic and symbolic continuity between Airline & Goodwood and the other movement spaces within the city and nation. Chapter 4 approaches Airline & Goodwood on the terms of infrastructure, change, and historical geography. Grounded in the symbolic connections which interlocutors drew concerning the meaning of activism at Airline & Goodwood, I follow their connections to view the geography of Airline & Goodwood as a uniquely meaningful place of protest, indelibly connected to the health infrastructure of Baton Rouge. Finally, Chapter 5 revisits ethnography, recounting a night spent at Airline & Goodwood in late July 2016, and draws final conclusions about the multiple geographies of the space.

## **CHAPTER 2. PROJECT METHODS AND THEORY**

In this chapter, I detail the methods & theory which have guided this project. I begin with a discussion of my fieldwork and observant participation (Tedlock 1991). Included in this work is my experience as a Legal Observer with the National Lawyers Guild, participation in protests and community events with a number of grassroots community organizations. Through this involvement, I met many of my research collaborators. Later I would work with some of these collaborators to co-create interviews and oral histories. In addition, I draw on archival research and local media sources.

As discussed at the beginning of Chapter 1, this project exists at the nexus of anthropology and geography, drawing on literature from a range of subdisciplines and associated fields. My methods are heavily ethnographic, reflecting my undergraduate and masters-level graduate training as a cultural anthropologist. This project, methodologically or theoretically, would not be possible without the contributions of anthropologists to my education and to the literature. That said, my current placement in a hybrid department, the LSU Department of Geography & Anthropology, has greatly influenced my approach to the examination of place-specific events. Reflecting this hybridity, I use this section to expound on key theories which have shaped this thesis and are later drawn on in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

### **2.1 Fieldwork and Observant Participation, Summer 2016**

During July of 2016, there were numerous forums, healing events, protests, vigils, speak outs, marches, organizing meetings, and other community gatherings. While these sites and organizations are not the primary focus of this thesis, the occurrence of so many kinds of crowds and the difference they made helped to shape my perspective on the political engagement and



community building activities taking place at Airline & Goodwood, as well as the greater historic/infrastructural significance of the site. Notably, these communities included education and arts organizations. At the time, I was a 7th grade science teacher and a newer addition to the Baton Rouge Poetry Alliance, a collective of poets which organizes the Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam & Open Mic. Following anthropologist Barbara Tedlock's (1991) shift from "participant observation" to "observant participation," I understand my own methods as embodied and affective, stemming from ethnography within my own community and network. I briefly describe my communities of origin in Baton Rouge as entry points into fieldwork and context for my ultimate participation in protests at Airline & Goodwood.

As a teacher, I was connected to coworkers at my school site, as well as various educators around the parish/region. I was a poet and organizer with the Baton Rouge Poetry Alliance, responsible for the then-weekly Eclectic Truth Open Mic & Poetry Slam. I knew or had worked with various education organizations, including Teach For America (and their charter school-advocating political counterpart Leadership for Education Equity), Baton Rouge Youth Coalition, Humanities Amped, and Forward Arts. I do not wish to conflate the politics, missions, or identities of these groups, nor will I discuss explicitly the ways each was or was not involved in political action over that period of time. Some of the organizations chose the route of providing spaces and skills development directly to young people, focusing on the political and community visions that Black teenagers in Baton Rouge had for this city. Other organizations invested in the professional development of teachers, who may or may not have been from Baton Rouge, or remaining in the classroom longterm. It remains to be seen whether these investments will improve outcomes for students. However, each organization is a nonprofit which seeks to

improve outcomes for students in this community, and each of these organizations has donors and board members to which they must answer. They are restricted in the ways in which they can appear or not appear political depending on funding sources. The nonprofit status and the divergent political analyses of these organizations exemplify the conflicts and challenges of supporting youth activism in a neoliberal climate.<sup>3</sup>

I was out of town when Alton Sterling was murdered. Upon my return to Baton Rouge on Thursday July 7, 2016, I connected with as many members of my existing community as possible, looking for where to ‘plug in’ to activism as I stumbled through attempts at anti-racist solidarity. Educator friends pointed me in the direction of the Louisiana State University African American Cultural Center, where a coalition of organizers was holding an arts build and community meeting in preparation for a march that Sunday. From this Thursday afternoon meeting, packed wall to wall with a more racially diverse group of people than the LSU campus usually sees, I talked with folks involved with The Wave and Deep South Justice.

The Wave, a youth collective led by five young black women, was meeting to plan the march. I must have known enough of their advisors, or they knew of my background in education, because when I asked how I could help, they told me to show up to their planning sessions the next day. From there, I encountered other organizers from a myriad of groups in Louisiana and out of state, including organizers from Ferguson. It was in these planning sessions on Friday July 9, 2016 that I met members of the Louisiana chapter of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) for the first time. They were holding a “Know Your Rights/Legal Observer Training” at the Southern University Law Center the next day, and I was told I would get more

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<sup>3</sup> For a nuanced discussion of school politics and youth protest, see Shange (2012).

information on how to help there. The next morning, after a severely condensed two hour training, I officially became a Legal Observer with the NLG. I did not fully understand my role as an LO, the intricacies of police action to watch out for, and what to document or not document in my notes. I did understand that the most helpful thing I could do would be to distribute the NLG Hotline number for protesters to mark in sharpie on their arms. In case of arrest, they could call and we would track them through the system, possibly providing bail funds or legal aid. It wasn't much, but it was a tangible action, and that would have to do. That evening I would find myself at Airline & Goodwood for the first time.

#### 2.1.1 From Legal Observer to Protestor: Airline & Goodwood

The grounding for this research is based on observant participation (Tedlock 1991) in the protests at Airline Highway and Goodwood Boulevard during the month of July 2016, and stretching into the first week of August 2016. I arrived at Airline & Goodwood as a newly trained Legal Observer on Saturday July 9, 2016. What occurred on that night at that street corner fundamentally shifted my involvement in racial justice organizing, and in the research of racial justice activism in Baton Rouge. I was, to put it gently, unprepared to witness the police violence of that week (described in Chapter 3). However, as a function of my LO role, I was tasked with taking notes akin to ethnographic field notes during the protests, a step of due diligence I might have foregone if I had arrived as solely a protester/participant, but one which put me in an ideal role for participant observation.

As a confidential legal product, the field notes that I took in my role as a Legal Observer are not the direct basis for my ethnographic inquiry into the site. Rather, they served as a guidepost for my own reflection after the events of that evening in documenting my own

experiences as a participant. Per my training with the NLG, Legal Observer notes focused exclusively on documenting police action (numbers of police officers, their locations/movements, badge numbers for arresting officer, specific actions that would violate a citizens' first amendment rights). Legal Observer notes did not include the things I might document as an ethnographer in a public space (details which might characterize the people who occupied that space more broadly, the conversations I was hearing, the way the site was being utilized, quotes from people at the site). Rather, the NLG specifically highlights the need to protect identities and actions of citizens, therefore their documents do not reflect citizen action unless it is direct interaction with police, and even then documentation is focused on the police action within that interactive space.

My field notes as an observant participant were necessarily written after the fact most nights. If I was acting as a Legal Observer at a protest, I would write my own account of the evening immediately after leaving the site, generally late in the evening, and store it in a separate and secure space from my Legal Observer notes. Legal Observer notes were, from time to time, collected by the Legal Observer Coordinator, who was responsible for dispatching LOs and coordinating information with legal aid and jail support teams in the case of citizen arrests and ensuing court appearances (these LO notes could be used by attorneys arguing for police misconduct or the infringement of first amendment rights).

With respect to the identity of my interlocutors, my field notes did not include names or ages, and removed as much identifying information as possible. As my observant participation continued, I began taking notes in the moment, though only when I was present at Airline & Goodwood as a participant and not a Legal Observer, and only after identifying myself to those

present as a researcher and obtaining consent from those around me to continue writing. At this time, I was conducting informal interviews and building relationships with people who were returning to this place night after night.

My ethnographic record includes 85 pages of field notes from Airline & Goodwood, in addition to the transcription of 2.5 hours of audio memos I made for myself while driving home after various nights at Airline & Goodwood. The audio has since been deleted, but transcripts were referenced in the writing of ethnographic accounts. Fieldwork and observant participation continued at Airline & Goodwood through August 10, 2016. A small group of protestors briefly returned to Airline & Goodwood in May of 2017, when the Department of Justice released news of the non-indictment of Baton Rouge Police Department Officers Blane Salamoni and Howie Lake II, the officers responsible for the murder of Alton Sterling.

#### 2.1.2 Post-Flood Engagement with Activism, August-September 2016

On August 11, 2016 a three-day period of rain began in South Louisiana, causing historic flooding and widespread devastation. This natural disaster destroyed over 100,000 homes and effectively ceased all protest activity at Airline & Goodwood. At this time, activist networks and community organizations turned towards flood relief as a form of racial justice activism. My observant participation continued with The Resistance, now in the Glen Oaks neighborhood of North Baton Rouge (rather than at Airline & Goodwood). Further observant participation with activist flood relief efforts included work with North Baton Rouge Relief and Mutual Aid Disaster Relief.

### 2.1.3 Research Collaborators

During the initial fieldwork and observant participation, I was in constant conversation and close community with two other researchers: Lauren Hull and Kobi Weaver, both of the LSU Department of Geography and Anthropology. Lauren Hull and I had both attended the Legal Observer training on the afternoon of July 9, 2016 at the Southern University Law Center. We had both gone to Airline & Goodwood that same evening for the first time. Lauren, through involvement with environmental activism, was more familiar with direct action than I was, but we were both female-bodied white folk, both trained in ethnography and grounded in anti-racist politics, and our approaches to Airline & Goodwood as a space of protest were initially similar. Our experience diverged when, just minutes after arriving at the protest on July 9 and beginning the record unlawful arrests of peacefully gathered citizens, Lauren was arrested. Lauren's experiences in the East Baton Rouge parish prison and as part of 200 people arrested over that weekend shaped our unfolding inquiry (for more information see section 3.2).

Another researcher engaged in this project from the beginning was Kobi Weaver. Kobi came to the nightly protests of July 2016 at Airline & Goodwood a handful of times, grounding her in the experience of Airline & Goodwood. During the fall of 2016, Kobi and I collaborated in the creation of a dialogue space for non-Black activists to engage with undoing internalized anti-Black racism. This group, named Solidarity BR, met regularly throughout the latter parts of 2016, and into early 2017. Kobi and I served as dialogue facilitators, which held us accountable to the individuals in the group as well as to our accountability partners, local black activists who advocated for the group's formation. Solidarity BR leveraged the resources and networks we had during the August floods to coordinate the shipment and delivery of supplies to North Baton

Rouge Flood Relief, Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, and The Resistance. Kobi would later conduct oral history interviews for the Justice Matters Project, as well as archiving news media and social media posts related to #JusticeForAlton protests.

## **2.2 Oral History Interviews, Fall 2016**

During fall 2016, data collection for this research occurred under the Justice Matters Project, a collaboration between myself, two other graduate students of the LSU Department of Geography & Anthropology, and the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, and supervised by Dr. Joyce Jackson, the advisor to this thesis. The Justice Matters Project was established in the middle of July, when Dr. Jackson, myself, and Lauren Hull spoke of our desire to collect oral histories from activists and organizers involved in the #JusticeForAlton protests. We recruited Kobi Weaver, as well as two other students and arranged for training in oral history interviews from Jennifer Cramer of the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History.

The Williams Center is the largest repository of oral history in Louisiana and one of the largest in the South. Housed in LSU Libraries, the research center staff agreed to assist our project through oral history training, audio data storage and the permanent archiving of oral histories that fit with their collections. On September 22, 2016, The Justice Matters Project and Jennifer Cramer of the Williams Center offered a workshop for five Geography & Anthropology graduate students and one professor on Oral History collection and transcription. Afterwards, two of those individuals worked as transcription assistants on the project, and three worked to conduct the oral history interviews with community activists. Two of the interviews were accepted into the T. Harry Williams Oral History Center collection, the remainder were

processed by the center and audio was returned to the JMP project, but not permanently housed at the Williams Center.

While this method was incredibly promising for this research project, its timing was fraught with barriers. As we were attempting to collect oral histories, interlocutors (including researchers) were engaged in flood relief efforts. The trauma of the summer was recent, and recent memory creates a vastly different type of interview than oral history. The method was time intensive, often requiring more than one sitting to complete a full interview completed, and many more hours to allow for full transcription. Furthermore, we aimed to collect oral histories from individuals who were 40+ in order to get the historical perspective that the Williams Center was seeking for its archive. The population at Airline & Goodwood mostly fell below this age bar, and those that were present and older than 40 were not easily accessible for interviews.

Ultimately, shorter, informal interviews at the site were foundational to much of the data presented in this thesis. Yet the six interviews the Justice Matters Project did conduct allow for great depth into the experiences of those interlocutors. Of the six full interviews, four were with black male activists in their 30s, two of whom had frequented Airline & Goodwood, two of whom had been there but were not regulars at the nightly protests; one was with a black woman in her early thirties, and one was with white woman in her late twenties. Both women were arrested at the Saturday July 9, 2016 protests. Follow up conversations conducted online and in person gave the chance for research collaborators to reflect on the meaning of Airline & Goodwood in the latter half of 2017. Two of these conversations, which took place via online chat, are quoted in Chapters 3 and 5.



### **2.3 Coding**

Informal interviews, field notes & oral histories were either fully or partially transcribed and coded thematically, with a grounded approach to generation of codes. Partially transcribed oral histories were indexed then coded. The following codes were used for analysis: geographic area within Baton Rouge; interaction with police; health care; transportation; working across lines of racial difference; exposure to/mention of activism/civil rights.

### **2.4 Archival & Media Research**

As engagement with the place of Airline & Goodwood, its specific texture and history, emerged, the need to situate it within the history of Baton Rouge became significant. My interlocutors drew connections in their interviews between the Baton Rouge Bus Boycotts of 1953, the closure of the old Woman's Hospital Campus (the current police headquarters located at the intersection of Airline Highway & Goodwood Boulevard), and the ongoing violences against Black Baton Rouge. I referenced the following collections in my quest for information and historical context: (1) The T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Series on Civil Rights, (2) The McKinley High School Oral History Project housed at the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, (3) The Louisiana Digital Library Collection, (4) The Manuscript Resources on African American History housed in the LSU Libraries Special Collections. The use of archival data assisted in the reconstruction on healthcare and transportation infrastructure timelines, a significant source of data in Chapter 4.

### **2.5 Theoretical Framework**

This thesis project remains grounded in the methodology and research framework of cultural anthropology and ethnography, but is multidisciplinary in theoretical approach. In the

following section I draw on geographical work including urban geography, political geography, and public/urban space studies alongside literature from Black Feminist Theory, Black Studies and Critical Race Theory, which have specifically critiqued the limitations of political and urban geography, as well as critical studies of race, power and protest and governance. The nexus of these fields of study allows me the space to theorize power dynamics and governance as they present themselves through the geography of Airline & Goodwood.

I take seriously the notion of “undisciplined” and interdisciplinary work as essential to moving past the limitations of “disciplined” scholarly tradition. Meché wonders “about our ability as graduate students to claim for ourselves the mantra of “undisciplined” during such a formative process, which by definition is aimed toward making “disciplined” scholars of us” (Hawthorne & Meché 2016). This idea of undisciplined work resonates with the praxis and theory of Elliott and Culhane’s (2017) edited volume *A Different Kind of Ethnography*. As anthropologists and imaginative ethnographers, Elliot and Cullhane approach the same epistemological and ontological question about knowledge production and presentation that Hawthorne and Meché consider as Black Feminist Geographers.

Anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup (1994) writes against the Western academic understanding of mind and body separation, arguing that our lived experience is a legitimate source of knowledge even against the limitations of our language. I would amend Hastrup’s language to *academic* or *disciplined* language. In my work, this undisciplining includes beginning this thesis with a short poem. It includes beginning with narrative account rather than structured introduction. A component of this ethnographic practice is ethnography attuned towards the body, which follows the affective work of performance ethnographer D. Soyini

Madison (2006) and intersectional scholar Sara Ahmed (2014). I still lean more heavily on the disciplined tendencies academia and whiteness have instilled in me. It is important to call these tendencies out, I believe, as limitations of my work. These separations- between prose and poetry, protest and paper writing, parts of me willingly put forward or defensively held back- are fictional divides. I seek, at times in this thesis, to write past them. At other, I allow their reinscription for the sake of ease and the confusion at what should replace the flawed categories I have learned by default.

This thesis explores space and place. In “Protest at the Intersection- Saturday July 9, 2016,” the narrative preceding Chapter 1, I consider the embodied experience of space through the approach to my field site and the events which occur there. The ethnographic writing pays attention to sensory details of the moment, as well as calling back to the memory of LO training. Over the past eighteen months of fieldwork and research, I have increasingly questioned the role of both embodiment and imagination in the ethnographic reality of this work. The embodiment of a place, the feeling of being there, comes from being there, and in some ways everything else is an imaginative practice, or the “doing of imagination” (Elliott and Culhane 2017, 15). My collaborators and I imagine the place of Airline & Goodwood repeatedly throughout this project. I imagine walking up to the site the first time I am there. Members of The Resistance gather on the site to imagine its use differently, as a space outside of corporate and police control. They use historical imagination to evoke the past, when the building that now houses police officers and military-grade equipment housed Woman’s hospital. They use a spatial imagination to recast the geography of this city as a place where Black life does not exist between the violences of racialized infrastructure and racist policing.

Geographers have long tried to understand the social production of space. Geography as a field has failed to seriously take up the questions of race and racism or critique its origin in Enlightenment science and colonialism (Hawthorne & Meché 2016; Pulido 2002; Kobayashi 2014). Increasingly in the twenty-first century, geographic work has taken black feminist praxis and black studies into this discipline (Finney 2014; Gilmore 2002; McKittrick 2006). I consider this work, as well as geographical theories of space and place which have been engaged in the study of social movements and race.

Marxist humanist geographer Lefebvre (1991) theorized spaces as a social product, the knowledge of which could inform the process of production. Lefebvre's theory of space grounds the ability to *reimagine* and *reappropriate* dominant spaces which maintain unequal societal power dynamics. "By seeking to point the way towards a different space, towards a space of a different (social) life and of a different mode of production, this project straddles the breach between science and utopia, reality and ideality, conceived and lived" (Lefebvre 1991, 60). Harvey (1973, 1990) takes up Lefebvre's ideas of urbanism and materialism, adding four other dimensions to space: accessibility and distanciation, appropriation of space, domination of space, and the production of space (Harvey 1990, 222). McCann (1999) identifies Lefebvre's approach as devoid of acknowledgment of race, suggesting that Lefebvre's notion of space could be contextualized in order to "capture bodily experiences toward space and therefore suggest that the racially 'marked' bodies will have a particular relationship to, and constitutive role in the production of abstract spaces. Further, he theorizes that through the resistance practices which situate activists as "out of place", "groups such as African Americans, whose lives, histories, and spaces are so often marginalized by capitalist abstract space, can challenge the dominant

representations central to that space” (McCann 1999, 171). Heynen, also reading Lefebvre, addresses scale in black radical urban politics, theorizing the Black Panther Party breakfast program worked by ““starting at the scale of the individual body but also for the sake of building a political base that could be used to resist the hegemonic repression of the U.S. government and capitalist interests more broadly” (Heynen 2009, 415). In Chapter 3, I explore the ways community members reappropriated dominant space at Airline & Goodwood, intentionally differentiating activities at the site from activities at other contemporaneous sites of protest in Baton Rouge.

The question of scale, from interpersonal, hyperlocal/site based, citywide, state, national and international, is a question which must ground this work. A political conceptualization of space necessitates identifying the scale of analysis. Massey (1994) views the construction of space through “social interrelations” throughout spatial scales, from local to global. Further, Massey theorizes social relations which imbue space with “power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation” (Massey 1994, 265). Cox (1998) engages with the way political actors construct space, positing that transitions in scale and “networks of association” are critical to consider in the political process of space. These networks, as well as Massey’s “social interrelations” evoke anthropologist Ingold’s (2008) “networks of entanglement.” MacKinnon (2010) considers the discursive and performative construction of scale, rather than the material construction of it. I reference Karolczyk’s (2014) reading of MacKinnon (2010), “For MacKinnon, scalar politics contains four elements: the object of scalar politics is the scalar aspects of political processes rather than scale itself; a focus on the ways in which political actors strategically deploy scale; a concern for pre-

existing scales constructed by previous social processes, and a focus on how actors and processes construct new scales at the intersections of existing and newly emerging scales (Karolczyk 2014, 32). In Baton Rouge, the scale of the protests was relatively small. In a city of 500,000, the largest march had around 1,000 people in attendance. There was not a large-scale occupation of public spaces like in Ferguson or other cities. However, technology evoked a shared temporality (Bonilla and Rosa 2015) with those places, and my collaborators connect their actions on local and hyperlocal scales to national and transnational movements for racial justice and the end to police violence.

While connected through time and technology, the protests in Baton Rouge were not the Black Lives Matter protests of New York, Ferguson, or Toronto. Nor is the organizing and action in each of those locations equivalent to any other. Historians and historical geographers have questioned the placing of social movements, in terms of both place-making activities and physical locations. Too often, social movements are given blanket characterization without consideration for “how black political radicalism differed and converged, dependent on geographical location, political organizations, and historical circumstances during this era” (Joseph 2001, 14). Cha-Jua and Lang (2007) criticize historical geography for minimizing place-based differences in social structures, economics and politics. Woods (2002) pushes geographers and social scientists to pursue a deeper understanding of race as central to restructuring processes on regional levels in order to understand race and political processes at the national and international scales. Further, Woods advocates for the use of oral history to understand the textured alliances that cross lines of identity in “regional”<sup>4</sup> blocs and processes. I

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I read Woods use of “regional” as including the possibility of local or hyper-local scale.

use oral history in chapter 4 to specifically explore the location of Airline & Goodwood as a place which symbolizes the precarity of Black life and death in Baton Rouge.

Marston (2000) pushes the geographic understanding of scale to include a feminist politics, a view of the totality of political economy past mere production. Routledge (1993) theorizes terrains of resistance as, “the dialectic between domination and resistance and how this dialectic is manifested within time and space with reference to the agency of social movements. A terrain of resistance refers to those places where struggle is actively articulated by the oppressed . . .” (Routledge 1993, 35-36). The “place-specific character” of Routledge’s terrains of resistance is constructed by the social relations of that place, including the social movements and contestation of that place. I understand Airline & Goodwood as a terrain of resistance in Routledge’s terms, one that is constructed through the specific place-making actions which reappropriated a dominant space for purposes of resisting the racialized violence of the present, reimagining a future that exists beyond those violences, and evoking images of a past which clearly frames the struggle of Black life and death.

Reading Terdiman (1985), White (2001, 127), considers the “hegemonic and oppositional” nature of discursive practices, and joins him in calling for “a contrary and transgressive counter discourse” for every dominant discourse (65). White engages discursive signs, through a reading of Teridman (1985), Volosinov (1973), and Carby (1987). Carby asserts, “The sign, then, is an arena of struggle . . . ; the forms that signs take are conditioned by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interactions” (1987, 17). I connect place-frames to this discursive theorization of signs. The

place-frames which my collaborators employ to mark Airline & Goodwood as a site of resistance also frame the geography of inequality in Baton Rouge.

Black Studies scholar Weheliye (2014) draws on Wynter (2006) to critique the ways in which mapping and geographic practices have constructed and reconstructed racial inequalities. Weheliye's reading of Richie's (2012) work on black women in prisons highlights "the place of violence, race, gender, sexuality, and class within our current social political order-what bodies are worthy of protection and which ones are not, or the continuous disregard for black life" (2014, 8). Like Chris Tyson's (2017) writing specific to Baton Rouge, Weheliye and Wynter assert the violence that geography does to racialized bodies, as well as the violence that happens within a specific geography. Wynter (2003) reads Godzich (1980) reframing of Marxist class struggle into a "politics of being" and "space of Otherness" in terms of geographic, political and economic segregation. Wynter connects this Otherness to Fanon's (1967) orders of knowledge and adaptive "regime of truth".

Hine (2014) grounds black studies in five key concerns: intersectionality, non-linear thinking, diasporic perspectives and comparative analyses, oppression and resistance, and solidarity. Hine sees black studies scholars as seeking "greater understanding and excavations of silences, gaps, and erasures of resistances by probing not only the outspoken performances, but also those practices that are often veiled or disassembled. We unravel and reveal the myriad rituals and cultural creations that nurture and sustain oppositional consciousness while appearing to signal acquiescence, accommodation, and adaptation. In fact, these activities are often indicative of the transformative realities and alternate futures that already exist" (2014, 14).



Rodriguez views black studies as radical generosity, historical gravity/force, radical urgency, conditions of being/creation and Radical Inhabitation. On Radical Inhabitation, Rodriguez says,

That is, black studies explodes the "ethnographic object" of black social subordination, suffering, and subjection by producing knowledge that is in a permanent entanglement with the experience of that violence, embracing rather than disavowing the ways in which that violence is at the epistemological center of critical black thought itself. Thus, to be meaningfully engaged in/with the project of black studies is to abandon- in principle and performance- the position of intellectual spectator to such violence and to struggle with whether and how that violence is both the condition and productive, dynamic center of a scholarly liberationist praxis, including its scholarly iterations. The singular ingenuity of black studies is the manner in which it creates a capacity to galvanize creativity and historicity within actually existing circumstances of profound oppression. (2014: 44)

I use this quote here in order to ground discussion of critical studies of protest, oppression, governability and activism in the knowledge that radical academic ways of knowing stem from the embodied and inhabited material conditions of black people and people of color, and that to confront the complicity of academic study in this oppression is not a pragmatic or pleasant impulse (to paraphrase Rodrigues 2014, 45).

## **CHAPTER 3. AIRLINE AND GOODWOOD AS GEOGRAPHY OF PROTEST AND POLICE VIOLENCE**

I begin this chapter by laying out an ethnographic and geographic timeline of events from July 5, 2016-July 10, 2016 in order to give scope and context to the types of resistance events that were occurring around Baton Rouge simultaneously. Next, I discuss three of the major sites of protest, characterizing them by their geographic location in town, the placemaking that occurred at those sites to reclaim dominant space, and the scalar politics of those spaces which connected hyperlocal events to trans/national movements. Finally, I discuss the ways in which Airline & Goodwood, with its sustained nightly occupation during July of 2016, and specific place-based characteristics (both the site and the people) was divergent from other sites of resistance in Baton Rouge.

### **3.1 Selected timeline of events July 5-10, 2016**

Time happened upon this city so strangely in the summer of 2016, moving all at once and not at all. In the next few pages, I defer uncomfortably to a temporal recounting of events out of a personal struggle to make sense of what happened in at the beginning of July 2016. Following the work of Black Feminist scholar Denise Ferreira Da Silva (2014), I state now that time is both a hegemonic construct of power and knowledge and a way in which the categories of knowing and “thingness” constitute a racial dialectic. In this section, I ethnographically and geographically locate the events of the week of June 5-10, 2016 through a partial timeline of the local activism which took place in the week after Alton Sterling’s death as part of the #JusticeForAlton movement. My recounting here, in linear separation and categorization, is a concession to the hegemony of time that I am willing to make if it will provide some type of

clarity. This timeline is, as all timelines are, wildly incomplete. It is based on the experiences that I and my interlocutors participated in. It also represents the events most notably represented by local news media.

Two Baton Rouge police officers shot and killed Alton Sterling shortly after midnight of July 5, 2016 at the Triple S Store on N. Foster Drive. Bystanders who film the interaction send their footage to Silky Slim, founder of Stop the Violence. Silky and his collaborators ensure that footage gets to the media. This viral footage enters national and international media. The next day in St. Anthony, MN, a police officer shoots and kills Philando Castile. Philando Castile's partner, Diamond Reynolds, films her interactions with the officer in the moments immediately after the shooting in a viral Facebook live video.

The back-to-back killing of two black men, shown in accessible video format sparks outrage, and amplifies the attention that either case might have individually received otherwise. The best available data on police killings shows that police have been killing citizens at the same rates for as long as the data is available, but the ability for citizens to capture and share these killings with camera phone technology has dramatically affected consumption of and response to this information (Bialick 2016, Comey 2015). Videos of acts of police violence and civilian resistance were shared through the virtual geography of social media, and used to gather people in physical spaces and to create a sense of shared purpose there.

Local religious and political leaders hold a vigil with the Sterling family at the Triple S Store (see Figure 3.1 for event flier). Demonstrations and vigils continue at the Triple S store throughout the weeks and months to follow. The Triple S convenience store, already a central place of gathering in the midst of a food desert, becomes a hub of resistance activities and like

Airline & Goodwood takes on many meanings throughout the course of #JusticeForAlton. The store owner, Abdul, a close friend of Alton Sterling's, is also an outspoken witness to the murder. Kindly, despite the detriment to his business, Abdul opens the store to a string of protests and vigils. It will take time, but in the months to follow community organizations will question the circumstances of Alton Sterling's death at this location. As one organizer tells me later,

He was there because he could not get a job with his record. He sold CDs to provide for his family. People gathered there because there are no grocery stores in the area. We need to...pay attention to the factors that put people in these places, and then look at the way the police view...these places.

An adjacent coalition of organizers including members of Deep South Justice, the Wave and the Louisiana Democratic Party host a sign-making event at the LSU African American Cultural Center (see Figure 3.1). Participants make posters and discuss the plan for a march on the capitol on Sunday, July 10. There are more white people in attendance at this planning meeting hosted at a predominantly white institution than at the protests which follow on Airline & Goodwood, approximately half of the room is white. These racial divides will continue to play a role in organizing: where an action is located determines in part who shows up, and the dialogue which takes place.

On this same day, July 7, in Dallas, TX, a lone shooter kills five police officers at an otherwise peaceful protest connected to the Black Lives Matter movement. The protest was in response to the police killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Later that night, the first protests happen at Airline & Goodwood. The crowd is small this night, but news spreads via social media the next day. On Friday July 8, 2016, a small cohort of organizers gathers at the BRYC (Baton Rouge Youth Coalition) house to support the efforts of the Wave, a collective of

young Black women organizing the Sunday march. All of the organizers are young folks in BRYC’s mentoring program. They are high school students, many attending a predominantly white magnet school and being mentored by the mostly white staff of BRYC. BRYC has invited individuals from BYP100 (Black Youth Project 100, a grassroots political organization which centers Black youth) and organizers with BLM in Ferguson, as well as adult mentors from the local organizing community. Conflict arises as each adult imposes their politics on the planning process, and as the young people attempt to organize in a way “different from those people out on the street.”



Figure 3.1: Event flier for community events in #JusticeForAlton July 6, 2016 through July 10, 2016. Flier circulated through texts and social media the morning of July 6, 2016.

There is a connotation of respectability politics in these planning meetings. In particular, there is an elevation of Black male leadership from local law schools and community organizations.

There is multi-directional friction between the various organizational interests, the invited local and non-local community members, and the five young black women who have convened the meeting. One invited community organizer, less focused on respectability politics later tells me his version of these conflicts:

The dudes kept taking over the conversation and saying some really annoying patriarchal stuff...like I know you are way taller than me and I am this teeny tiny little black person but I need you to fuck off...I am not about to let the erasure of people happen, even though there it did happen...I'm okay with cishet Black male leaders, but I quickly become not okay with them when they keep saying the same things that get people like me killed. Like you are saying 'lead a rally behind the Black man' or you talk about police brutality but you won't ever mention Black women. It's all these little pieces that may seem minor at the time but add up to massive amounts of violence that haunts everybody else.

As a black trans organizer from Grand Coteau, LA, a rural town sixty five miles from Baton Rouge, this person has a deep understanding and connection to Baton Rouge, but a grounded intersectional (Crenshaw 1989) critique of the power dynamics used to reinscribe the oppression of Black women, as well as Black queer and trans folk. They connect the current organizing tensions to historical recognition in the Civil Rights Movement, and to the struggles of organizing for liberation in churches:

I am just saying I aggressively need you to step back, to either talk to people like us or get out of the way because I cannot...It's like the Civil Rights movement all over again. It's like we are centering respectable Black men. Screw Bayard Rustin. Screw Fannie Lou Hamer. Screw all these other people. I know that their leadership is only going to end leading the Black community into whatever dark pit we are already in. We can't truly be liberated in the system if we don't even want to take a step back and think about the decision we already participate in. That was a theme I noticed with a lot of the Black men in general, but over the protests in the different spaces I was in. I was in a lot of churches.

And that is a thing as well, organizing in churches and how that was not accessible to a lot folks. Most Black folks go to church but like, I guess I am just gonna be this cute little heathen that goes to church and tries not to catch on fire which is like...all these little microaggressions turn into one big macro aggression.

My friend goes on to connect these experiences in churches and planning sessions back to the Sunday march:

Which then culminated after the [Sunday] march. After the march I was standing with people from EQLA<sup>5</sup>, we were trying to figure out what to do now that everything was done, and this old Black man walked up and...I am just gonna quote him.... Said 'I don't want no white people or bull dykes or trannys or shit' and he came by took his bike and walked away from us. And there were kids behind us that heard all of this. Lee was giving sass, I just walked away crying. With everything that had happened that week, I was just like wow nobody really does care about my life. And then these kids, their mothers stepped in to chastise him. And I was like of course it's always Black women that are doing the work. The emotional work to take care of other people or make sure everyone is safe. That Black male violence is always there. And then this is in front of children who may replicate this violence.

The youth leadership is aware that young folks are taking to the streets, that they are fed up with a status quo which refuses to listen to their voices or see them as equal. Neither pawns nor of a single mind, the youth organizers are being maneuvered by organizers and educators many years their senior. The youth collective The Wave effectively dissipates<sup>6</sup>, though a few members invoke the moniker for its social clout and recognition during community meetings or social media dialogues related to police violence and racial justice in 2017 and 2018. Across town at Airline & Goodwood, protests grow in size and escalate in tension (Figure 3.2). Teenagers are tackled and maced. Riot-gear clad police arrest more than 30 people. One officer draws his gun on unarmed protesters who are blocking a street.

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<sup>5</sup> Equality Louisiana (EQLA) is an organization that works for queer and trans equality at the state-level.

<sup>6</sup> BRYC receives state and city funds, is run by a Teach For America alumnus, and has never supported explicit resistance action before the group came under pressure from within the organization to do so. After apparent donor pressure, or fear of donor pressure, BRYC steps back from explicitly activist activities.

On Saturday July 9, 2016, the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) holds a “Know Your Rights” info session at their training for new Legal Observers. Over 200 people attend, packing a lecture hall at Southern University Law Center. 500 people march from City Hall to the State Capitol. The New Black Panther Party leads a march down Airline Highway to the corner of Airline & Goodwood.



Figure 3.2: Protestors and police at Airline & Goodwood. Photo by Hillary Senuik courtesy of *The Advocate*. July 8, 2016.

Later that evening, the NLG Legal Observer coordinator dispatches newly trained LOs to Airline & Goodwood. 102 people are arrested that night, including famed activist DeRay McKesson. McKesson’s arrest is later used as evidence in the narrative of “outside agitators.” Based on information BRPD released, 58 people arrested were from Baton Rouge, 26 people were from other parts of Louisiana (including suburbs of Baton Rouge), and 18 people were permanent residents of another state.

On Sunday July 10, 2016 the largest march of the summer takes over downtown Baton Rouge. Planned by 5 young black women, all still in high school, this march brings together



wide swaths of people in Baton Rouge but exposes discord amongst ideologically different factions of organizers. There are entire groups of people present who will never go to Airline & Goodwood. White, liberal, established economically and politically, many people attending The Wave march considered the protests at Airline & Goodwood too unsafe and volatile. 50 people are arrested after the march (for more information see section 3.2.2 of this chapter). One person describes their experiences at the Sunday march and other organizing spaces to me in detail, but wavers when I ask them about attending events in other parts of town: “I went to the Triple S Store when folks were there giving speeches, there was a vigil I think. I never went out there, to Airline & Goodwood. I am not sure why.” Intentionally or not, many citizens had ingested the media narrative of unruly protesters and a dutiful and just police force. Citizens of Baton Rouge reinscribed their segregation in resistance.

### **3.2 Three sites of protest in Baton Rouge, July 2016**

In this section, I discuss three of the sites of protest in Baton Rouge during the summer of 2016. I reference their geographic location, the placemaking activities that occurred in each space, and the scalar politics which connected each space beyond the boundaries of the site. These connections were sometimes to other sites in Baton Rouge, sometimes to other contemporary sites of protest nationally, and sometimes to the international Movement For Black Lives. For a map of these protest sites, see Figure 1.3.

#### **3.2.1 Triple S Store**

The Triple S Store (Figure 3.3) is located on North Foster Drive in Baton Rouge, LA. Of the major sites of protest in #JusticeForAlton, Triple S is the only one north of the “Mason Dixon line called Florida Boulevard or Government Street” (Tyson 2017). This is also the location

where Alton Sterling is killed on July 5, 2016. The store owner, Abdul Muflahi, was a witness to the murder as well as an advocate for Alton Sterling and his family following his death. Abdul greeted and got to know activists and community members who gathered there, attended Metro Council meetings when the issue of police reform was heard, and allowed community gatherings to overtake his parking lot, sometimes at financial expense to him. There were protests at Triple S, but the largest events held there were press conferences and vigils (see Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.3: Memorial to Alton Sterling outside of the Triple S Store on North Foster Drive. Photo courtesy of the *Baton Rouge Business Report*. May 1, 2018.

On October of 2016, I was sitting in a Community Police Reform meeting in city hall when an Internal Affairs officer in attendance acknowledged the lack of police presence at the Triple S store, stating: “The store was given a wide berth. The officers did not want to engage there.” This fact was commonly understood and referenced amongst activists: the police was not going to show up in force to Triple S. One community member, sitting on the curb in front of the mural of Alton Sterling, told me, “They don’t give a damn if we burn this place down. This is our

home, not theirs.” Indeed, located in predominantly Black North Baton Rouge, the Triple S store felt outside the jurisdiction of the police, at least as it related to protest. But if the police had implemented that policy before, giving a wide berth to Triple S on July 5, 2016, Alton Sterling would still be alive.



Figure 3.4: Dr. Rani Whitfield, also known as “Hip Hop Doc” speaks to the crowd at the Triple S Store on North Foster after word came down that the two police officers in the Alton Sterling case will not be charged. Photo by Patrick Dennis courtesy of *The Advocate*. May 2, 2017.

It is through contrast that the scalar politics of Triple S become clear. This is not a site where police are entering the intersection armed with riot gear and military-grade armor. This is not a site where 200 people are arrested. I am not aware of any protest arrests made at Airline & Goodwood in the course of #JusticeForAlton actions. Triple S is a place to gather, serving the community in the way that local family-owned convenience stores serve communities: as a source of nutrition and sustenance in a food desert, as a space for informal economies, like the

selling of CDs, and as a place of conversation and connection. In these ways, Triple S is any convenience store in an low-income, urban neighborhood, rooted deeply to its local economy and neighborhood identity.

The vigils and speak outs that occur in this place acknowledge the connection between this hyperlocality and the city of Baton Rouge, even if that is to say “the cops won’t come *here*” or to say “on Sunday we are going over *there*” meaning the State Capitol building. This is and is not Baton Rouge: this *is* the Baton Rouge that many in the city know, full of people whose city will fail them with infrastructure, strike them with violence, and then leave them without the ears to listen when they speak out against that violence. The vigils and speak outs that take place here acknowledge the geographical divisions of the city, even as they connect to the international racial justice issues of the killing of black men and women, police violence, incarceration, and the war on drugs. Sometimes the media is there, sometimes it is absent. But the police have given this place a wide berth. When you speak out at the Triple S store, you don’t always know who will be there to listen.

### 3.2.2 Downtown/Beauregard Town

On Sunday, July 10, 2016 a march took over downtown Baton Rouge (see section 3.1 for a description of the events of the day, see Figure 1.3 for a map with site location). Unlike Triple S and Airline & Goodwood, this site was only a site of protest for a single day. Other protests have taken place at the capitol building, at City Hall, and the courthouse. However, this protest was the only one in #JusticeForAlton where a large number of people came close to entering a major highway during an action. I describe the march and ensuing police violence. I then

consider the militarized police violence as direct state response to the appropriation of dominant space (the highway).



Figure 3.5: Police arrest a protester in Beauregard Town. Photo by Patrick Melon courtesy of *The Advocate*. July 10, 2016.

The march began at the United Methodist Church on Government Street and the route traveled the half mile north to the state capitol building. The area is partially residential, partially commercial and partially governmental buildings. The residents who are there are predominantly white. The march was the single largest action associated with #JusticeForAlton, and had around 1,000 attendees. The route was planned and cleared with the city, officers were posted along the sides of the road, waving and passing out water bottles. There were various hiccups in planning, friction between organizers/organizations, and the struggle of a massive event in the midday

Louisiana summer heat. The march went quickly, the speak out at the capitol building moved smoothly, and the crowd returned to the parking lot of the church about two hours earlier than the advertised end time of the facebook event for the march. At this point, a group of protestors split off from the chanting crowd in the parking lot, making their way down the sidewalk of Government street.

While this second, impromptu march was unfolding, I was LOing. It was the day after my first night on Airline. I was still a little shaken from the events of the night before, but sure that a mostly white crowd gathered between a church and the capitol would not elicit the same response from authorities (a hypothesis seemingly confirmed by the jovial cops passing out water bottles and smiling for selfies along the route). Another much more experienced LO and I followed the offshoot of the crowd. It quickly became clear that there were a handful of folks who had vests and/or megaphones, and were leading the rest of the crowd towards the I-10 on ramp. The week before, I had seen Black Lives Matter protesters in Atlanta peacefully take the interstate, but I had never been a part of such an action.

The crowd following down Government street was growing. Not everyone from the original march joined in, and some clearly did not know what was ahead. Things moved quickly: police cars pulled up from all directions. The front of the group had nowhere to go, and a crowd which had filled the church parking to the brim was overflowing on the sidewalk. Police vehicles, including a very large tank, now blocked three of the four ways out of the intersection.

The police began ordering protesters to leave the street and the sidewalks or face arrest for obstruction of a public passageway. Lisa Batiste, a black resident of East Boulevard, saw the crowd, heard the officers threats, and invited every person onto her property. For a few moments,

as tanks and heavily armored officers filled the neighborhood, her yard and porch became sanctuary.

Those moments quickly ended, and the police rushed us (see Figure 3.6). They arrested, tackled, maced. They shot rubber bullets, pinned, pointed guns in faces. They ripped through Ms. Lisa's house, damaging her porch and garden. People scattered and screamed.



Figure 3.6: Police arrest activist Blair Imani as other officers storm Lisa Batiste's front porch without a warrant. Author can be seen on porch wearing green LO hat. Photo by Jonathan Bachman courtesy of *Reuters*. July 10, 2016.

The tanks advanced down the street. Anyone outside a house was taken. Before I left, I was still trying to film, to fulfill what I thought was my job as an LO. The police pointed their guns first at me, and then at a young twenty-something year old black man standing nearby. We had both just been pushed off of Ms. Lisa's porch. One said, "Take him." The other two police officers pinned the man to the back of the car in the driveway and zip tied his hands. Another officer, seeing me

film and not leave, points a gun in my face and threatens arrest if I do not move. I turn and back away. I move faster after the first few steps. I find two friends, another teacher and her partner, in the street. They have found one of her students, a sixteen year old Black girl who was punched by a cop before being separated from her sister. We all run to my car, still in the church parking lot just a few blocks away. The tank is getting closer now. The street is almost clear.

This site was only a site of protest for a single day, and it was the only one in #JusticeForAlton where a large group came close to entering a major highway during an action. The attempt at this action shows a connection to the Black Lives Matter events which were happening contemporaneously in Atlanta, New York and Dallas. The state responded swiftly: the infrastructure of this city was to be protected at all costs. Block North Foster Drive outside the Triple S store, but do not touch the highways or the roads near white neighborhoods. The 50 arrests on July 10 put the weekend arrest count at over 200. The other 150 took place at Airline & Goodwood.

### 3.2.3 Airline & Goodwood

Airline & Goodwood is located nearly in the middle of Baton Rouge, north to south (see Figure 1.3). Airline Highway is the historical route between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, there long before the I-10 corridor was built in the 1970s. There are shopping centers and car dealerships lining the highway. Florida Boulevard is just slightly north, I-12 is just slightly south. Goodwood Boulevard is full of churches, nonprofits, the nicest public library I have ever seen, and parks. This is a main thoroughfare, with plenty of traffic at most times of day. There is a predominantly white neighborhood east across Airline Highway, and predominantly white churches on both sides of Goodwood Boulevard to the west, just past the Circle K gas station and



the police station. Unlike the Triple S store, a family-owned neighborhood institution, this is a more commercial, standard gas station/convenience store.

I do not know who was the first person to put out a call for folks to gather at Airline & Goodwood. Friday, July 9, I heard folks were gathered at the intersection when a fellow educator texted me about young people sharing stories of being harassed, maced, and punched by officers at Airline & Goodwood the night before on Thursday, July 8. By the time I arrived there on Saturday, I had seen a number of people posting on Facebook and Twitter about going to Airline & Goodwood in posts that were getting a lot of traction in local social media, including from groups like the New Black Panther Party. Word was getting out, in person, online and in one-to-one messaging: something was happening at Airline & Goodwood. The first few nights at Airline & Goodwood were filled with people, confusion & expectation. It was dark, hot and late. Police were arresting people every few moments on Saturday, and the crowd was getting jostled around. In this space, The Resistance was born.

A friend later recounts the story, which I paraphrase here: It is the evening of Sunday July 9, 2016. The crowd is smaller than Saturday night, maybe due to arrests the night before, maybe because it is Sunday, maybe because the march and police violence that had taken place in Beauregard town earlier in the day. The police are continuing their tactics of the past few nights: they are in full riot gear, lined up along the perimeter of police property. Every so often, they advance into the intersection. As they move, the crowd tenses. Their actions incite a reaction and they know it. They grab anyone with even a toe in the street. Intermittently, they enter the lawn and tackle someone that they say has put a foot in the roadway. Suddenly, when a few in the crowd look like they aren't going to take more of this, whatever that may mean, Redell jumps up

onto the big metal power box on the lawn (see Figure 1.4 and 1.5). He manages to get the attention of the crowd, gathering folks together for a chant. The chanting serves to create a sense of group unity and purpose. Cooler heads prevail, collective energy is channeled, and Redell is established in a position of impromptu leadership.

While I am sure that this is an imperfect and one-sided retelling of a complicated series of events, I also have no trouble picturing it. Redell is a tall, easy going guy. He is quiet until you get him talking, and he can either look fiercely serious or have the sweetest smile there is. He has an energy that welcomes people, and that people want to follow. Another friend would later reflect on how Redell's energy was foundational to the creation of Airline & Goodwood, and to the place-making activities which happened there over the ensuing weeks:

People wanna yell about "all lives matter", and truthfully, that corner was one of the only spaces I truly saw people valuing and appreciating all people. Redell would talk to anyone and everyone. As long as you were respectful, he wanted to hear your thoughts. No one else could have created the space that he did because he was someone who so genuinely arose out of the chaos. He was regular people. Until he had to be something more. And he just sorta...stepped into it.

Vigils and speakouts took place at the Triple S store, one very intense action took place in Beauregard Town, and here, at Airline & Goodwood, a tense weekend of violent police actions and around 150 arrests would yield into weeks of nightly community gatherings (see Figure 3.7) and the reappropriation of dominant spaces of power to new purposes, led by Redell. My friend continues:

And by being so accepting, he didn't close it off to just one type of person at all when it started. Like people didn't feel uncomfortable stopping by you know? I mean that's literally how I met him. Dropping off water. And he invited me back for food. He invited anyone and everyone who spoke to him to stick around, come back, stop back by. And that genuine interest, that genuine care, from a regular person...it created something really unique.

Airline & Goodwood is a space of protest and police violence, but what marked it as unique in the context of local activist sites was the way that it perdured. Airline & Goodwood is a place of care and community in the face of that racist police violence.



Figure 3.7: Social media flyer circulated for The Resistance protest at Airline & Goodwood.

A community member later tells me:

No one but a regular person could have made that what [Redell] made, that was seriously the beauty of Airline & Goodwood. He could boil it down to the bare basic of “we all just wanna feel safe and ok with who we are.” That spot let people be just that with each other.

It spanned ages. It spanned religions. It spanned intensities of beliefs and opinions. It's hard to describe, really. Like there would be pockets of similar type people that would link up, but then you'd find everyone all mushed together later and having really interesting conversations. The prayers were really something so interesting. so many different faiths and levels of faith and everyone was always so respectful and heard it all out, you know?

It is exactly because of the occupation there *anyway*, the refusal to leave, the attachment to place, that Airline & Goodwood had its power. The nightly gathering at that intersection begged those of us there and anyone who passed it to question the use of public space, to question the institutions which shaped the way we moved throughout the city and accessed services. The conversations that took place at this site cut across identities and forged human connections in incredible ways.

### **3.3 Divergent Placemaking and Powerful Geography: Airline & Goodwood**

One hot night in late July, there are just a few of us sitting on overturned 5 gallon buckets and the curb of the Circle K pavement. No one is on the corner holding a sign, there are no chants. A few people chain smoke while the conversation turns to the personal, to the teasing, to the political and then right back through the circuit. One of the men who sleeps behind the Circle K but visits our nightly protest regularly stops over to say hello. Redell feeds him, like he has fed everyone who come through this place, including the hecklers. Not many people come every night anymore. The weekends are busier than weekdays, but the numbers are dwindling. The momentum was always going to be difficult to sustain, Redell tells me, "but the shooting of those three officers...that did it."

One of the regulars, there every night, works out in Hammond, but he drives in to Baton Rouge after work because he says this is where he needs to be. He wants to plan a performance night on the lawn. He knows that I perform poetry in another space, and asks if I will read

something. I tell him that I will, but tease him that he's got to as well. We have all been out at this spot every night for weeks, and the jokes come easier now. There are not too many strangers in the group, but I always meet one or two people who I haven't seen before. Most nights, a few folks get out of their cars to drop off supplies (cases of water, posters for more signs) or timidly ask questions. Redell inevitably offers them a hot dog, a place to sit, and tries to get them to stay. Sometimes, he succeeds. Sometimes, they come back the next night.

The smaller group of regulars, five to fifteen people depending on the night, is mostly black men, ranging from their teens to their 40s. There are anywhere between three to seven black women in the space, and three white regulars. There are obvious gendered power dynamics. Of the three white people consistently showing up in the space, myself, a mom in her mid-thirties who was a pit-bull rescuer turned activist, and a lawyer from New Orleans who came to the space the same way that I did, with the National Lawyers Guild. Not everyone is there every night, but most show up for the weekends.

There are obvious and intentional bonds of affection between many in the space, a camaraderie and sense of purpose which counterbalances the power dynamics and problematic flirtations, advances and the occasional ill-fated relations. The regular cast has a self-identity, they are The Resistance, and to a lesser extent their sister or cousin organization People Building Communities, a smaller collective which co-existed at Airline & Goodwood.

This protest that is not quite a protest, cookout that is not quite a cookout, meeting that is not quite a meeting happens under the towering presence of the Baton Rouge Police Department. The mere act of protest at Airline & Goodwood represents a transgression of the enclosure of segregation and redlining, the surveillance of the police state, the genocidal efforts of white

supremacy. One interlocutor tells me “we are taking the fight to their home.” Another says “they’re newer to this building than I am.” A third person chimes in “we’re gonna be here for as long as we can. Until we get some type of change.”

This was not true in the strictest sense of truth or linear time. The protest that was more than a protest at Airline & Goodwood was fated to end with the Great Flood. Yet the activism that took place in this transgressive space demonstrates both power and possibility. Citizens occupying this symbolic piece of geography so agitated the police that they committed atrocious oversteps in civil rights. The courts have more cases to settle in ongoing legal action when it comes to the consequences of these police violences. The folks at Airline & Goodwood express their complicated views of the city: that it is their home and still deadly, this is the place of family connection and community, but everyone they know is struggling. City-Parish officials will not look at North Baton Rouge unless it is time to make an arrest or close schools and hospitals.

In this thesis, I conceptualize the first weekend of mass protests at Airline & Goodwood as a form of popular uprising (Bertelsen 2014). Beyond the organization of a single group or coalition, they emerged through democratic will and the ad hoc mobilization of people through social media. Bertelsen (2014) argues that these in-the-moment mobilizations are a new form of organizing political discontent, one which calls into question the mechanism of liberal democracy and its puppeteer, neoliberalism. Airline & Goodwood did not begin as a site of organized protest, nor was its nightly occupation sustained by a singular organization.

Lateral (peer to peer rather than organizational or “top down” calls) and digital mobilization brought people into the space. Once there, key actors helped to gather people in a

vision of collective action. The police sought to maintain political, economic, and racial authority through the use of intimidation and violent force. Large gatherings of Black folks were perceived by the city as threat to (white) authority through a threat to dominant (white) space. Through this project I seek to connect the site of Airline & Goodwood to the larger context of Baton Rouge, its history and contemporary resistance, and racial justice resistance nationally. In the mass mobilization through technology, and the reclaiming of public space for popular politics Airline & Goodwood in many ways typifies recent popular uprisings such as #Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Arab Spring (Fosshagen 2014; Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

I briefly read #JusticeForAlton against Bonilla and Rosa's (2015) "#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States" in order to connect the actions at Airline & Goodwood (as well as other sites in Baton Rouge) to the larger movement for Black Lives. Bonilla and Rosa examine the semiotics of digital protest and question "hashtag ethnography" through #Ferguson in the wake of the killing of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown in 2014. Social media posts about Michael Brown's murder spread quickly in the middle of the day, whereas Alton Sterling is killed at night and the specific release of video by activist Silky Slim is what engages viral social media and news outlets the following morning.

Like in the aftermath of the Michael Brown's death, #JusticeForAlton and #AltonSterling trend on twitter and other social media platforms. The video of the shooting is viewed millions of times. Alton Sterling's portrayal by the media, his treatment by police, his criminal background, and the circumstances and consequences of his death are discussed and debated in living rooms and news rooms around the country. Before protests gather, before even the vigil at Triple S takes

place on July 7, the news discusses the potential of riots. News will follow the protests throughout the summer, with varying focus in coverage, and then in the months and years to follow as lawsuits proceed and time unravels. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) specifically question what to do with the eight million tweets in #Ferguson. There was no footage of Michael Brown's death, and #Ferguson provided a platform to users to disseminate information and news in real time, as well as challenge representations of racialized bodies by mainstream media. In the case of #JusticeForAlton, cell phone video surfaced immediately and began to trend.

Bonilla and Rosa (2015) note the indexicality of a hashtag (#), how it can function as a library call number to clerically indicate a topic, in addition to signifying a tone of the utterance. #Ferguson and #STL quickly became aggregates for users tweeting to mourn Michael Brown and support Officer Darren Wilson. #JusticeForAlton and #AltonSterling indicate a person, not a place, a significant shift in the use of the hashtag. #JusticeForAlton explicitly associates with a concept of justice unlikely to be used by the Oathkeepers, a deeply conservative white group which would show up armed to racial justice protests in Baton Rouge to ostensibly protect the police. However, #AltonSterling was sometimes used to aggregate information and updates from a variety of ideologies, like #Ferguson. Most often, news sources would use this hashtag alone, or in combination with the less frequently used #BatonRouge. Bonilla and Rosa wonder how to understand the purpose of each tweet, whether it was critical, supportive, intended for a local audience or national. They remark that the simultaneous experience of perspectives on a hashtag, particularly one about unfolding events, created a shared temporality amongst users. This was essential in the early stages of #JusticeForAlton and #AltonSterling. In my own experience,



social media allowed me to receive news and updates in the 40 hours between hearing of Alton Sterling's murder and returning to Baton Rouge.

Further, Bonilla and Rosa engage with racialized media representations, stating “Whereas in most mainstream media contexts the experiences of racialized populations are overdetermined, stereotyped, or tokenized, social media platforms such as Twitter offer sites for collectively constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities.” In a mostly black city with a mostly white news media, the use of hashtags represented a reimagining of representations of Blackness. Other media projects (which varied in size but also sought this included) Observations in Blackness by Donney Rose, The Rouge Collection, and The ThinRedLine Project.

Bonilla and Rosa (2015) conclude with the idea that #Ferguson propelled this small locality into a larger, virtual spotlight, which resonates in many ways with Baton Rouge. But Baton Rouge was not marked by the hundreds of days of protest and occupation that marked the streets of Ferguson. Nor was Baton Rouge (and either #JusticeForAlton or #AltonSterling) in the public spotlight for that long. The flood and the political elections of 2016, as well as the shootings of the police officers in mid July, shifted the narrative in many directions. Perhaps #BatonRouge would have provided a better aggregate of this data. Perhaps it would have been even more complicated to understand. What is clear from my experience in person and online is that there was a reciprocal relationship in participation: social media drove folks to physical sites of protest, like Airline & Goodwood, by keeping them informed. Being informed allowed folks to engage more readily in the dissemination of information, even if their publics at times became

smaller and smaller sites of the same people over and over again, a real life version of a social media algorithm gone wrong.



Figure 3.8 (left): The Resistance gathered with New Orleans activist Mama D and Mardi Gras Indians at July 30, 2016 Voter Registration Drive. Photo courtesy of Maggie Clarke.

Through the specific place based characteristics, the place-making activities which occurred at Airline & Goodwood, it became divergent in quality from other sites of protest and resistance in Baton Rouge. Further, Redell and The Resistance showed a willingness to go where

the work needed to be done. During protest, that was at Airline & Goodwood. But for community building and mutual aid, they moved sites, often to Glen Oaks (see Figure 3.8), Scotlandville or Gus Young Park (each in North Baton Rouge). This mobility of activities was occurring throughout July, and extended into the fall of 2016. It showed an understanding of powerful geographies and geographies of power that were being used by The Resistance for their own purposes.

Airline & Goodwood's nightly gatherings included people who have never, and as they told me "would never" enter the spaces of a town hall, city council, or community organizing meeting. These individuals found a resonant power in the visceral, performative, and person-centered approach to resistance which underpinned the nightly occupation of that intersection. They joined together in a powerful space, and the place joined the people in creating a sense of community. Sometime during the weekend, a flier appears, stuck to the side of the metal power box in the lawn at Airline & Goodwood (Figure 3.9). The third point of the flier reads:

WE NEED PLACES. Our power comes from our bonds and having spaces to let those bonds grow. We gather, we fight, we grieve. Together. The strength we've felt at the Triple S this week is only a glimpse at what our future could be. We must do everything we can to meet each other, get stronger, and determine a life of dignity.

Airline & Goodwood existed for as a site of protest during a finite moment in time (July 7-August 10, 2016). It was a place that should have never existed, a transgressive act of appropriating dominant space and turning it into a place of and by the community. Each night, Redell pulled up to the shell station at 7:30pm. The covered bed of his truck full of supplies: grill, cases of water, charcoal, folding chairs, tents, protest signs. He set each piece up carefully.

Sometimes a friend arrived to help him. Other days he worked alone until the people gathered.

Early in July the crowd is waiting for him.

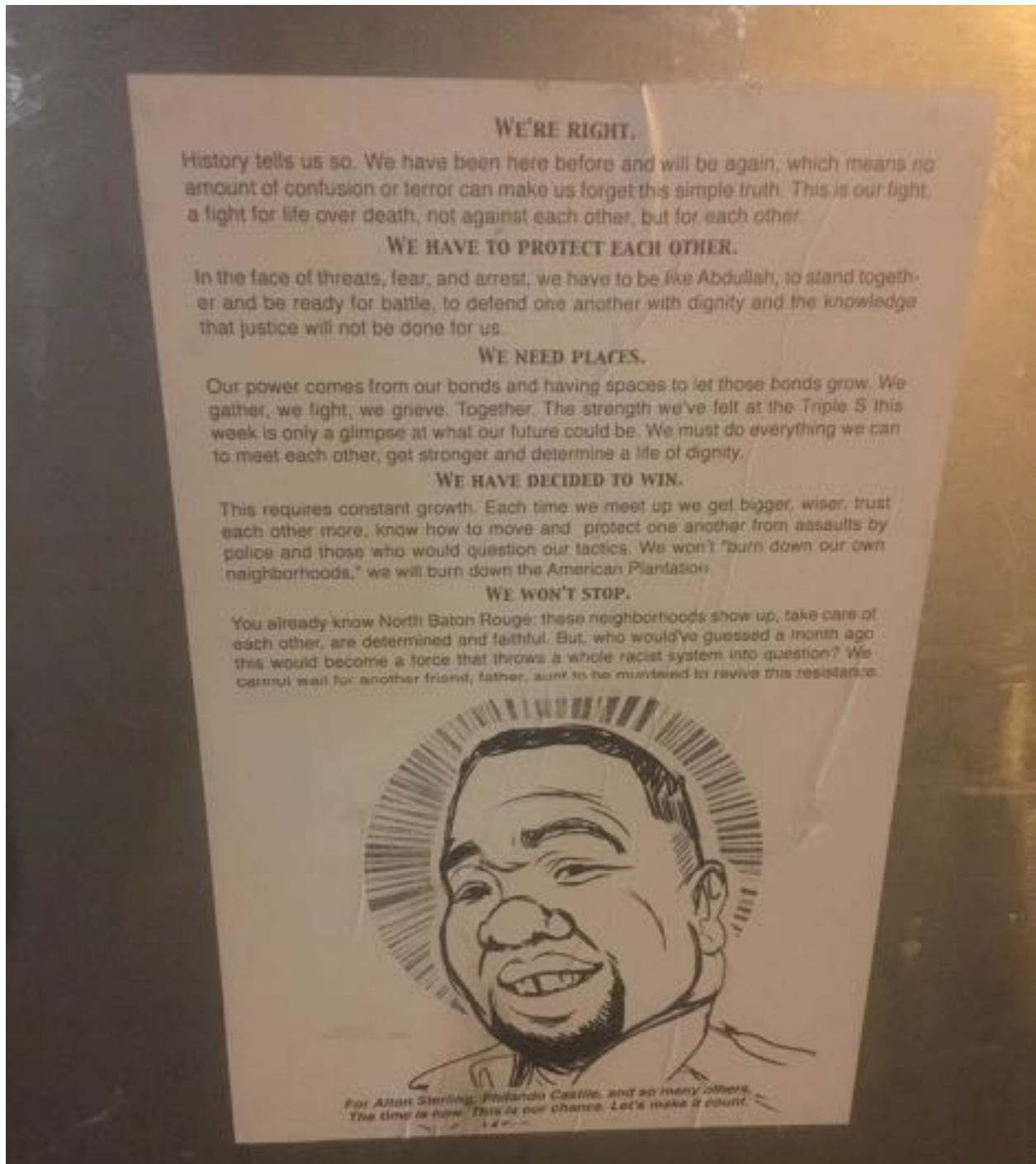


Figure 3.9 Sticker on side of metal power box at Airline & Goodwood. Photo taken by author. July 15, 2016.

By early August, the crowd has evaporated into the heat. Into the tears shed after three police officers were shot and killed just down Airline Highway by a man claiming retribution for the murder of Alton Sterling. Into the rains that would become the flood. The dissipation of these direct actions at this site was due to a convergence of natural disaster and orchestrated fear. The fear originated in the police brutality enacted against the citizens who chose to demonstrate on those first nights and were arrested and mistreated, and in the military-enforced curfew of the city, introduced in the nights after the officers were killed. Criminalization of and structural violence against the black population in this city, and the United States more widely, is not new (Ralph & Chance 2014). It is the standard fare of governance in the American illusion of democracy. In this way, protests at Airline & Goodwood are the Black Lives Matter protests of any town in this country, and as such share a cartography.

### 3.3.1 A Note on Surveillance, Security and Ongoing Legal Action

Largely unused after August 10, 2016, Airline & Goodwood once again becomes a place of protest on a night in early May 2017. The Department of Justice announced (through a series of leaks and press releases) that there would be no federal charges brought against the officers who murdered Alton Sterling. Rather than respect the three ongoing lawsuits, public backlash, or the court-ordered Memorandum of Understanding placed upon the police department, the police continue to terrorize individuals at the intersection. A sign posted on the lawn at Airline & Goodwood warns anyone who stops to read it “The Baton Rouge Police Department recognizes the right to peaceful assembly and free speech. To aid in that freedom, please abide by the following laws: 1. Entering the roadway is prohibited 2. Law prevents the use of amplified devices at assemblies 3. Law prevents public masking (covering your face with bandanas, etc...)

4. No damaging property 5. No acts of violence toward persons or law enforcement.” ” (Figure 3.10). This sign serves as an attempt to reassert authority over reappropriated space. In my reading of events, it also shows that police power imagines a greater presence and violence of protesters, and seeks to implant that imagination into media and citizenry alike in order to maintain control over the powerful geographies of this place.



Figure 3.10: Lawn sign on Airline & Goodwood. Photo taken by author. May 5, 2017.

## CHAPTER 4. AIRLINE AND GOODWOOD AS GEOGRAPHY OF UNEQUAL INFRASTRUCTURE

“This is where it started for me. I was born over there, and now we are fighting for our lives here.” - Redell

In this chapter, I contextualize Airline & Goodwood historically. Inspired by conversations with collaborators which sparked sentiments similar to the one above, I began to investigate the history of Airline & Goodwood as a site of birth. I begin with excerpts from an oral history with Mrs. Shirley Whitfield, a woman, now in her eighties, who gave birth in Woman’s hospital a few months after the facility at Airline & Goodwood opened in the 1960s. I then trace the openings and closures of hospitals in Baton Rouge in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, noting the recent closing of hospitals in North Baton Rouge and the opening of hospitals and health facilities in South Baton Rouge.

Considering the segregated and sprawled geography of the city (Brown 2016, Tyson 2017), and the link to contemporary protest, I look at transportation justice in Baton Rouge through the history of the 1953 Bus Boycotts and the contemporary funding of the CATS public transportation system. My objective is to connect the words of my collaborators to a variety of historical materials in order to document and question the dramatic shifts in the health care and transportation infrastructures of Baton Rouge. In the current moment, the first two decades of the twenty first century, we are seeing the wakes of Civil Rights history played out in real time. Race and infrastructure are shifting around each other, tectonic plates which form the foundation of the city’s geography. Black life and death are caught in these shifts, held in the grasp of violence foundational to the infrastructure of the city.

#### 4.1 A Conversation with Mrs. Shirley Whitfield

The bare patch of grass across from Baton Rouge Police Department did not ask to become important to the political geography of this city; in some ways, it is merely what remained between a highway and a gas station. In another light, the land here has been significant for a long time. One night in early 2018, an online conversation with another activist turns to the perception of protests at Airline & Goodwood. She tells me:

[Airline & Goodwood] wasn't "just" a protest space, it was seriously a connection place...so many people came together, met there, branched out of there, connected resources with each other there...not to mention the sheer physical dynamics of the place...situated across from the old women's/new police HQ, just below florida blvd/BR Mason Dixon line, and being just down the street from the B Quik. There was a lot coming into play in that corner.

This person's message refers to the the human and spatial dimensions of Airline & Goodwood: the ways in which people rooted themselves to a new and budding community, and the ways this city had already rooted the space in significance through commercial development, racially segregated areas marked by specific roadways, and health and transportation infrastructure. While the community's protest may have grown here like a weed, unwanted but thriving, the paths of infrastructure and development were tended to carefully, pruned and trained by institutions of power.

Before the police renovated and fortified the towering building across from this small lawn, it was Woman's Hospital of Baton Rouge. The nonprofit hospital was built in 1968 (Shule 2013). When I describe the early stages of this project to a friend, Dr. Rani Whitefield (see figure 3.4), who tells me "I was born March 8, 1969. My moms says she was one of the first black women to deliver there. Her OB was a man....Dr. Leggio. If I'm correct, a family by the name



“Cunningham” was the first black family "delivered" there.” This person is a physician and activist, a youth mentor and documentary maker. He is also a black man and a father-to-be. Since Alton Sterling’s death, Rani, who goes by the moniker Hip Hop Doc, has been producing a documentary called “The Day After,” detailing the community response to this act of police violence. Months after this initial conversation with Rani, I sit down with his mom, Mrs. Shirley Whitfield, in a crowded coffee shop, and she relays her own experience of Airline & Goodwood:

I was working in Engineering at that time, as a secretary at Southern [University]. The one professor’s wife brought the baby to the office. I said ‘Look at that baby! I want a baby.’ Two months later, I was pregnant and asking ‘What was I saying?’ But Rani got there, and oh my god! You know him, he is spoiled rotten! Everyone wanted to cater to him, change his diaper, give him a bottle and bring him to me. His birth was fairly decent.....They just put us in stalls when I went to Woman’s Hospital. I thought they would take you to a room, but they put us in stalls, like cattle. [The stalls] were like when you go in to wait for something, like a stall with a curtain. That’s where the Blacks were, I don’t know about the whites. I was the only one as I remember. I was in so much pain, my stomach felt like it was going to pop open. I was there for four days. Now they put you out in a few hours unless something is wrong, but back then that was the policy. I needed that break too! I remember George bringing the babies. This is on Airline where the cops live now. All the children, my three other children, were standing downstairs in the parking lot waving to me They couldn’t see me because the windows were dark, but I could see them. They couldn’t come in, one time in Pine Bluff, George snuck [my oldest son] in to see me after [my second child] was born. Each time I gave birth there was something different, some small improvement. They did something each year.

Mrs. Whitfield has four children, a growing family of grandchildren, and a life history deeply intertwined with the geographies of race, health access, education and southern protest. She is in her eighties, a smart dresser, and as kind as can be. Originally from New Orleans, she moved in with her aunt and uncle in Arkansas at a young age and then remained there for college before relocating to Baton Rouge when her husband got a job as a professor at Southern University, a historically Black college located in North Baton Rouge.

Her four children were born in 1959, 1960, 1963 and 1969. The first three were born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and her fourth child, Rani, was born at Woman's Hospital in Baton Rouge.

1969..I'll never forget. March 8th, it was like 2 in the morning. None of my babies were born at reasonable times, each of them came early early early. [Woman's Hospital] was the new hospital, and you know, I like things clean and fresh, and the new facilities are always clean clean clean. So I told my doctor, who is deceased now, that I wanted to go there, and he said 'Well that depends if I am there.' I told him 'I want to go there.' He said 'We'll see if I am there.' Luckily, he was there, so it was not a problem.

I ask about the other women in her family, her neighborhood.

My neighbor who lived in our subdivision went [to Woman's to give birth] two weeks before I did. I'm from New Orleans, and my mother gave birth at Charity Hospital. My mother was fourteen when she was pregnant with me. She had something wrong with her heart, so they wanted her to stay in the hospital for months before she gave birth. She didn't have anything to her name, but she worked in the hospital to pay her bills. I was born August 2nd, and my mother's birthday is August 8th, so she made her fifteenth birthday in the hospital with me. The rest of [my family] gave birth at home with midwives.

When I asked about giving birth to her first three children in Arkansas, she says:

Oh at the hospital there. That was really a challenge. My first born, the Blacks had one little room to be in. When I gave birth there were four of us in the room. The room was so small that they couldn't close the door with all of us in there, in labor, and some of them were just outrageous. There was this one lady carrying on and I just asked her "Can't you just be a little quieter? We are all fittin' to have babies really soon!" She was a screamer, there was nothing we could do. The windows were up, there was no air conditioner of course, flies would come in. It was really traumatic, but I got through it, I had no choice. When [my first son] was born, he was born breach. I got to the hospital around two-something and he was born around four-thirty. It was something. He did fine. But then our babies, see our babies, they put them near the burn center. In the burn center, those people are screaming all night from the pain. I'll tell you, I'd never experienced anything like that. The women that had the babies with me, we were all in the room together which was not private at all, but that's all we had. Jefferson Memorial Hospital in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. And when my next son was born, it was a little better then. They changed the wards a bit, we had a little more privacy. And [my second son], I started having contractions with him around five o'clock in the morning, and he was born around five thirty-five. My doctor came to the house to get me, and I barely made it there.... Luckily my sister was staying with me at the time, my husband was away at grad school. When I got to the hospital I had the baby in about twenty minutes or so. He was born with a head

like [hand motions show a lump] and that is because I was on my side. That's because [the doctor] was trying to give me the epidural but it was two late. I screamed when I saw that head, but the doctor told me it would be fine, just give it two days. Two days later, he had a big old round head! With [my daughter] it was different too...I had eaten, and I probably shouldn't have, but she came out fine. But each of them was increasingly larger and I thought, it is time to call it a day."

Mrs. Whitfield received her undergraduate and graduate degrees and gave birth to four children in the course of twelve years. She is quick to speak of her husband's activism during this time: how he desegregated the school pool at the University of Arkansas while in graduate school, how his students at Southern University loved him because he was a radical dashiki-wearing professor, and how their family (particularly the male members of her husband's family) have planned any number of protests in the name of Civil Rights. It is hours into the conversation before she tells me of the meals she cooked for the Freedom Riders, the segregated restaurants she sat down in with her husband and their friends, and the labor that she performed at home in support of her husband's work in the Civil Rights Movement. She is as modest with her own political engagement as she is generous with the activism of those she cares for.

When I ask Mrs. Whitfield about hope and activism in the contemporary moment, she refers to her son:

My son is really concerned about what is happening in Baton Rouge. He's so into that police watch thing...he's been so into this Alton Sterling thing. He was so affected by it. He really really tries to make things better. But I like it because he pulls me in...he's just always doing something. He went up there and met Barack Obama!...He's so interested in kids, and that is our future, the children.

I asked Mrs. Whitfield what she would want someone not familiar with Baton Rouge to know about this place, to which she replies:

It wouldn't be the ideal place for you to come. It's better than it was, but if I had a choice I wouldn't be here, really. When my husband finished his dissertation he got offers from

all these different places. He said ‘no, they don’t need me there.’ I said ‘What the hell are you doing?’ He had so many offers, he is really smart. He said ‘I’m going to Southern University.’ I said, ‘Why?!’ He said, ‘They need me there.’ . . . You know they even had a rally trying to make him chancellor, the kids really liked him he. He wasn’t a typical professor and they liked that. But I wouldn’t tell you to come here. There are good people here, but I wouldn’t tell you to come here.

Mrs. Whitfield’s words reach me alongside the sound of the espresso machine, the loud conversation between two old friends a few tables over, and the traffic outside as the coffeeshop door opens to the busy street. I dig the nails of my right hand into the page in my notebook, momentarily forgetting my pen or purpose. My teeth jump to counter the critiques of Baton Rouge. My place-protective instinct grinds and steams, quickly pooling on the tip of my tongue before evaporating entirely.

Perhaps this hot-tempered protection grew out of a love for Baton Rouge. If so, it was fueled by respect for the communities and people I have found here and nourished by the newness of this place to me. I did not grow up here. For me, Baton Rouge is not a place of remembered struggle and setbacks, nor of youth hardship and heartbreak. The problems of my past inhabit another place, and that is a type of privilege. Further, my life in Baton Rouge is shaped at each turn by the economic and racial privilege I enjoy as a middle-class white person. The violences of Baton Rouge geography are rarely visited upon a body like mine. In this moment, I am pulled out of my role as enraptured listener to Mrs. Whitfield’s life history. Mrs. Whitfield is still talking, the coffee shop is still bustling, and I am craning my neck to glimpse what may be my unfurling understanding of the past, place, and race, or what may just be the perpetual unsettling of privilege held up to a mirror.

A few months before this meeting, Mrs. Whitfield's son, my friend Rani, met with my mom during her somewhat-yearly visit to Baton Rouge. She watched him interview me for his documentary "The Day After," and after the filming she met a number of other activists and artists in the Baton Rouge community. These were interactions full of grace and warmth. My mom stretched her understanding of social justice, and my community members welcomed her kindly. In my on-camera interview, I was asked about privilege. I spoke about the geographic segregation of space and the marginalization of various identities in Baton Rouge. I used academic speak to talk about the marginalization of black women in social movements. At the coffee shop table across from Rani's mom, I mentally trace the route back to the hospital where my mother gave birth to me in a private room twelve hundred miles away. I replay the kitchen table retellings of my birth: the panic of a blue face and tightly wound umbilical cord, the rush of nurses and doctors, the champagne after when all was well.

I look across the table to Mrs. Whitfield, full of grace and warmth. I mentally trace the four mile route back to the hospital where she gave birth to Rani in a stall. I replay the word *stall*. I replay her doctor's warnings that she could only go to Woman's Hospital if he was there. I replay the dozens of anecdotes she has told me over two hours seated at a wobbly coffee shop table: a segregated Piccadilly in Arkansas, tin showers at her first home by Southern University, each of her four experiences with childbirth. I return to the idea of place. I return to Airline & Goodwood.

#### **4.2 Southern Shift in Baton Rouge Healthcare Facilities**

When Dr. Rani Whitfield was born, in 1969, Mrs. Whitfield lived with her family in Park Vista, a subdivision East Baton Rouge Parish. She was 9.8 miles away from the new Woman's

Hospital, but she wanted to give the new hospital a try. At the time, it took her just 15 minutes to get to the old hospital location by car. In 2012, Woman's Hospital moved 6 miles down Airline Highway. For a few months, the facility was under contract to be bought by for-profit group TPAC Holding LLC, or The Physicians Alliance Corporation (Shule 2013). This physician-owned specialty medical group intended to maintain the facility as a hospital. While there are numerous press releases announcing the transition of the facility from one hospital to another, documented in local papers, cable channel websites and the website of Woman's Hospital, it is unclear why this sale did not happen. Rather, in December of 2012 the Metro Council announced that the Baton Rouge Police Department would buy the vacant facility for \$10 million dollars. The deal was approved by Baton Rouge Metro Council in March 2013 (Shule 2013). Public officials lauded the deal as an excellent way to expand the police department's footprint and to move towards a more central headquarters. Yet as police presence became more central, health care moved south.

What of the southward shift of healthcare service? People I spoke with identified the infrastructural and symbolic significance of this shift. What was once a place of life had become a symbol of death. What was once an all-white hospital (and *the* centrally located sole provider of inpatient obstetric care) integrated in the late 1960s only after both the Civil Rights Act and the introduction of Medicaid compelled healthcare facilities to comply with federal law in order to receive funding. For decades, most of the babies born in Baton Rouge, white and black, were born in Woman's hospital. Anne Lovell (2011) describes the stratified reproduction of racial classes in New Orleans in relation to the controversy of reopening Charity Hospital in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, stating "at stake is nothing less than social death for a segment of this

ethnically diverse city.” This geographic shift in resources is not accidental, nor a move of convenience. Rather, it is part of a consistent and deliberate geographic shift of resource south and east, towards a whiter and wealthier suburbs and away from the majority Black and lower-income people and places of Baton Rouge.

In 1968, at the same time that Woman’s Hospital was opening at Airline & Goodwood, Earl K Long Medical Center was opening in North Baton Rouge. Woman’s, a private but not-for-profit hospital, was the sole provider of inpatient obstetric care for twenty years after it opened. Earl K Long, a public state-run facility, became the de facto treatment center for many area residents without health insurance, or who could not traverse the unfriendly transportation terrain of Baton Rouge (Brown 2016, LSU Hospitals 2018). Earl K Long was closed and demolished in 2015. Its satellite facilities have been taken over by a private hospital system, Our Lady of the Lake (LSU Hospitals 2018).

For residents in Mrs. Whitfield’s old neighborhood of Park Vista, this could mean two hours and forty six minutes of travel via three buses for a resident using public transportation. Even traveling from Airline & Goodwood, the old location of Woman’s Hospital and a site much closer to the new Woman’s Hospital than Park Vista, a car ride would take around 26 minutes and a bus transportation would take 1 hour and 31 minutes and a bus change (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The geographic distribution of healthcare resources has a marked effect on Black and lower income residents of Baton Rouge.

Our Lady of the Lake has been operating medical facilities in Baton Rouge for over 100 years. Initially, a group of Franciscan nuns opened a four story brick building in a former goat pasture facing University Lake, adjacent to LSU’s campus and near downtown. At the time in the

1920s, Baton Rouge General was located in downtown Baton Rouge, and the city wanted the Catholic hospital built next door. However, the nuns chose a pasture near LSU, facing University Lake (Blitzer 2011). In the 1970s, shortly after the construction of Earl K Long Medical Center and Woman’s Hospital, the nuns moved their services into a new facility off of Essen Lane, which at that time was a gravel road. This move represents a shift south and east, along the trajectory of still-under-construction I-10 (Blitzer 2011).

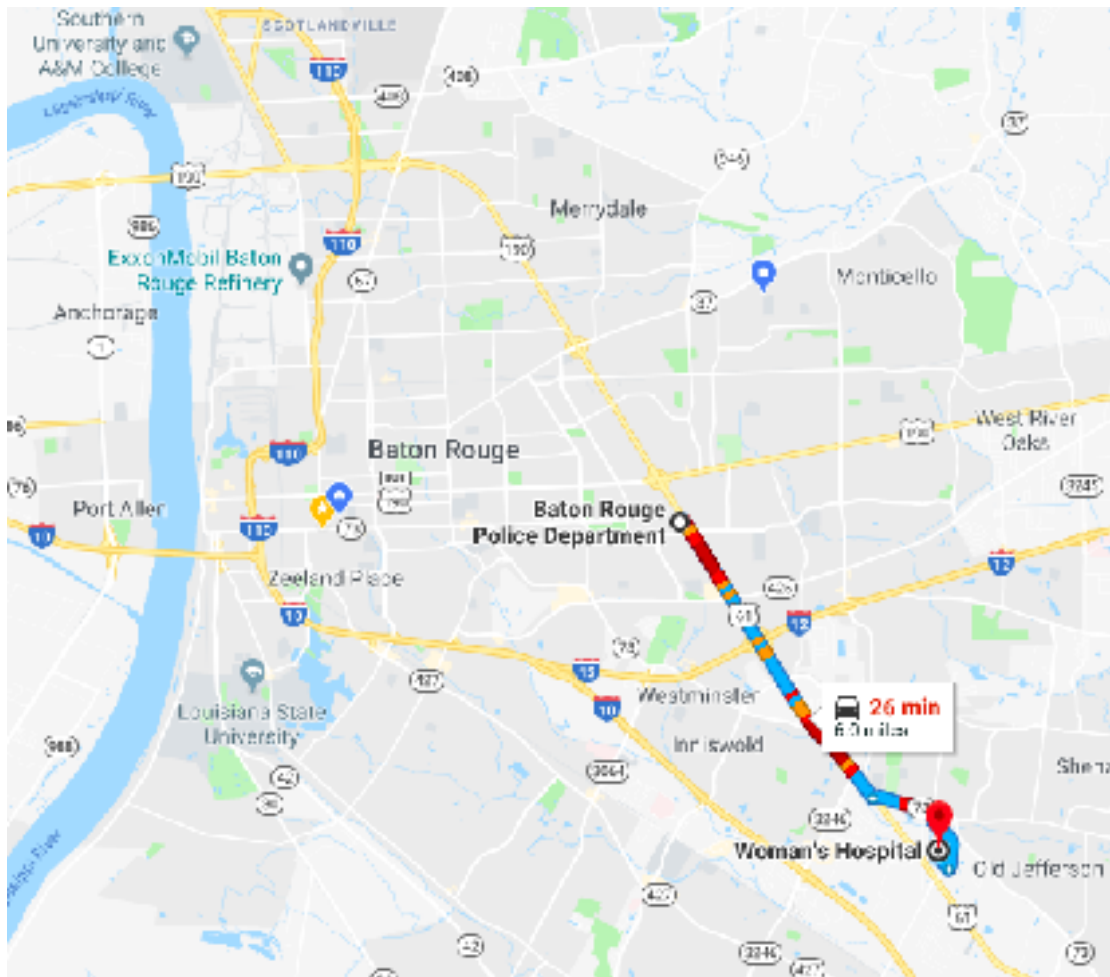


Figure 4.1: Google Map of Baton Rouge showing the distance and driving directions between the current locations of Baton Rouge Police Department and Women's Hospital.



Baton Rouge General was located in downtown Baton Rouge, until it moved eastward to mid-city in 1923. In 1994, Baton Rouge General outgrew the mid-city campus on Government Street, and expanded to a state of the art campus on Bluebonnet Road, 6.5 miles south of the old campus. In 2015, when Earl K Long was demolished, Baton Rouge General announced the closure of its mid-city emergency room. The northern half of the city is now without emergency medical services, and with incredibly restricted access to reproductive healthcare services (Brown 2016).

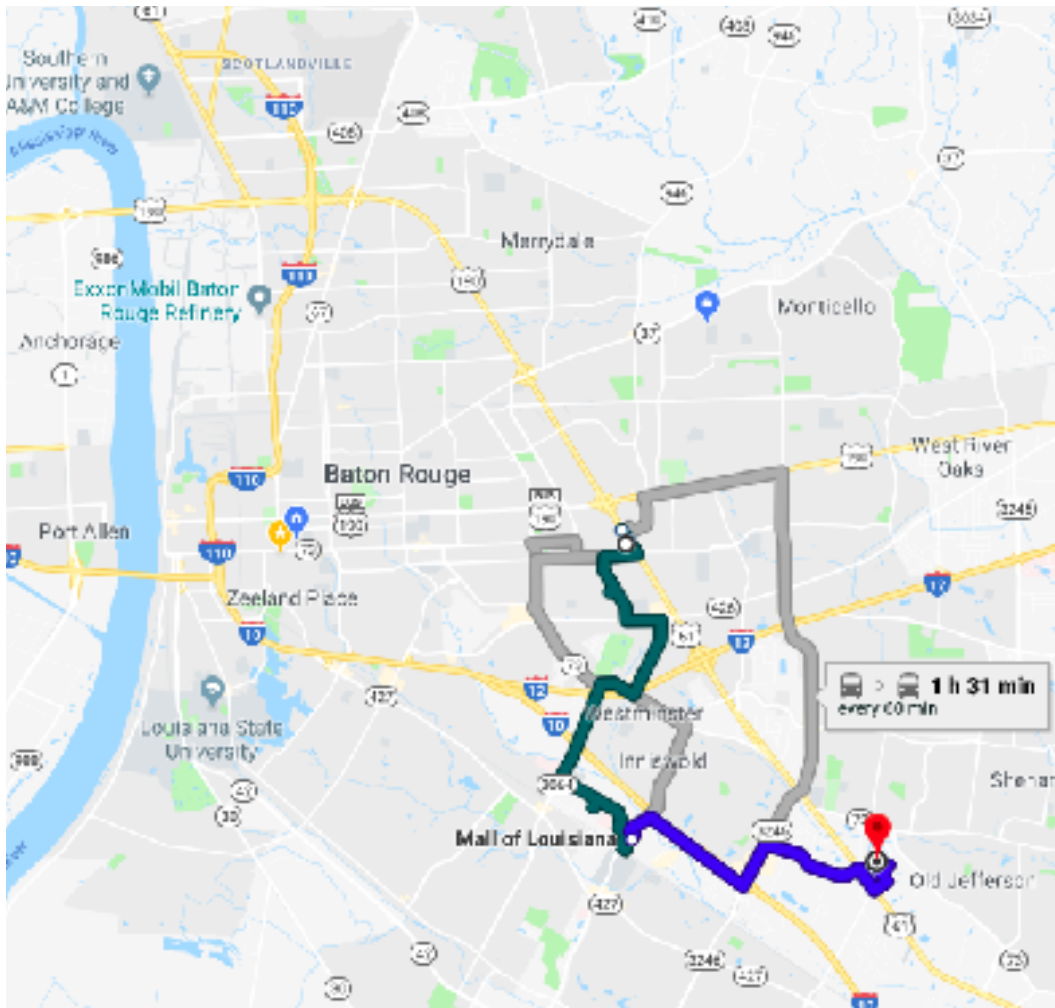


Figure 4.2: Google Map of Baton Rouge showing the distance and public transportation directions between the current locations of Baton Rouge Police Department and Women's Hospital.

### **4.3 “Free Rides” to Slow Rides: the many enclosures of still-segregated transit**

In Baton Rouge, you need a car. There are no two ways around it, except by bus or foot. Buildings are far apart. The city is a town that doesn't stop sprawling until it reaches rural farms or swamplands (Brown 2016). There is not much of a downtown, or a business district (Speights-Binet 2004). What has developed is by the mall, by Our Lady of the Lake Hospital. This area, known as St. George is part of the unincorporated part of East Baton Rouge Parish south of the city and far south of the Triple S Store where Alton Sterling was shot. Economic stakeholders, specifically predominantly white corporations and the City-Parish government have driven investment into this part of the City-Parish (Gallo 2016, Brown 2016). Not technically part of the city proper, St. George has tried to secede and incorporate on its own (failing to do so by just 71 votes in the 2015 ballot) (Brown 2016). St. George, if successfully incorporated, would take with it 30% of the City-Parish tax revenue (Baton Rouge Area Chamber 2013). This revenue currently funds public infrastructure, like the CATS bus system.

During an interview in 1995, Reverend J. T. Jemison, a minister at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in north Baton Rouge, said:

Invariably I would see buses going down into South Baton Rouge. And on those buses were maids and cooks and so forth who had come from the white area of Goodwood and other areas. The maids, who had cooked for whites were not able to sit down. And of course, there were only blacks down there, and the whites who were living in South Baton Rouge were those whites who had businesses such as grocery stores and what have you, and were making a living off of blacks. I thought it was terrible that they could work all day for white folks and couldn't sit down on the bus. . . . The blacks going down into South Baton Rouge were forced to stand up over empty seats. They could put their bags, their bundles, in the seats, but they couldn't put their bodies (Jemison 1995).

Baton Rouge is the original home of the Bus Boycotts, and Reverend Jemison served as the president of the United Defence League (coalition of oil workers, educators, voters leagues and religious leaders representing African American interests in the boycott) during negotiations with the city (Louisiana Public Broadcasting 2005, Inwood et al. 2015). In 1953, Black Baton Rouge leveraged direct and nonviolent action to contest the non-enforcement of Ordinance 222, which had amended the segregated seat policy. When white drivers would not abide by the new ordinance, the bus boycott became the first boycott of a southern city bus system under segregation. Massive volunteer networks coordinated free rides around the city, modeling the ways in which other cities would establish solidarity networks during other bus boycotts.

However, Reverend Jemison struck a deal with the city after five days of no significant gains. He later stated, “We started the boycott simply to get seats for the people and once we got that what else was there to get?” (Louisiana Public Broadcasting 2005, np). The bus boycotts in Baton Rouge were not successful in desegregating the bus system in the ways many wanted, but they were groundbreaking in the tactics used and the precedent created for future boycotts in Montgomery and elsewhere around the south. One historian stated:

The Baton Rouge bus boycott tactics actually led to the success of the Montgomery bus boycott because for the very first time they actually had a prototype or a model. You had the free ride system, which was set up. Then you had the mass meetings, which brought everyone together where they discussed what had happened all day and how they planned to continue the next day (Louisiana Public Broadcasting 2005, np).

The quality of CATS has declined over the last 60 year; funding from public sources is increasingly limited, and routes are consistently cut or combined (Inwood et al. 2015).

As Stephen Davis of Transportation for America said, “Although African American riders now have the option of sitting wherever they like on buses, the likelihood that buses will get them

where they need to go when they need to get there is significantly less than it was 60 years ago” (Schmitt 2012, Inwood et al. 2015).

Currently, Louisiana has one of the highest of car insurance average monthly rates, and one of the highest accident rates in the country (Brown 2016). The cost of owning a vehicle here is prohibitive. The income inequality, and racial disparity across Louisiana and particularly in East Baton Rouge Parish, ranks among the top income inequalities in the nation. The CATS bus system has been plagued by scandal, fraud, public distrust and divestment (Inwood et al. 2015). In a state and parish with a track record of privatization, public officials have an easy target in defunding the historically controversial and relatively ineffective bus system. Yet, it remains the only city-wide method of transportation outside of privately owned vehicles (Schmitt 2012). There is no train or subway. There are not many taxis, and Uber and Lyft services are cost-prohibitive for most people who cannot afford their own vehicle. How, then, are citizens of North Baton Rouge intended to read the investments of “their” government?

My collaborators repeat, again and again, that Airline & Goodwood is a place caught between life and death. One woman says, “I was born in that building, now the pigs live there.” Her friend nods his head, points to the police headquarters, and adds, “[That building] used to be a hospital, now they’re aiming guns at us.” They tell me about their love for this city, for the places which made them and the way family and community hold each other dearly here. We talk about a love for the ways in which people bond in this place. Each of the 35 nights that Redell pulled up to that patch of grass, grill and protest signs ready to go in the back of his truck, he did so facing the sniper rifles that we were told were positioned at the top of the old medical tower.

He did so under police spotlights, across from barricades. He did so facing the building where he was born. He did so to fight for his life.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I examine organizing and activism in Baton Rouge after the summer of 2016, giving particular attention to the ways that activists turned their resistance efforts towards flood relief in racially segregated and undeveloped areas. I then summarize Chapters 1-4, and discuss possible future directions for this research before offering final conclusions.

### 5.1 Organizing after the flood

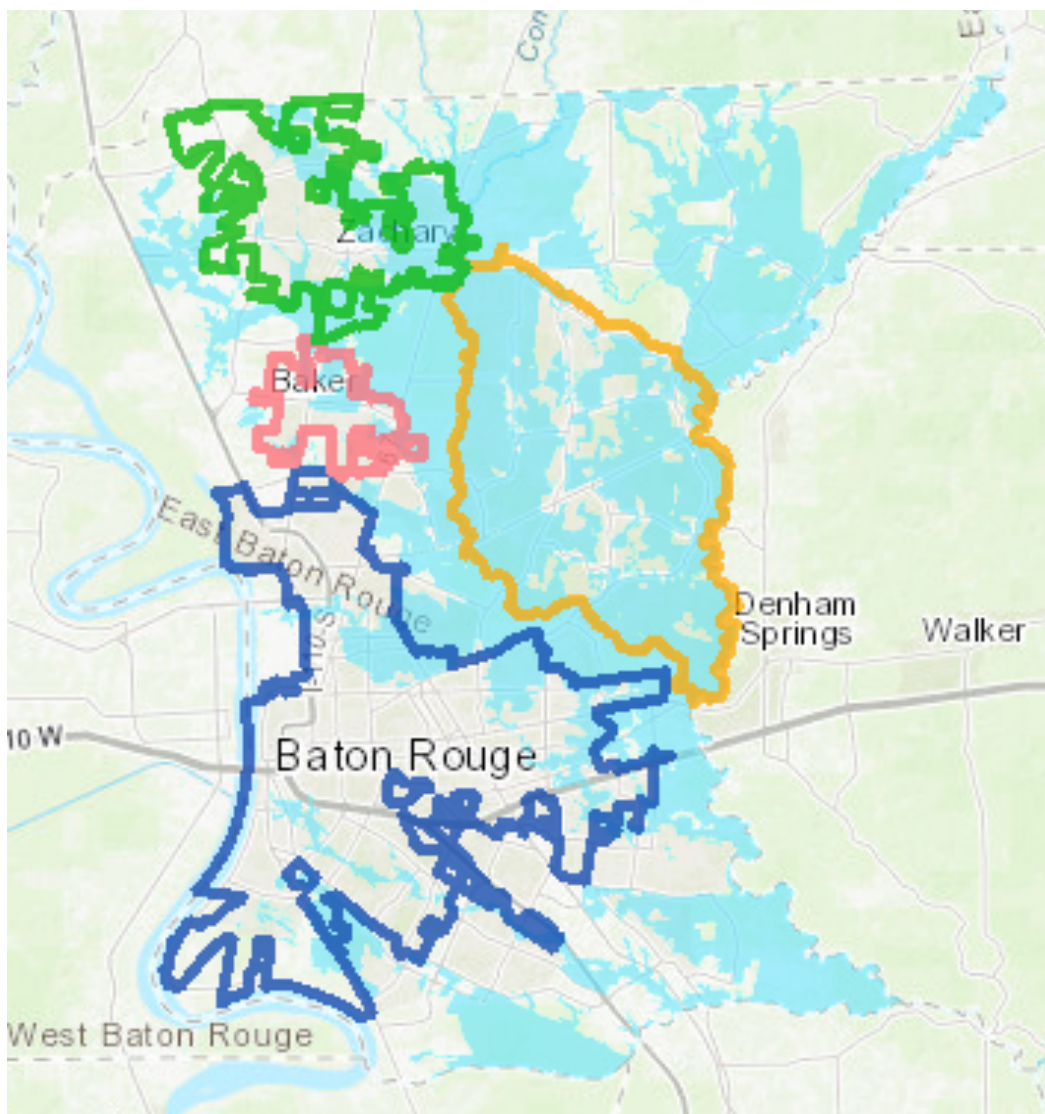


Figure 5.1: Map of Flooding in East Baton Rouge Parish, courtesy of the city-parish Geographic Information Systems department and shared by The Advocate.

After the flooding that took place from August 11-13, 2016, many from the media, the political establishment, and the parts of the city with traditional avenues of access and privilege rushed to highlight the flood's effect on everyone in the area. Using this city-wide experience of tragedy was a rhetorical strategy to erase the deep impact of race on the experience of disaster and displacement. While in a shelter, one white Baton Rouge resident said: "Right now people aren't concerned about black versus white," she added. "We're all just trying to survive and get everybody back on their feet. So it kind of washed all that away. ...I think in the long run it will be a healing thing."

The flood affected over 145,000 homes, more than half of them in East Baton Rouge Parish, and approximately 34% of businesses in the parish (Water Institute of the Gulf 2017). Livingston Parish, directly to the east of East Baton Rouge Parish, was also hit incredibly hard by the flood, sustaining the worst damages in the area. The flooding in Livingston Parish was devastating. In the aftermath of the flood, the state of emergency experienced by this majority-white parish was further used as an example of the "unity" that trauma had produced for this city: Black Baton Rouge had lost a citizen as the hands of the police, now white Livingston had lost too. The narrative is never that simple, and rarely stated so plainly. Most people would not put it in exactly those terms. Instead, like the woman above, they would say words like "heal" and "unity." Which raises the question, "Who has the resources to heal?"

As the state capitol of Louisiana, Baton Rouge is a hub for commerce, people and resources. Baton Rouge is also a magnifying glass for the inequalities entrenched in the state and the country. In an article published six days before the Great Flood of 2016, the city's newspaper *The Advocate* reports on the racial income inequalities in the city-parish:

The median household income for the parish in 2014, the most up-to-date year in the survey, was \$63,558. White households slightly lost ground in earnings from 2013 to 2014, saw a median of \$88,901. Asian households also saw their household incomes drop during the two years, with a median incomes of \$57,823 in 2014. Hispanic and black households did not lose or gain any extra household earnings from 2013 to 2014, the statistics show, and still lagged behind. Hispanic households had median incomes of \$51,404 in 2014 while black households saw the lowest incomes in the parish at \$41,029 that year (Gallo 2016).

Racial disparities in Baton Rouge surpass bank accounts: they are entrenched in every bit of the city, permeating the soil, the water and the air. The Racial Dot Map of Baton Rouge shows the ways geography is divided racially (see Figure 1.1). Racially disparate policing, access to health and education, food security, and homelessness are just some of the issues that research has repeatedly linked to racial inequality. In Baton Rouge, racial inequality is geographically bound, and the contemporary disparate distribution of public resources bends itself to the contours of racial segregation.

The summer was marked by protests- over a thousand people took to the street on July 10, 2017 as a youth-led march for #JusticeForAltonSterling went to the capitol building. Over two hundred people were arrested between July 8 and July 10, 2016 throughout the city of Baton Rouge, both at the march downtown and at the corner of Airline & Goodwood, where people gathered outside of the Baton Rouge Police Department (BRPD) headquarters. Various groups continued to protest outside of BRPD until the night of August 10, when the flooding began. These groups, including People Building Communities and The Resistance, were explicitly fighting for racial justice in the face of a deadly act of police violence. They were doing so in a geographically targeted spot (outside the police headquarters) in a city geography scarred by racial inequality.



When the flooding happened, Airline & Goodwood was empty. The nightly occupation and protest was over. The community leaders and activists who held that space for a month were dealing with the devastation. One leader took eleven people into his home when another activist lost their house to water. Another started a gofundme for donations to school children who would not have the resources to replace newly bought school supplies. The public middle school where I taught, Park Forest, a title 1 recipient, was under two feet of water. Our supplies, primarily bought by donations, grants and teacher salaries, were not able to be replaced.

Together Baton Rouge, a coalition of churches and community organizations, had spent the summer sending volunteers to community meetings about policing and police violence, holding dialogues and town halls on racial justice in the city, and distributing supplies when protesters took to the streets. After the flood, Together Baton Rouge turned their immediate efforts to relief, specifically gutting homes in low income neighborhoods on their “Gut Check Saturdays” (see Figure 5.2). The organization also used grant money from Foundation for Louisiana to pay low income people to help with the relief efforts, simultaneously filling the gap of lost wages and addressing the flood relief needs of neighborhoods without the resources to hire contractors immediately. North Baton Rouge Relief, a coalition briefly created by activists with a strong social media following, organized quick clean up blitzes (see Figure 5.2). On these blitzes, community members went around to North Baton Rouge neighborhoods in the Park Forest and Monticello areas to remove waterlogged furniture and provide hot meals to residents.

During the clean up, conversations turned to how long it would take the city to remove the garbage from the streets in North Baton Rouge. Even a week after the flood, it was becoming obvious which neighborhoods would have access to clean streets and which would not. The Park

Forest neighborhood, a predominantly low income black neighborhood, had flood debris by the roads well into the spring of 2018 (see Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.2: North Baton Rouge Relief and Together Baton Rouge flyers, distributed on social media as a single image through social justice and progressive networks.

The Resistance, a group which occupied the site of Airline & Goodwood from July 10-August 10, 2016, continued resistance in creative ways after the flood. Redell, a leader of the Resistance, turned towards grassroots relief- collecting and distributing supplies outside a Ragusa's Meat Market in the Glen Oaks neighborhood. Many people who stopped by expressed

their frustration at obtaining supplies from the Red Cross Shelters, heavily militarized and policed places, or from city supply drives.



Figure 5.3: Two photos of debris by the side of the road in the Park Forest neighborhood of North Baton Rouge, LA. Photo taken by author. September 10 2016.

Both spaces had consistently harassed and traumatized community members who were desperately in need of essentials- everything from clothes to baby diapers. In order to distribute necessities, build goodwill and heal more than just the physical trauma, the Resistance partnered with the Mardi Gras Indians, musicians, artists and the Glen Oaks Alumni Association to host a block party and supply give away at the Glen Oaks High School campus (see Figure 5.4). The school, closed due to flood damage, was still able to be a place of education, community, and purpose. Part of my contribution to The Resistance was either fixing/adding to premade fliers or making new ones for upcoming events (I added to but did not make the original design for the flier below, Figure 5.4).

Activities of organizers after the flood directly addressed racial, economic, and social inequalities of Baton Rouge's unequal geography. Many organizers asked: Where are flood relief resources invested? What does it mean for people to rely on the state in the wake of disaster when the state has displayed active violence against its people, and specifically people of color?



Figure 5.4: Flier for The Resistance Giveback and Block Party showing the eclectic and community driven nature of the event. August 25, 2016.

The people who have means to access private resources are not the people who have been victimized by the state. Private resources are also not exempt from these inequalities and experiences of racism. Actors understood their role as resistance to systemic racism and the inequalities that cut into Baton Rouge and Louisiana. They knew that victimization by the state happens in acts of acute violence, such as the execution of Alton Sterling. They also know that victimization by the state happens in neglect. When natural disaster strikes, it can affect everyone. Yet the people who had economic security before the flood are the ones with the resources to recover, and the gaps that existed in access and equality before are exacerbated by disaster.

How do we study the inequalities of future disasters? How can climatology and geography engage with the diversity of human impacts? In this place of disappearing coastlines, intensifying storms, and deepening inequality, it is not a question of if the next disaster will hit, but when. When it does, who will take care of the people already harmed by public and private institutions? In Redell's words: "we are who we got." Resistance after the flood no longer meant protest at Airline & Goodwood, but that same group of people took the spirit of that place into other work. Resistance meant a community engaging in grassroots relief and care for each other.

## **5.2 "I have hope, I am just really tired": Where the community is now**

There is a clumsiness to this process. I watched (and watch still) as the political awakenings of the moment meet people in waves, and the varying ways in which they(/I/we) respond. That summer, in 2016, I was one of many who showed up in a tidal wave of *doing*. I am grateful for the community members who held and hold me accountable to processing my experiences *doing*, who encourage me to slow down, and who advocate for the community before the ego or impulse of any one *doer*. One collaborator described this collective moment of education/awakening:

Organizing right now, and I am gonna wrap the summer and the election together when I say this, it feels educational. It feels like getting people up to speed. They need to understand some basic things and understand the severity of this. It feels like it is just educational because you can't do anything unless people know. Which is why I care so much about getting to these people that don't have access to any of these conversations. If we really want to have some solid coalitions, people showing up for things, we need people to know that they matter and that it matters when they show up, that there are these networks. I want to see more conversations, more one-on-ones. More one-on-tens, -twenties, -thirties. More networking and people really getting into the roots of the community, that way there is always going to be a solid base of people sprouting out of the ground, and not just some really burnt out activists... who do a lot of stuff and then feel, ya know, get burnt out and nothing happens because they are burnt out.

I resonate with this collaborator, someone who became a friend both through our shared community connections and the sheer number of times we showed up at the same organizing/activist space searching for ways we could contribute. The various projects and commitments I took on leading up to this thesis have mapped onto this trajectory. First, I was just *getting up to speed* and learning about the depth and breadth of things I did not know. I was attending trainings and community dialogues, listening as much as I could, writing down everything I could, asking questions. Next, there was *conversation, one-on-ones* and *one-on-tens*. In some ways, the same people were everywhere, and in other ways, resistance existed in pockets or cliques. I tried to sustain connections with different people from various organizing spaces. In many ways, this was foundational to the breadth of things I learned, and in many ways those relationships were only situational and became specific to organizing work, rather than full, social relationships. Nonetheless, each was and is valued immensely.

Then, there is my time as a *really burnt out activist*. One night, I was speaking to a friend about a coalition that failed at setting up even a single direct action due to infighting, an organization that I stepped away from in order to protect my mental health, and the sheer exhaustion of having to take on leadership roles when more experienced (also burnt out) folks stepped away. I realized that in the course of six months I had rapidly slingshotted through roles in the organizing community of Baton Rouge, and that the burn out of not having a *solid base* had become untenable. From dialogue with other folks in these communities, I know that the feeling was shared. I write now from a place of uncertainty. Nearly two years have passed, the community around me has grown in some ways and fractured in others, and I do not see justice when I look at Baton Rouge. I do, however, see many people working for justice.

### 5.3 Conclusions

In this thesis, I examine the relationships between place, power, and people with special care to the place of Airline & Goodwood: a site of protest in the #JusticeForAlton movement. Through this place, I explore the powerful geographies which shape and are shaped by racial segregation and violence in Baton Rouge, LA. I began by describing my first night at Airline & Goodwood, contextualizing the place-based experiences of protest and police violence which ground this work. Chapter 1 gave an introduction to the city of Baton Rouge demographically and geographically and briefly overviewed the case details of Alton Sterling's murder, and the #JusticeForAlton movement. Chapter 1 also addressed my own entanglements as a researcher, community organizer and Legal Observer, and explored the ethical considerations these entanglements presented as I moved through my fieldwork.

Chapter 2 detailed the project methods & theory guiding this thesis, beginning with a discussion of my fieldwork and observant participation. Chapter 3 explores the geography of protest and police violence in #JusticeForAlton. I give specific attention to three sites of protest used in the summer of 2016, characterizing them by their geographic location in town, the placemaking that occurred at those sites to reclaim dominant space, and the scalar politics of those spaces which connected hyperlocal events to trans/national movements. Chapter 3 also discussed the ways in which Airline & Goodwood, with its sustained nightly occupation during July of 2016, and specific place-based characteristics (both the site and the people) was divergent from other sites of resistance in Baton Rouge.

Chapter 4 contextualized Airline & Goodwood historically. Beginning with excerpts from an oral history with Mrs. Shirley Whitfield who gave birth in Woman's hospital a few months

after the facility at Airline & Goodwood had opened, I connect the powerful geographies of my contemporary collaborators with the historical geography of Black birth in Baton Rouge. I then examined the histories and geographies of health and transportation infrastructure in Baton Rouge, connecting hospital closures and underfunded bus systems to the geography of police violence in the current moment. This chapter, Chapter 5, began with a discussion of organizing after the flooding in August 2016 and a discussion of current burnout in the local organizing community.

Since the night of July 9, 2016, I have sought to make sense of the experiences at Airline & Goodwood, to contextualize the embodiment of panic and fear, the perpetuation of state violence at the individual level, and the terror experienced as a collective whole; but also the community building, celebration of identity, and reappropriation of dominant space which allowed The Resistance and other protestors a chance to use the powerful geography of this city as a call to action. There is a complex relationship between people and place, place and power. My collaborators used the transgressive nature of their presence at Airline & Goodwood to expose a crack in the facade of hegemonic police and state power. This exposure ultimately allows for a nuanced look at the ways in which economic and political power, protected by policing, has spatially invested itself in Baton Rouge.

Baton Rouge is a city with a distinctly segregated geography. It simultaneously exemplifies the segregation of post-Civil Rights southern cities and provides incredibly unique, and somewhat challenging, local context. The intersection of Airline & Goodwood carries the marks of past investments and divestments. It holds the geographical traces of its history. Each place has that burden. For the study of protest, race and institutional power in Baton Rouge,



Airline & Goodwood has a meaning beyond what the media, most people or history books will say. This is an archaeology of meaning in a place of conflict which has been subject to news stories which would label citizens as “terrorists” and peaceful assemblies as “riots.”

Place matters. This close look at the temporal and spatial context of, placemaking at, and

surveillance around the space of Airline & Goodwood shows the larger socio political significance of resistance in Baton Rouge, LA. However, like historical studies seek something greater, the attention to place shows us something more: how we can zoom in to this one place over the course of a few days or weeks and understand centuries of history in Baton Rouge. Airline & Goodwood functions as a geographic counter discourse, an alternate use of space which configures hierarchy, purpose and production. Airline & Goodwood is a site of surveillance and building- a place to both display and conceal the activities which most undermine the hegemony of the white supremacist police state at a local level. Returning to Hine (2014) “Manifesto for Black Studies”, I seek a greater understanding of this space through the investigation of the ways power uses its geography: divestment, racialized police violence, and as a seemingly non-place- the lawn between a highway and a gas station. This apparent silence cloaks the deeper meaning of its place, the ways in which political and economic power has pressed into it, and how groups of activists and community members weaponized the symbolism in its geography in order to use “out of place” activism in resisting the dominant use of this space, symbolic resisting dominant use of space and power in the larger scale of Baton Rouge.

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## VITA

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