

“Through recollecting threads of her story with stories of slavery and institutionalized racism in this country, Benders offers theological insights on the relationship between original sin and individual sin as well as the interdependence of liberation.”

— Erin Brigham, University of San Francisco

“In *Recollecting America’s Original Sin*, Benders invites the reader to travel alongside her in *communitas* in an admirable quest to ‘live justice authentically and inclusively.’ It is a personal and deeply moving account of pilgrimage as a powerful means of reckoning as America confronts a long history of racial injustice, as embodied prayer, and—importantly—as a way to begin to heal.”

— Kathryn R. Barush, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University

Recollecting America's Original Sin

A Pilgrimage of Race and Grace

Alison M. Benders



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~ For my brother Drew (1952–2021)—
a pilgrim in spirit and in service

~ For all the members of the
Fall 2018 Race, Justice, and Theology class from JST

~ For my family, with deepest love

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Preface

We live in reckoning times. For years now, daily unprecedented events have challenged reliable routines for Americans. They force on us a reckoning about who we are and what we value. They demand that we declare ourselves for or against. If we remain silent, we are complicit. When we speak, we say too much or not enough. The year 2020 sparked national reckonings long in the making. My pilgrim story visits shrines and holy places in the nation's history to encounter moments that have led to these reckonings. I look through the lens of Black-white racial justice. Our nation's path has also been my own color-line journey as a white woman in an interracial marriage. In walking the color line, I discovered moments of lament, moments of conversion, and gifts of great wisdom.

This race and grace pilgrimage was planned as a Civil Rights journey to be taken in the fall of 2020. A global pandemic interrupted my plans, just as it interrupted the whole world. Since traveling was so limited, and direct human interaction so constrained, this pilgrimage unexpectedly became purer and more intense. I still traveled but, really, from my desk chair, using journals and memories. I filled out my own experiences with the insights of scholars and poets. The pilgrimage lasted longer than I had anticipated even though the circumference of my explorations was reduced to thousands of footsteps, not thousands of miles.

As with all pilgrimages, my color-line path remained a journey seeking transformation. The pandemic, however, stripped away the prospects of travel and spontaneity. The enforced distancing also stripped away distractions. I did not travel far

beyond my home community on foot, but the Spirit led me deeply into the desert to reckon with my own sins and the sins of America's white culture.

When I first prepared to take a physical journey to recollect America's original sin, I had anticipated that the actual travel would make up the core of the spiritual encounter. I thought I would move my feet as I prayed myself through our nation's history of slavery, race, and persistent white supremacy. In preparation, I investigated holy sites of resistance and sites saturated with conflict or triumph. I studied our nation's prophets of justice for inspiration and blessing. I considered who might have living water to wash America clean in the struggle to redeem our story on race for this time and place—for a justice-saturated shared future. But COVID disrupted all my calculations. It disrupted the world's expectations. Disruption, I learned, was grace.

In the separate space of a pilgrim time, I recognized our nation's persistent sins as I examined my own conscience. These sins are a failure to love God and the repudiation of God's call to love our neighbors fully and justly. I rambled through U.S. history focusing on the color line dividing Black people and white people, listening for God's appeals, exhortations, and reprimands. I felt myself at a reckoning moment along with our country. I wondered whether we were at a genesis moment, a new creation, when we might begin again on the project of living justly together. I heard God's grace inviting me to convert my heart and dwell in a covenant community—a beloved community where all belong.

My pilgrim path to recollect America's original sin, therefore, led me deeply into pivotal moments of our nation's history. I pieced them together during the world's pandemic pause. Some historic moments were jumping-off points for faith connections. Other moments connected with places in Louisiana, Alabama, and Georgia that I had visited as a part of a class, Civil Rights Immersion, during the fall of 2018. Still others came from personal experience, either places and events from

my family's story or places in my city that I was able to visit during the spring of 2021. Like landmarks upon a pilgrim's path, the moments strung together from history, memory, and imagination became a real journey recollecting America's original sin. The selected moments, few among so many possible, ignited my desire to respond faithfully to the reckonings of our time that have called us to justice.

I thank God for graces rained upon me along this pilgrim path—for the time apart, for wise guides with discerning words, for the cloud of witnesses who accompanied me, for the unexpected hope that justice is possible in a *kairos* moment.

I invite others to join me in this sacred pilgrimage space. No preparation is necessary; all that's needed is an open heart ready to encounter what may come. This book is not a travel guide or a theological treatise. We're on a pilgrimage. Accept each separate moment as an invitation to savor the place or situation with grace and possibility. We can become *communitas*, a community bound into a shared hope by walking and praying together. According to the ancient Israelite prayer: *Shema!* Hear, O Israel! Love God and love your neighbor with your whole being!

For me, *Shema!* has been the Spirit's summons to walk with wide-open eyes and then respond. Walk with me! *Shema!*

Alison M. Benders
Berkeley, California / Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Pentecost Sunday 2021

Second Week

Shackled Past and Present in Louisiana

During the second week on pilgrimage I explored Louisiana, figuratively a hop, skip, and jump in time and distance from our country's East Coast colonial origins. While the regional cultures differed, both were bound by our nation's deep-rooted racial caste hierarchy. In the moments of this week, the country's nineteenth-century slaveholding society built upon chattel slavery was still in plain view in Louisiana. The country's past still shackled African Americans; it shackles all Americans.

Before this color-line pilgrimage, New Orleans and Louisiana had refused my efforts to box them, safe and sound, into domesticated sketches. The humidity, heat, and hurricane-threatened bayous formed tangled, damp impressions in my mind. The region also sparkled, beckoning me like colorful and dangerous glass shards. Before this pilgrimage, I had known only bits and pieces about this paradoxical delta city that has lived so tantalizingly large in the national imagination. I had gathered all sorts of facts and facile judgments from TV, online media, and friends' vacation reports. Picture-perfect ads of New Orleans had tempted me to saunter through the French Quarter as a place of gaudy Mardi Gras celebrations promising bacchanalian release from the drudgery of northern winters. Jazz was born here, as were all the musical genres so distinctively American: the blues, Negro spirituals, rock and roll, and hip hop. Its cuisine and place names revealed its French and Creole history. Preparing for this week's trekking, I realized finally what unnerved me in the menacing memories

and sharp, splintered tales that I had collected about New Orleans: with the proverbial log in my eye, I had not wanted to confront New Orleans and Louisiana because recollections of terrible racial violence there frightened me.

My itinerary this week led me first to New Orleans proper. Its past was cached in restored historic buildings, burrowed in the land's vegetation and marshes, and narrated in the residents' speech and customs. To trace the color line running through the region, I began on the banks of the Mississippi River near the port. Then, past the ironwork and alleys of the French Quarter, I recollected the *communitas* echoes of drum celebrations, which had pulsed in Congo Square's foot-pounded dirt commons. On an upriver plantation museum, now tranquil, I faced the reality of enslaved human beings' short, brutal lives that unexpectedly intersected my own. I paused to excavate the Catholic presence in the region. My own faith ancestors both shamefully sinned against their fellow human beings and audaciously triumphed over the surrounding sin-soaked culture. The last moment of this week allowed me to pause in the Lower Ninth Ward under the levees' ominous shadow. Here was the legacy of enslavement, presenting itself as poverty and social abandonment as Black residents demanded that America fulfill its promises to them.

To grasp America's original sin, I had to pay attention to what happened in the Deep South along the Mississippi River two hundred years ago, so I begged God's grace for a wide-open heart. Defended with my father's shillelagh, girded with my penitential prayer, and steeled for the unpredictable, I journeyed to New Orleans to reckon with its past—with our country's past. I was surprised by what I discovered this week about our nation and myself. *Shema!* Walk with me!

Moment 1: Sold Down the River

Standing early on a Saturday morning at a broad bend on the murky Mississippi's east bank, I tentatively breathed in

the mild fall air. The Mississippi River flowed from its far-north source in Minnesota south over two thousand miles to the Gulf Coast. It marked the boundary between the country's British-settled states and the French territorial expanse that Jefferson purchased for the United States in 1803. French explorers settled the Gulf Coast from east to west and asserted ownership over the vast Mississippi watershed for France. The sprawling settlements of New Orleans from its earliest days have flourished for centuries a few miles inland from the wide flat delta where river and land mingle. From the river's edge at the Jackson Square landing, I looked west to Algiers Point, where the transatlantic slaving ships had disgorged their human cargo.¹ Enslaved individuals were then bound away to the French Quarter for sale. Today, anguished moans no longer floated on the wind. I saw only an incongruous assortment of riverfront hotels, high-rise buildings, and tricked-out steamboats with their layered decks. These hardly squared with the ships that once docked there with kidnapped cargo in their holds. To the south of Jackson Square, I saw seemingly innocuous industrial cranes thrusting their white skeletons skyward to load and unload ships crammed with ever-changing payloads.

¹ The *Slave Voyages* database documents over 325,000 men, women, and children who had been shipped legally and illegally to the North American coast during the centuries of the transatlantic slave trade—mostly to the Carolinas, to the Chesapeake Bay region, and in lesser numbers, to Canada. Researchers estimate that over 12 million Africans in total were transported for enslavement on the American continents and the Caribbean islands, one of the largest forced migrations in human history. Approximately 95% of all Africans disembarked in the Caribbean and South America, 4% in North America, and the rest in Europe. Records document that, in 1719, the first two ships originating from the west coast of Africa carried kidnapped individuals to Louisiana; over 100,000 people were eventually sold as chattel to labor on land and in cities in Louisiana before the Emancipation Proclamation. "Explore the Dispersal of Enslaved Africans across the Atlantic World," *Slave Voyages*, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://slavevoyages.org/>.

“Moans are the utterance of choice when circumstances snatch words and prayers from bereft lips. As time went on, the moans from the slave ship’s cargo hold lost their human sound, for there is no bodily response that could assuage or comfort, no sound that could fully express the horror. If there were such a sound or expression adequate to the task, it would break the hearts of all who heard it.”

Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*²

“Sold down the river” expresses betrayal. It’s a casual expression signifying dismay when our friends or family members have not supported us as we expected. We rarely pause over its origins when we complain that life’s deck has been stacked against us. “Sold down the river” actually refers to this country’s shameful, shrouded but well-developed business of transporting enslaved people inland to plantations distant from the East Coast ports. The “inland slave trade,” as it had been called, flourished right up to the Civil War. The practice of selling kidnapped and enslaved persons down the river began in earnest in 1808 after the international community banned the transatlantic trade. Thus, breeding and transporting people for forced labor within the South became a lucrative industry in itself. It generated profits to salvage the declining fortunes of the Eastern Seaboard’s landed gentry. In the nineteenth century, New Orleans was one of the largest marketplaces for purchasing enslaved laborers.

The betrayal of being “sold down the river” captured the experience of Africans and their descendants in the Upper South of Virginia and Maryland. The threat of sale was psychological torture sometimes used as a threat to control unruly laborers, but tragically, it was too often a reality. Black people,

² Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 49–50.

enslaved or free, were ripped without warning from their families to be sold down the river. Some were kidnapped, others were traded by white families who owned them. All were sold to drivers whose only job was to move the human chattel to the marketplaces further west and further south. Whipped along a trail of tears out of Alexandria, Richmond, or Norfolk,³ they trudged in coffle lines, dozens of human beings chained by their legs and necks. Scarcely protected from cold and heat, they trekked mile after mile. Seeking the most profit possible, drivers force-marched men, women, and children across the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, across the song-celebrated Shenandoah River. People were shipped down the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers, to Deep South auction blocks. Louisville and Natchez were departure ports for flatbeds and steamboats bound for New Orleans with their human cargo. Researchers estimate that nearly a million enslaved laborers from Virginia and Maryland were driven further south and inland to enrich plantation owners during the agricultural boom and bust cycles of the nineteenth century. The height of the trade coincided with the settlement of the Louisiana Territory, land lust fueled by sparkling promises of wealth in the lawless infancy of global market economies and the rise of corporations. Even though northern states had abolished slavery, their factory towns flourished on the backs of crops produced by human chattel.

A bit further along the riverbank in New Orleans, I studied the tall bronze marker near the public sidewalk that tallied for tourists what had happened here. The marker for the “Transatlantic Slave Trade to Louisiana” recounted this history in a

³ Edward Ball, “Slavery’s Trail of Tears: Retracing America’s Forgotten Migration,” *Smithsonian* 46, no. 7 (November 2015): 58–83. For this moment, I also relied on Edward Baptist’s extensive research and rigorous analysis of the inland slave trade in the U.S. and the conditions of enslaved individuals’ lives in *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

single central icon emblazoned with the widely recognized Pan-African colors: yellow, red, and green. A canary-yellow circle surrounded a heart-shaped image of the sankofa bird. The bird twisted its head backward toward its tail, retrieving a precious egg. *Sankofa* from Ghanaian tribal languages translates to “go back and get it.” It symbolized that communities would be stronger when they retrieved and retained their ancestral values. The stylized bird was superimposed upon a dramatic red outline of Louisiana within the boundaries of Africa, the continent colored in vibrant green. The text below the icon related a few summary details of Louisiana’s participation in the transatlantic slave trade, recording the tribes, genders, and ages of the Africans who were carried to this port against their wills.

The concrete amphitheater beside the Moonwalk pedestrian path offered me on that morning a cool, sturdy seat where I could rest and remember the souls who had passed through here in shackles. My heart felt like the braided weeds I saw on the dismal mudbank as the waves tugged at their stems. I was restless as my mind snagged on thoughts that were too much to take in.

Sankofa. Do we treasure our past? I mused to myself when I considered sankofa wisdom in the context of U.S. culture. Mostly, it seemed to me that people in the United States value being unfettered and free from their past. They treasure being an individual who can progress unfettered into the future. Ideas of freedom have changed in this nation since its founding. Thoughts of escape and a brave new world of freedom sustained British Puritans crossing the ocean as they dreamed of creating a shining city on the hill. They framed their story as God’s deliverance from tyranny to liberty, an Exodus. At first reflection, Exodus seemed to be solely about emancipation, meaning to be free from the demands of overlords or monarchs. I knew that such a characterization of Exodus was too simple and pat. My faith understanding told me that Exodus was about fidelity—fidelity to relationships—much more than about being unfettered.

The Hebrew Scriptures' Exodus drama is not history, precisely (although archeological evidence of the rise and fall of ancient Semitic tribes at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea aligns with the timeline laid out in Exodus). Rather, the drama recounts the Israelites' exciting escape from Egypt. Jewish tradition celebrates the Exodus events through ritualized Passover practices to remember how Yahweh saved them and formed them into God's own people. The Israelites' bondage started centuries before their enslavement in Egypt prompted them to call upon God: "*Shema!* Listen to our calls and save us!" Speaking for God to the pharaoh, Moses demanded: "Let my people go!" The angel of God executed all firstborn males in Egypt but "passed over" the Israelites, who had marked their lintels with sacrificial blood. Escaping in the confusing aftermath of widespread death, Moses led the people across the Red Sea's windswept bed, while the pharaoh's army drowned behind them in the crashing waters. Following this dramatic liberation, the Israelites roamed for forty years through the Sinai desert wilderness before they reached the banks of the Jordan River. God provided daily manna, nightly quails, and rock-sourced water to sustain the tribes. God and the Israelites sealed the Torah covenant on Mount Sinai, which memorialized their mutual and everlasting commitment to full fidelity and trust.

I felt kinship with the Israelites, who wandered forty years through a liminal desert space to meet God. Forty is a holy God-quantity in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. With grace, deserts are paradigmatic settings where a person can wrestle with God and find transformation. In the Exodus desert adventure, God formed a collection of individuals from kin into covenanted community. In the long, holy pause between their enslaved past and their promised-land future, God and the Israelites pledged fidelity to each other: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Exod 6:7). The terms of the holy covenant became the Torah, the law that would govern the people's relationships. *Berit* is often translated from Hebrew into English as covenant or contract, but its literal meaning is

“shackle” or “chain.” The Ten Commandments dictated how the people would live bound together in covenant with God in the promised land. The commandments have been summarized throughout the centuries in two brief imperatives: love God and love your neighbor.

I was struck then by the essence of Exodus: Yahweh liberated Israel from slavery to the pharaoh so that they would be shackled to each other and to God’s own self: “Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you . . . in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut 8:2-3). The Torah was the ligature identity—the *re-ligio*—that bound them together, past, present, and future.

Musings on Exodus brought me back to sankofa wisdom. To be liberated is to be emancipated from constraints for a purpose. God liberated the Israelites so that they would live in a community grounded in justice for a shared future. This aligned with sankofa. Sankofa meant to me that we could not separate ourselves from our sisters and brothers or from our past, especially the human relationship binding us as one. Relationships with other people are the only possible foundation for our lives. The meanings of sankofa and Exodus came together in my mind.

I stirred myself from my reverie, ready to meet New Orleans. In the benign sunshine, the silent, ever-flowing water restored some calm to my searching thoughts. The deep brown river’s flow, gliding smoothly past, and the sparkling water itself seemed to offer a solemn tribute to the stolen lives and labor that built New Orleans and our nation. The great river’s steady flow carried the past pain out to sea in a holy ritual of cleansing.

Psalms 51 again voiced my repentant plea before God: “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, / and cleanse me from my sin. / For I know my transgressions; / my sin is ever before

me" (vv. 2-3). I understood that I needed to face the sin that still shackled our nation, the sin which has always been plainly before us. If I wanted to be a part of a community of faithful justice, I needed to face the full story of America's original sin and sift everything with the grace of sankofa wisdom.

Moment 2: The Past Is Present in New Orleans

I turned from the river to the city. My steps led me in this moment from the French Quarter past the auction-block marker of the slave exchange, past the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, and over to Congo Square. All around me, I glimpsed evidence of the country's dark history even in the bright morning sunshine. I tried to pay attention and absorb what I experienced. As well as I could, I practiced *Shema!* and attempted to follow God's command.

The French Quarter: The crowded sidewalks on both sides of the French Quarter's narrow streets overwhelmed me. Tourists wandered, stopping and starting unpredictably, and music congested the air. Along with my feet, my thoughts stumbled at every new crossing as I tried to decipher the past hidden beneath ornately reconstructed building facades. During the antebellum period, this neighborhood housed one of the highest concentrations of millionaires in the South. Perhaps I should not have been surprised at the magnitude of money in a slave-market city. Wealth and oppression go hand in hand; labor exploitation has so often been the mechanism by which governments secure extreme wealth for a privileged class of people.

Only a mile distant from the riverfront, the streets were awash—brimming—with racial and social complexity. The street names proclaimed New Orleans's French and Catholic lineage. St. Louis, St. Ann, and St. Peter Streets crossed the city, perpendicular to the Mississippi, from the river toward Tremé-Lafitte. Rampart Street and Barracks Street recorded the fortifications that once protected New Orleans from enemies storming up from the riverbank. Bourbon Street, named after

the French ruling family in the early eighteenth century, and Dumaine Street, for the illegitimate son of Louis XIV, proclaimed their former royal alliances. These names sounded stilted in my broad eastern-midwestern accent. My speech marked me as an outsider, which is how I felt. But a foreigner, a saunterer without a place in this world (*sans terre*), can make connections that might have eluded the residents, who are too accustomed to what has been.

Even when the young United States nation purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803, all shades of humanity destined for all walks of life mingled together in this delta city. The people who sauntered in the French Quarter were labeled according to the strains of their ancestry with terms like “quadroon,” “octoroon,” or simply “mulatto,” meaning mixed. Such color labels, based more on culture and custom than genetic reality, served to segment and calculate human value. The people who owned other human beings might have been of African or European descent, but for enslaved individuals the color of their skin mattered; it constrained them and condemned them. An expression like “high yellow,” still in use today, signaled the stigma of African descent while paradoxically elevating an individual’s light skin. Some people of color were able to “pass” as white, because onlookers judged them by their fair skin and European features. While passing might have seemed to be a good-luck chance, it was risky and always entailed heartbreaking alienation and isolation.

There was no such thing as being colorblind in New Orleans back in the day—or now, either. Societies have always drawn lines of social distinction. For example, in ancient Palestine, Jews drew a bright line between neighbor and Samaritan. The surprise of Jesus’ story about the good Samaritan is that a reviled stranger could act with more compassion and justice than one of the chosen people. In America, we look to people’s skin color to know where to place them on the hierarchy of caste and virtue. I remembered my three-year-old daughter’s first lesson on the importance of color. Her father went to pick her

up one day from nursery school. His skin and features had always been labeled Black, while hers were more ambiguous, with her light tan skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. That afternoon, she stood behind her teacher in the classroom doorway, clamoring for notice: "My dad is here! He's right there!" Even though her father was the only parent in the lobby, wearing his suit and tie from the office, the teacher wouldn't release his own daughter into his care. "There's no one there, honey," the teacher reprimanded our tearful child. In America, past and present, to be Black has meant to be invisible; it has meant that a person does not count.

"I'm mixed with the bravery of a soldier and the passion of activists. I'm mixed with the rage of a victim and the hope of a survivor. I'm mixed with the brilliance of a polymath and the swag of a 'hood boy. I'm mixed with the past and present and my future is as bright as my skin. I'm mixed, because I'm both spiritual and human and my life is both joyous and challenging. . . . What am I mixed with you ask? I'm mixed with great thought and measured action, which is helping to create a world where one day people will ask 'How are you doing?' before asking 'What are you mixed with?'"

Christopher Norris,
"The Question I'm Often Asked as a 'High Yellow' Black Man"⁴

Aware of this as I toured the French Quarter, I watched for the nineteenth-century contributions of enslaved Africans and their descendants, contributions that might otherwise have been invisible. The French Quarter has traded on the tangled beauty of its wrought iron decorations, evident everywhere.

⁴ Christopher Norris, "The Question I'm Often Asked as a 'High Yellow' Black Man," *The Good Men Project*, 2021, <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/cnorris-the-question-im-often-asked-as-a-high-yellow-black-man/>.

I appreciated the iron gates and fences that adorned the St. Louis Cathedral. The graceful church occupied a place of pride in the neighborhood because its triple spires were visible above the rooftops. Rebuilt at the end of the eighteenth century after a devastating fire, the cathedral claimed to be the oldest in North America. On the morning I visited, its white sun-sparkling facade was set off against manicured lawns and tall lampposts, segmenting a delicate, black iron fence. Elsewhere in the Quarter, above pedestrians' heads, a parade of balconies also flaunted elegant wrought iron railings.

West African blacksmiths, either free or enslaved, had forged iron into ornate scrolls, with webs of filigree and complicated flourishes. Many blacksmiths had their signature motifs, such as acorns, oak leaves, or intertwined vines, still on display centuries later, though now refurbished with brightly painted colors. Architectural historians read dramas from the balconies' designs, finding the initials of the families who had lived there and indications of whether there were marriageable daughters in the house. Some designs subtly proclaimed resistance to white-dominated society with rebellious meanings hidden in an artisan's tribal symbols. However, historical markers rarely acknowledged the enslaved craftsmen whose pounding labor created the city's unparalleled grandeur. I also remembered, as I resumed my sauntering, that blacksmithing skills produced shackles and leg-irons as well as delicate iron filigree.

St. Louis Hotel: Moving inland from the river, like a gawking tourist rather than a wisdom-seeking pilgrim, I photographed the marker identifying the St. Louis Hotel. The hotel had hosted one of the largest and most well-known auction blocks in the United States, the end of the line for the coffle-chained gangs sold down the river. Other markers in New Orleans recounted that captives awaiting sale had been penned in "Negro yards" all over the city. They were forced to display themselves in the stockade lots in a devilish mimicry of a liturgical procession. Beatings and threats had forced them to participate in their own sale, by greasing their skins, demon-

strating their agility, or exaggerating their skills. I nearly overlooked the fading sign of the New Orleans Exchange on the outside wall of the Omni Royale Orleans Hotel near the parking garage. All that remained visible on the wall was the half-word “CHANGE” to mark the anguish that had hung in that place here two hundred years ago.

In color drawings of the time, now preserved, the hotel’s soaring rotunda was depicted as uplifting, light filled, and gracious. One drawing I examined showed bound, naked, and desperate dark-skinned women and men under the dome. On the periphery, neck-ruffled white people drank tea, ironically unruffled by the human trauma in their midst.⁵ Advertisements from the period contributed chilling details about auction practices. One notice from March 1858 described eight people for sale from Alabama by name, age, coloring, skills, and defects, such as burns or lost fingers. A whole family was listed: George, 23, “carriage driver, very likely and intelligent”; his wife Martha, 30, a cook and laundress; and their four children, Ned—7, Nancy—6, Horace—4, and Mary—18 months.⁶ “Very likely” meant tractable, obedient. Enslaved people were valued according to how much labor could be extracted from their limbs. Individuals in the prime of life were most valuable. The price for men was greater than for women. Women, however, could be bred to produce children, adding to an enslaver’s wealth through more field hands or as inventory for sale. Laborers who were scarred by whip strokes or rebellion brands commanded a lesser price because they were obviously difficult to control. Field hands were less valuable than domestic servants with cooking or housekeeping skills. Captive men and women with rarer expertise in sugar-making, carpentry,

⁵ Brett Todd, Kate Mason, and Kathryn O’Dwyer, eds., “St. Louis Hotel & Exchange: Auctioning Off Lives,” *New Orleans Historical*, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://neworleanshistorical.org/items/show/926>.

⁶ “Slave Sale Advertisement,” 1858, *New Orleans Historical*, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://neworleanshistorical.org/items/show/1370>.

cooperage, and tailoring commanded commensurately higher prices.

In encountering tales of the auction blocks in New Orleans, I heard a phrase that made me shudder. At that time, just as now, women and Black people had been subjugated, considered suitable to be dominated and used as white men's property. The New Orleans slaveholding society perceived Black women's bodies in particular as property for white men's sexual satisfaction. Attractive "Negro women" of fair complexion were in demand as concubines and prostitutes in New Orleans brothels. White men bought and sold the women as "fancy girls." The phrase struck a nerve, pointing to a connection that I hardly dared to acknowledge. "Fancy girls" was the nickname our daughters gave themselves when they played dress-up years ago. "Mom, you're so lucky to have us—your fancy girls!" Had we lived two hundred years ago in New Orleans, our daughters would have most likely faced a life of satisfying white men's sexual desires simply because of their African heritage. They might have been fancy girls.

Congo Square: From the horrors of the auction blocks, I paced somberly toward Congo Square. The autumn afternoon was bright, but the still-lush fall canopy offered me shade for solace and sanctuary from the Quarter's hive of activity. The Tremé-Lafitte neighborhood surrounded the park. It had once been sacred Houma Indian land before becoming a plantation that produced food for city dwellers in the late 1700s. Tremé-Lafitte of centuries past had sheltered individuals of color of all statuses: free people, those enslaved to white or mulatto city residents, and Africans recently disembarked. Narrow shotgun-style houses with Caribbean and African architectural details still dotted its streets. The Tomb of the Unknown Slave beside St. Augustine Church had anchored this mixed-ancestry neighborhood since the nineteenth century.⁷ The monument's cross

⁷ Christina Lawrence, "St. Augustine Catholic Church," *New Orleans Historical*, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://neworleanshistorical.org/items/show/551>.

of rusting iron chains honored slaves whose deaths (from violence, overwork, or age) had been unmarked and unremarked. The sacred soil here absorbed the blood and tears of human beings too long deemed expendable. As I passed, I prayed silently for absolution and a path to forgiveness so that our sinning nation could return to God's embrace. I knew our nation's sins would not be easily expiated.

“On this October 30, 2004, we, the Faith Community of St. Augustine Catholic Church, dedicate this shrine consisting of grave crosses, chains and shackles to the memory of the nameless, faceless, turfless Africans who met an untimely death in Faubourg Treme. . . . This St. Augustine/Treme shrine honors all slaves buried throughout the United States and those slaves in particular who lie beneath the ground of Treme, in unmarked, unknown graves. . . . The Church sits astride the blood, sweat, tears and some of the mortal remains of unknown slaves from Africa and local American Indian slaves. . . . The Tomb of the Unknown Slave is a constant reminder that we are walking on holy ground.”

Excerpts from the public marker at the Tomb of the Unknown Slave

In Congo Square that afternoon, a few people milled around, strolling and chatting, persons of all descriptions and many accents. Bronze statues and contemporary art installments were situated along the walkways memorializing Louis Armstrong Park's vibrant musical and cultural history. In the mid-eighteenth century, however, hundreds of free and enslaved Africans would have gathered here at *Place des Nègres*. Even then, the unrelenting colorism of racial caste had shackled every moment of people's lives: Africans had gathered in *Place des Nègres*, but Afro-Creoles (those of African descent born in the United States) and “American slaves” from the Upper South were permitted to congregate at other public venues in the city, even in mixed-race ballrooms. The Africans who gathered

at Congo Square hailed from Senegambia, a region along the African continent's western coast, although they claimed diverse tribal ancestries with different languages. Their shared experience as strangers kidnapped to a strange land offered a path toward community, a possibility of human companionship and acceptance in dark days.

Finding temporary freedom from white gazes, people gathered on the grassy field of *Place des Nègres* on Sundays—the only day granted for leisure under Louisiana's *Code Noir* ("Black Code"). The Congo Square community traded produce and household goods. People shared stories and embraced loved ones. Historical descriptions of the meadow have inevitably remarked upon the drumming and dancing circles that happened here. Drumming and dancing had a sacred cosmological significance for uprooted West Africans. Ritual drumming in community "draws the listener toward the sacred realm within and without. In the drum rhythms, ancestors hear and remember their responsibilities to the living; the living hear the beating heart of the ongoing universe and re-order their priorities so that their life energy is attuned to the pulse of life."⁸ Drumming and dancing were salvation practices. On the transatlantic passage, the captives were forced to dance on the ship decks in a perversion of their past lives. Drummers beat out rhythms of remembrance and resistance. Dancers stepped in time, using their bodies to communicate lament and suffering that were deeper than words could express. Drumming was never about entertainment for Africans caught in the inhuman business of chattel slavery. In the presence of ancestors and ancestral gods, they forged fragile human bonds that kept their bodies and spirits alive for just another moment.

Scenes of the French Quarter and Congo Square, past and present, showed me the many ruses white people have used to erase the sin of chattel slavery from the story of our country's

⁸ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 38.

history. A veneer of new place names, refurbished balconies, and modernized ports might sometimes obscure a region's past. But New Orleans of the nineteenth century had been a society founded on enslaved labor, no matter what moments of relief or beauty its streets offered me two hundred years later. America's original sin was still present.

The next shrine—unholy shrine—on my pilgrim's path was a sugarcane plantation just north of New Orleans, up the river. *Shema!* Walk with me.

Moment 3: Raising Cane

Of all the moments on this pilgrimage, the Whitney Plantation Museum represented for me a place and time nearly beyond the reach of even God's grace. In that moment, I met the memories of men, women, and children who had been fettered on the land raising cane in Louisiana a century and a half ago.

Plantations in the Louisiana Territory grew cane, indigo, and cotton as the most lucrative crops of the antebellum South.⁹

⁹ Slavery was essential for the United States to achieve the economic, political, and social world dominance that our country enjoys today. It was a tragic "perfect storm" that birthed chattel slavery. Sugar cane cultivation arrived in Europe at the dawn of the modern era, coinciding with the age of transoceanic exploration. Once a luxury spice, sugar became a staple sweetener, and its value accelerated with international trade in tea, coffee, and chocolate. Limited liability corporations were ingenious financial and legal devices engineered to distribute cost and risk for far-flung ventures. The last necessary condition for the rise of chattel slavery was the appropriation of sparsely populated and easily conquered lands in the Western Hemisphere. Modern banking transactions, such as letters of credit, insurance, and mortgages, were developed to secure investors against the financial risk of selling perishable property in distant places on uncertain dates. In the United States, wealthy landowners in the southern states and factory owners in the northern states prospered handsomely from the plantation economy that emerged at this time in global history. European nations also profited richly from the plantation economies around the globe. See, generally, Ball, "Slavery's Trail of Tears"; Baptist, *Half Has Never Been Told*; and Christina Proenza-Coles, *American Founders: How People of African Descent Established Freedom in the New World* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2019).

Sugar cultivation became profitable in the late 1700s with the development of varieties that could be planted in early spring in temperate climates for a December harvest. The emergence of new varieties coincided fortuitously with the United States' purchase of the massive Louisiana Territory. The federal government offered land grants in the territory for plantation farms, which tempted all types of investors, farmers, and adventurers to seek their fortune by heading west and south. Most new plantation owners were white, some were free people of color, but all were demonically possessed with the prospect of getting rich from land and enslaved labor.

The Whitney Plantation Museum's mission today was to tell the story of plantation life from the perspective of enslaved individuals. The Haydel family owned the Whitney plantation for a century before the Civil War. Typically, as it was with Whitney, plantation acreage was laid out in a grid with narrow frontage along the Mississippi River and deep parcels stretching into swamps and bayous. River access reduced the costs of shipping sugar and cotton to market. Whitney's main approach when I visited was no longer the shaded, gracious oak-lined drive leading to the slaveholders' "big house"; instead, a simple gravel drive led to the back fields. As a ticketed visitor, I received a lanyard displaying the image of a bronze-cast statue honoring one of the "Children of the Whitney" that told of the child's life in the child's own words. The brief biographies, like the one of Frances on my lanyard, were culled from a Depression-era WPA oral history project that interviewed men, women, and children who had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. As I read Frances's story, the docent emphasized that "slaves" had not lived at Whitney, but *people* had been captured, traded, or bred for conscripted labor on this land. Slavery was their condition, not their identity.

The docent shared that more than twenty-five hundred individuals of all ages were enslaved at Whitney in the decades before the Civil War. Some were born on the estate, but a large percentage walked northward in shackles after being pur-

chased at auction in New Orleans. To prosper, the plantation economy needed a continuous river of human labor because sugar cultivation was grueling. The laborers' lives were always precarious, sometimes only lasting four or five years, as they were forced to bring the plantation owners' sugar crop to market. Nevertheless, owners were able to cover the purchase price of each human laborer in that brief time because the labor was uncompensated—stolen. Often the overseers and slave drivers were themselves held captive and were forced to perform their brutal responsibilities. Their job was to manage the sugar production cycle by any means necessary.

“Saving up riches without regard for the other
We see it in the Gospels
We saw it on plantations
We saw it in lynchings
We saw it in the response to the Civil Rights Movement
We see it today
Monetary riches
Material riches
Emotional riches
Social riches
Awash in the blood of Black bodies”

Ellen Jewett, “Yet the Last Are Still Last”¹⁰

Sugar production began in early spring during bent-over weeks when field hands planted thick cane stalks in shallow furrows, acre by acre. After the young plants sprouted, the enslaved laborers had to fertilize the fields and keep them weed- and pest-free. Under the overseer's exacting eye, men and women harvested cane by machete just before the late fall

¹⁰ Ellen Jewett, “Yet the Last Are Still Last,” *New Horizons* 5, no. 1, art. 12 (2021). Used by permission.

frosts. Next, the most dangerous process began: to convert the cane-stalk bounty into granules of sugar before the crop rotted. Laborers stripped the razor-like leaves from each stalk, then chopped and pressed the stalks to extract the juice prize. Around-the-clock processing required every available worker to stir the boiling syrup until the moisture was released and the sweet remainder was packaged into hogshead barrels. The weathered iron cauldrons, with fierce fires below and scalding syrup within, were only one of the life-threatening menaces for adults and children laboring day and night to produce sugar.

It's little wonder that the enslaved workers at Whitney often died within a few years. The list of physical threats was horrifyingly long: shackle infections and lead poisoning, burns from syrup processing, infected skin wounds from sharp cane leaves or harvesting tools, mosquito-borne diseases, starvation, flogging, childbirth, and exhaustion. Rape and forced impregnation were for women common facts of life, often followed by the heartbreaking grief of their captors and rapists stealing their infants. Terror, grief, and desperation compounded individuals' bodily suffering—human beings died here because it was just too hard to live.

As I gazed upon the sugar fields, swatting bugs from my neck, an unnerving insight flashed in my mind: all of this human violence, all of this suffering, was greed driven. And then, another realization sent me reeling—my own story was closely connected to the story of sugarcane. My father grew up in his grandfather's house. He was a grandchild only three years younger than his aunt, treated like a son and a sibling. Many times, I had shared my family story by fitting it into the typical American Dream template. I recounted that my father was the first in his family to go to college. He married young, was a veteran, went to law school, and alongside his Catholic wife, raised nine healthy children. Not exactly rags to riches, but still it was a story of success based on hard work. I had thought that southern labor exploitation was not part of my story because my parents were New Yorkers.

I have learned that every American is shackled to chattel slavery in some way. All of us. Some of us, though, are closer than others. My Irish great-grandfather—my father's grandfather—was a sugar broker on Wall Street in the 1930s. He commuted into New York City on the Long Island Railroad from his spacious brick house in Rockville Centre. As a sugar broker, he facilitated market transactions between sugar growers in the South and the refineries and food producers in the North. In that period, impoverished, land-shackled Black sharecroppers labored in the cane fields across Louisiana and other southern states. Brutal work conditions prevailed, while pervasive poverty crippled their families. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies, a safety net for white Americans after the war, provided no protection for them. They were excluded from Social Security, worked without minimum wages or union protections, and were subjected to Jim Crow terrors. Because my great-grandfather's safe and settled life relied on exploited labor, our family story was not the unadulterated proof of the American Dream that I thought it was. It was a story of working hard, but it also exemplified how white advancement rides on the backs of people of color, regardless of whether we know it or choose it. All of us in this nation, across the rainbow of skin colors, are completely bound up—shackled—by America's original sin.

That wasn't the end of Whitney's store of suffering and sorrow. At the far end of the property, there were two sacred memorials. First, I came to the Field of Angels, which memorialized the brief lives of over twenty-two hundred infants who had died in slavery in Louisiana before reaching their third birthdays. In the whisper of a breeze, I could sense a deep, keening anguish that rustled the trees around me. It was weighted with the unassuageable grief of the mothers whose babies had died without ever breathing freedom or tasting security. Though stunned at the immensity of the grief, I followed the docent's directions to find on the surrounding wall a child who shared my birthday or name. I located the names of two infants who, like me, were born in early May. I paused

for a moment on the tree-shaded benches next to other visitors, overcome with heartbreak and unspeakable sorrow. Within the encircling walls, on the simple center platform, a bronze angel gently cradled a small child, tenderly gazing into its still face. The loss of life and loss of hope recollected here were beyond comprehension.

Then I tiptoed to the Wall of Honor across the lane. Reading the dark granite walls etched with hundreds of individual names added bone-deep shame to my somber recollections. The engravings simply recorded people's places of origin, birthdates (if known), occupations, and ages at the time of their deaths. The docent instructed us to read the names aloud: "Say their names." I did, and I also sampled the short quotes and vignettes recorded on the wall, details taken from the oral history project. One woman's life became etched in my memory. She said: "I hate that man with every fiber of my being. How could he sell his own daughter into slavery? He stole my mother from me!" Her meaning dawned on me, and I was revolted: the man was her grandfather, her father, and her owner. He was her mother's rapist, and the heartless brute who had separated the daughter and her mother from each other. I thought of Barbara Holmes's description of the captives' moans: the sound "would break the heart of all who heard it."¹¹

I continued slowly down the avenues, whispering the names of as many individuals as I could to honor their humanity. In the grave silence, under the crystal sunshine, the monuments cried out: "*Shema!* Pay attention! Do something!"

Before visiting Whitney, I had been able to distance myself from the horror of plantation labor by picturing the victims according to their enslaved status or people caught in a tragic system that had been consigned to history. However, Whitney's spruced-up green grounds and tranquility could not mask the

¹¹ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 50.

unfathomable suffering and brutality that the plantation's sun-drenched cane fields had witnessed. The sacred ground now cradled the bones and blood of human beings worked to death to produce wealth for the people who enslaved them. Later, Black sharecroppers produced crops for white-owned factories and anyone else in the sugar production process, from field to table, who stole their labor. The crimes in this small pocket of Louisiana multiplied by the millions of human beings enslaved in this country and across the American continents stunned my spirit. Now, I could not "unsee" what I had seen.

I completed writing about these recollections of America's original sin on display at Whitney during Holy Week in spring 2021. The horror and heartbreak that enveloped me in the cane fields of Louisiana merged into Good Friday's dirge: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" In this moment, there was no looking away.

Moment 4: Raising Cain

From the Louisiana cane fields, I traveled next to the Woodland Plantation "Cain-raising" of 1811. The play of words *cane* and *Cain* was irresistible for me, but captives' rebellions were deadly serious. Coined in nineteenth-century America, "raising Cain" described any unruliness and rioting that challenged the public order. To raise Cain was to cause trouble, to conjure the devil from hell, or to raise hell. In Genesis, Adam and Eve's son Cain killed his brother Abel in a fit of jealousy. In the New Testament, the civil and religious authorities crucified Jesus for rebelling against the status quo. Christ's resurrection continues to be the Cain-raising, world-disrupting event central to the meaning of Christianity. In this moment, I thought mostly about Christ's rebellious ministry, which was good trouble meant to instigate God's order of justice. Christ's ministry was the kind of turbulent but good trouble that Congressman John

Lewis counseled.¹² The 1811 German Coast Rebellion was the good, disruptive trouble that men and women captured on plantations raised to secure justice. It was also deadly serious trouble.

In this “raising Cain” moment, I pondered the skipped-over story of Black people enslaved on a Louisiana plantation who, in 1811, fought to the death for their freedom and for the emancipation of their fellow captives. Not infrequently, individuals escaped from plantation captivity. They took refuge in the swamps at the back edges of the fields. Colonies of escaped men and women, named *maroons*, from the French word for “untamable,” lived in constant danger on the run. Snakes and animals just as much as slave catchers threatened their lives. The Code Noir punished escapees with branding for the first offense and maiming or death for repeat offenses.¹³ Enslaved laborers caught congregating together or possessing weapons were branded, whipped, hobbled, or executed. Free Blacks as well as whites faced fines, enslavement, or imprisonment for assisting Black fugitives. Some rebels heroically made their way to free states in the North or to Canada to avoid recapture. The Fugitive Slave Law was one of many legal and extralegal techniques this nation used to suppress revolts and escapes, for it meant individuals who escaped from captivity were not safe from recapture anywhere in the United States.

¹² Representative John Lewis’s statement on March 1, 2020, on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, commemorating Bloody Sunday of 1965 has been widely referenced in academic and popular discussions: “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and redeem the soul of America.” Rashawn Ray, “Five Things John Lewis Taught Us about Getting in ‘Good Trouble,’” July 23, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2020/07/23/five-things-john-lewis-taught-us-about-getting-in-good-trouble/>.

¹³ Cyprian Davis and Jamie Phelps, eds., “Stamped with the Image of God,” in *African Americans as God’s Image in Black* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 6–12.

The 1811 uprising was one of the most significant rebellions before the Civil War. I located the fading marker commemorating the Woodland Plantation “Cain-raising” beside West Airline Highway in Laplace, Louisiana. It was hidden behind traffic stanchions, utility poles, billboards, microwave towers, shimmering asphalt, and endless streams of cars.¹⁴ Its obscure location symbolized for me how white America too often neglects to commemorate Black heroes who fought for their own emancipation against the tyranny of chattel slavery.

The 1811 battles occurred during a few days in early January. Mixed-race Afro-Haitian Charles Deslondes was singled out as the instigator of the rebellion, mostly discovered through the tortured confessions of other participants. Deslondes was a slave driver on the Andry family plantation, not far from Whitney. Only a few facts have been confirmed for certain, while there has been a great deal of historical speculation filling in the uprising’s details. One cold night, several hundred domestic and field laborers slipped away into hush-darkened woods and gullies adjacent to the cane fields. They armed themselves with the only available weapons: sharp or heavy farm tools, sticks, and rocks. The fugitives’ strategy was to kill the families who imprisoned them, burn buildings, set fire to fields, and free other captives along a downriver march to New Orleans. They hoped their numbers and decisive actions would forestall government troops just long enough to free all of the enslaved people in the region. Unfortunately, swiftly spreading news of the rebellion prompted the United States Army to march north along the river, routing the uprising in a few short days. The army rounded up at least 130 rebels. Deslondes and dozens of other leaders were convicted as instigators, gruesomely tortured, and then executed. The army impaled their

¹⁴ Courtney Short and Clio Admin, “Historical Marker for the Location of the German Coast Slave Revolt of 1811,” *Clio: Your Guide to History*, December 10, 2017, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://theclio.com/entry/46715>.

heads and left them to rot on spikes along the River Road. This routine vengeance both punished perpetrators and terrorized others who might have fought for freedom.¹⁵

I remembered that the Whitney Plantation, just down the way, had memorialized the Black rebels in a small parcel of ground at the edge of the property. In my recollection, I linked the ceramic installation of fifty-five Black men's heads impaled on silver spikes with the *Raise Up* sculpture by Hank Willis Thomas at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (which I would visit in Montgomery in the week ahead). The lifelike visages of the heroes stopped me in my tracks, with realistic details of blood and anguish alive again. This was what American justice had looked like two hundred years ago: Black people slaughtered and displayed as a warning when they fought for the freedoms their nation had promised them.

It chilled me to the bone and threatened me, even across the centuries, to think of how the rebellion was squelched. The army's retribution upon the Black freedom fighters was nothing less than lynching. Terror and intimidation were the cruel goals of domination through agonizing violence. Lynching, even by military and law enforcement officers, even in times so different from contemporary moral sensibilities, violated basic principles of human decency. The governmental authorities

¹⁵ Another rebellion rarely mentioned is the successful Haitian revolution from 1791 to 1804, which established Haiti as the first Black democracy in the world. The enslaved descendants of Africans won their freedom from France, one of the greatest military powers of the era, but Haitians have been paying a dear price for freedom for two hundred years. In the aftermath of the Haitian war for democracy, white-led nations, including the United States and Europe nations, embargoed Haiti; France demanded reparations for the land and labor the rebels had reclaimed; and the new democracy endured deep civil unrest for a long time afterward. Within the U.S., "Remember Haiti!" was a cautionary tale and a white rallying cry to crush all Black expressions of independence fiercely and decisively. The international response to Haitian independence to this day has been an economic and political lynching that punishes proud Haitians and denies the nation full partnership on the global stage. See, generally, Proenza-Coles, *American Founders*, 115–19.

chose torture, beheading, and public displays of the defeated rebels precisely to intimidate other captives. By executing victims in the most brutal way possible, they obliterated any lingering resistance harbored in onlookers' hearts. Domination through raw and violent power has been routinely used to enforce the color line and the racial caste system at the foundation of American society. Lynching has taken many forms, but it has always sought to destroy the prophets of justice, prophets by their words and deeds. I was staggered thinking that the response of our "equal justice for all" Christian nation and culture has been to lynch the justice seekers rather than to punish their enslavers.

So, taking a lesson from the Whitney docent, I have tried to shift my language in order to shift my understanding. The German Coast dissidents challenged state-sanctioned captivity as a fundamental denial of their freedom. Deslonde was a patriot. He gathered freedom fighters who sacrificed their lives to defeat the worst tyranny of their times. They took heroic measures to defend their lives and their families' well-being. Just like the 1776 patriots, the German Coast fighters were pro-democracy protesters, dissidents who challenged governmental oppression. The fact that they lost the 1811 battle for emancipation did not diminish their heroism. The battle was just one moment in a long but successful war—the Civil War—that abolished slavery. Like the founders who signed the Declaration of Independence, the 1811 revolutionaries fought for liberty and justice for all. Two hundred years after Deslonde's heroism, I recognized the German Coast rebellion as a prophetic "Cain-raising" moment of justice on the move.

As I turned back to New Orleans, I made one more inspired connection. I retold the 1811 story in terms of Jesus—a salvation-focused "God is with us" story. The surreptitious encounters and whispers of 1811 were like the Jewish peasants in Palestine wondering if Jesus of Nazareth was God's Messiah. The brace of individuals joining the rebellion's downriver march toward New Orleans reenacted Jesus' triumphant entry

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