Erecting Death Shrines/Memorials: Unified Sympathetic Faith Responses, Gunning for Empathy and Compassion in the Second Amendment Debates

by Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, S.S.N.D.

In this article, I discuss the ordinariness of death shrines/memorials erected in the city of Milwaukee after gun violent homicides. Not surprisingly, one also finds shrines within the confines of children's playgrounds or even near children's daycare centers. Primarily my intention is to raise concerns about what more needs to be done to redress the issue of gun violent homicides.

To that end, this article contains four parts: 1) introductory remarks about my research on this topic; 2) a brief overview of the debates surrounding the Second Amendment, including other questions and thoughts raised regarding its historical context; 3) a discussion on the artifacts and symbol system that are contained in the shrines and an examination of this in relationship to black spirituality and the black spirituals and lament, which I offer are the sources to be used for the prophetic voices and political imagination; and 4) suggestions as to where do we go from here as we act more empathetically and compassionately.

I strongly believe that it is time for some fresh Catholic theological ethical reflection about the spontaneous erection of death shrines/memorials in predominately African American and Latin@ communities as a result of gun violent homicides. There remains too much silence around this issue among Church officials in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. It is not enough that these death shrines/memorials are erected after gun violent homicides as a sympathetic or even a frozen intellectual, emotional, or spiritual catharsis to tragic loss and grief. Empathy and compassion are also important as we draw on sources from the black experience and culture that speak to the spiritual, social, and political healing and transformation essential to redressing this ethical issue. Those sources include black spirituality and black spirituals. Black spirituals, for example, tend to contain the language of lament that speaks to empathy and compassion. The language of lament was also the language of the enslaved African and African Americans as they worked their way toward freedom from

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1 This silence around gun violent homicides in Milwaukee by Catholic Church officials is merely one observation among numerous others. For years, Catholic moral theologian Bryan Massingale and systematic theologians M. Shawn Copeland and Diana Hayes have written, taught, and lectured on the Church’s grand silence when it comes to white supremacy and black human life. Protestant systematic theologian James C. Cone draws on reasons for this silence as found in his reflections on systematic theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. See Cone’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012), 30-64.
social injustices and unnecessary deaths. It is the language undergirding prophetic voices\(^2\) and political imagination.\(^3\)

For our purposes, *sympathy* means “to suffer with” or the acknowledgement of another’s emotional hardship and providing comfort and assurance.\(^4\) *Empathy* takes sympathy to another level of relationship. Empathy means “suffering inside” with “the ability to do something concrete and hopefully positive to help alleviate the pain and suffering of another.”\(^5\) It is the bridge to compassion,\(^6\) where compassion, too, requires one to “act beyond the limits of what is considered reasonable and acceptable.”\(^7\) For example, radical and creative prophetic voices are empathetic and compassionate advocates who act to redress the brutality and dehumanization resulting from gun violence. These advocates are essential to social and political action as they focus on monitoring and rectifying the problems driving gun violent homicides, such as *no* commonsense gun control laws, the ethical implications of the thoughtless uses of guns, the history undergirding the Second Amendment, the cycle of oppression-internalized oppression,\(^8\) among others.

Mass shootings continue to haunt our nation, the most recent one, as of the writing of this article, being in Isla Vista, California, near Santa Barbara, by college student Elliot Rogers. Yet, I am also very much aware of the nationwide concerns surrounding perpetually gun violent homicides in inner cities that occur multiple times in a twenty-four hour period of time. I live in the city of Milwaukee in a zip code area where gun violent homicides are all too common.\(^9\) Nightly, sirens and horns from ambulances, police cars, and fire trucks reverberate past my residence on a major thoroughfare, stemming from the cascade of bullets fired and human life senselessly injured and/or destroyed. Yellow tape borders the crime scene, white chalk outlines the dead body, red blood is spattered on the ground, bullets are lodged in the victim's body, and stray bullet holes are found in buildings, cars, trees, windows, and at times innocent bystanders. 

Driving past several death shrines on my way to work one day in May 2013, I became very distracted by death shrines/memorials that seemed to be increasing in number daily.\(^10\) I parked at the roadside to further explore these shrines that had been erected to honor victims of gun violent homicides. The following day, I photographed the artifacts enclosed in the shrines while also making note of the places where these shrines were located. This information would assist me in locating the background story associated with the memorials, including demographic information on the victims of the homicides, and what sparked the shooting episodes in the first place. Sometimes

\(^2\) For example, black spirituals and black spirituality that include lament reveals resurrection hope and happiness, that healing and transformation is about to come. That there will be no more sorrow, no more weeping, and joy will come in the morning. See Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 104-108 and Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 49-51.

\(^3\) Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 131. “Having said that worship features our humanly constructed acts of imagination designed to advocate a perspective, we inescapably must ask if it is all 'made up,' for the term 'imagination' is a tricky one. But of course in the community of faith, to 'imagine' does not mean to 'make up.' It means, rather, to receive, entertain, and host images of reality that are outside the accepted given.” The artifacts that act as symbols in the death shrines/memorials are those objects outside the accepted given that point to political imagination as the community of faith gathers to pray about, reflect on, and grieve the loss of loved ones who died as a result of gun violence.


\(^7\) Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 115.

\(^8\) For more information on how this dynamic cycle of oppressor—internalized oppression works, please see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Press, 1994).


\(^10\) It is important to note that death shrines/memorials are also erected for those who might have been killed in car accidents, stabbed, hit by a moving vehicle, and/or died of unknown causes on the street. This paper strictly focuses on the death shrines/memorials erected after gun violent homicides.
grieving friends and family members were present at the site; I would start a conversation with them just by asking “what happened here?” Helpful information was freely shared.

At other times, I found myself right in the middle of the actual ritual building of the death shrines, where multiple expressions of grief were palpable. Intrigued by how the larger media networks captured the overwhelming amounts of sorrow displayed at these sites, I often wondered how these networks could help stop the epidemic of gun violence in the city instead of just showing up to do what it appears to be an exploitation of the deep sorrow expressed.

Nevertheless collective responses to the pain, suffering, and death of African American and Latin@ men, women, and children at these homicide sites create vivid pictures of what one could characterize as merely a unified sympathetic faith response to the disillusioning experiences of human indignity, suffering, and death. Here the community gathers to express their grief for a loved one that has died tragically. Here the community uses artifacts or symbols to touch into this notion of political imagination as a way to bear witness in protest to the pain and social injustice resulting from gun violent homicides. Hebrew Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann, for example, offers that the task of political imagination

…brings to public expression those very fears and terrors that have been denied so long and repressed so deeply that we do not know that they are there. The public expression of fear and terror, of course, requires not analytic speech and not the language of coercion but the language of metaphor, so that the expression can be touched in at many points by different people.11

Hence, when the makeshift monuments and public ritual have been completed, it is no surprise that a similar ritual commences soon. This type of protest bears public witness to the pain that the community experiences from the loss of a loved one(s). This loved one, a social being, created in the image and likeness of God, had a fundamental right to dignity and respect no matter what.

The city of Milwaukee homicide data collected and analyzed for the year 2013 totaled 115, including African American and Latin@ males and females between the ages of 5 and 50.12 However, the scenario of gun violent homicides in Milwaukee is repeatedly played out in the public square, polarizing debates on the Second Amendment persist as well. What deeper hidden questions need to be pondered about this amendment’s historical context?

The Second Amendment

The right to possess firearms by some private citizens has existed in the United State since its adoption on December 15, 1791. The Second Amendment states that “a well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”13 Given the culture, consciousness, and context for when this amendment was ratified, historian Edmund S. Morgan in his book American Slavery American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia14 hints at some of the thinking behind the Second Amendment, as his work generates these questions for me.15 Why does the US Constitution guarantee “a right to keep and bear arms?” Who would have had constitutional rights or were considered free citizens in the first place during the time that this amendment was ratified? Why was it so important to secure a free state against well-regulated militias? Is it

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11 Brueggemann, Political Imagination, 50.
15 These questions raised would need further research and examination in a different research paper as they relate to gun violent homicides.
possible that the militias could have included huge numbers of Africans and Native Americans against those in the white privileged establishment who were afraid of insurrections and to repel invasions by them?

In responding to the last question, it might be best answered through reflections on Article I, section 8 of the Constitution and the Second Amendment of the Bill of Rights. It reads,

Congress is granted the power to raise and support an army (8.12); provide and maintain a navy (8.13); call forth the militia to execute the laws of the Union; call forth the militia to execute the laws of the unions, suppress insurrections, and repel invasions…  

Essentially, one can extrapolate from this constitutional amendment and from Edmund Morgan's work that the constitutional sanctioning of the right to bear arms was not only to provide and maintain armed forces, etc., but it was also to prevent slaves and Native Americans from leveraging insurrections against white people. This statement also links Ta-Nehisi Coates' claims that white supremacy is foundational to the history of the United States of America. In essence, his claim does not exclude the historical fact that those entrenched in a white supremacist worldview could have access to and/or own guns, which meant that only unarmed people--African Americans and Native Americans--could not be armed and, thus, easier to control. Armed citizens can ultimately enforce oppression and submission on another.

No doubt, history records show that since their arrival in the U.S. in 1619, African Americans were banned from having access to guns.

Legislation called upon every able bodied white citizen to be a member of his state militia and possess a rifle, bayonet, and ammunition if called upon for service. This effectively banned African Americans from service in the militias…Throughout the early period of the twentieth century, guns continued to be concentrated in the hands of white citizens…Throughout the twenty-first century African Americans continued to be disproportionately impacted by gun violent homicides.

With this history of African Americans and gun prohibition, it is interesting to note that the very firearms that they were not allowed to own or to have access to, now, are their weapons that drive the ongoing number of death shrines/memorials erected after gun violent homicides in Milwaukee.

Today, legal and constitutional scholars, US historians, theologians, philosophers, among others, note that huge disagreements continue with less understanding about what the right to bear arms means. For example, nearly 223 years later, gun rights advocates continue to emphasize the lawful use of guns and their valued place in US history and culture. They contend that the fundamental right to bear arms is sacrosanct. Joe the Plumber demonstrates this sentiment in his response to the May 2014 mass shootings by Elliot Rodgers outside of Santa Barbara, California: “I myself have a son and a daughter and the one thing that I never want to go through is what you are

16 See Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution and the Second Amendment of the Bill of Rights. Italics added to emphasize the issue of insurrections and invasions.


going through now. But as harsh as this sounds, your dead kids don't trump my constitutional rights!"20 Immediately, a Catholic ethical response must declare that Joe the Plumber's statement is blatantly idolatrous. All human life is created by God, and is of incomparable worth. A constitutional right to bear arms never trumps the fundamental rights to human life and flourishing.

Antithetically, gun control advocates focus on the negative effects of gun availability on health and safety. They note numerous ethical implications resulting from gun violent homicides. The trauma from these homicides adversely affects human dignity: the spiritual, emotional, social, and political economy of those in the communities. Furthermore, highly disproportionate rates of homicides continue among African Americans and Latin@s despite the popular pro-gun ownership slogan that “guns do not kill people, people do.” Essentially, this reckless use of guns triggers the cascade of bullets as they resound in the city of Milwaukee for reasons such as: somebody's girlfriend or boyfriend had a fight on Facebook, gang initiation activity, someone gave someone a dirty look, a drug deal that had gone bad/wrong, mistaken identity, stray bullets, mental illness, etc.

Catholic ethicist Bryan N. Massingale reminds us in his essay, Healing a Divided World that, “the gunfire that barks down streets and alleys of Milwaukee's central city is our song of death. And we are all the composers…”21 The songs of death endure even despite the fact that civic and religious leaders from Milwaukee called a weeklong Ceasefire Sabbath during the summer of 2013. The composers of the song, the white supremacist oppressors, and the singers of the death songs, the internally oppressed, who throughout the centuries,“…everywhere kept singing their old slave songs, their dirges and the ditties, their blues and jubilees…”22 For Freire, the oppressors and the internally oppressed sing in unison as the cycle of oppression and internalized oppression continue.23 “Once a situation of violence and oppression has been established, it engenders an entire way of life and behavior for those caught up in it—oppressors and oppressed alike.”24 The internally oppressed have learned how to take on the invisible hand of the white supremacist oppressor.

Nevertheless, with the rise in senseless gun violence occurring today, the erection of death shrines in honor of the dead seems perpetual. Radical, creative, and prophetic voices are empathetic and compassionate advocates. These advocates must be summoned to address this issue. What do these death shrines and their artifacts have to offer to us in helping to redress this issue?

**Death Shrines/Memorials**

According to Erika Doss’ essay, Spontaneous Memorials and Contemporary Modes of Mourning in America, she views spontaneous memorials as:

> creative products of human thought and emotional need, spontaneous memorials help to mediate the psychic crisis of sudden and often inexplicable loss… Spontaneous memorials are actually rightly orchestrated performances of mourning: rituals of visibly public lamentation aimed at expressing, codifying and ultimately managing grief. Their spontaneity is only in their origination, in their swift response to the sudden and unexpected events of tragic and traumatic death. Their materiality and meaning are highly scripted.25

20 “Joe the Plumber’s Blunt Message on Gun Control” was tweeted by Zach Noble @(the Zachnoble) on May 28, 2014 at 10:49am.
23 See Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 40.
24 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 40.
In these shrines it is common to find pictures, mylar or helium balloons, votive candles, signed sympathy cards, poster boards with hand written messages, flowers, plush stuffed animals with a notably large number of teddy bears of varying colors, shapes and sizes, clothing, shoes, caps, glass liquor bottles, aluminum cans. More often than not, the shrines are built at or near the roadside. Others are found inside parks or playgrounds for our children. It is important to note that some would argue that many of these artifacts found in the shrines harken back to African traditional religions whereby these scripted works of art transcend ordinary questions about their makeup and confinements: it is divine force incarnate. For example, in Yoruba culture, artifacts provide the highest link between the people, the ancestors, and the gods.26

As aforementioned, the erection of death shrines/memorials must be more than a sympathetic response to grief and mourning. The artifacts or symbols must reveal sources that push us to empathetic and compassionate action through prophetic voices and political imagination. For example, Brueggemann notes, “[t]he task of political imagination is to cut through the numbness, to penetrate the self-deception, so that the God of endings is confessed as Lord.”27 Thus, in reflecting on the symbolism of the artifacts enclosed in the death shrines/memorials, I believe that these challenge prophetic voices to envision the symbols as “vehicles for redemptive honesty...to bring to public expression those very fears and terrors that have been denied and suppressed so deeply that we do not know that they are there.”28 In essence, materials or symbols contained in these monuments are consistently present in the vast number of the shrines. How might they move us to empathy and compassion? What other sources might be helpful? Indeed one can draw on: 1) Black spirituality which is holistic, communal, and joyful and 2) Black spirituals for the language of lament as found in the spirituals’ double code messages.

**Black Spirituality**

Drawing from the 1984 black Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral Letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, the notions of sympathy, empathy, and compassion have relevance to the holistic nature that characterizes black spirituality. For example,

> [b]lack spirituality, in contrast with much of Western tradition, is holistic. Like the biblical tradition, there is no dualism. Divisions between intellect and emotions, spirit and body, action and contemplation, individual and community, sacred and secular are foreign to [black people]...29

Further reflection on Erika Doss’ definition of death shrines/memorials, black spirituality and black spirituals, including lament, come to mind. For example, when black spirituality is applied to what is observed about death shrines and the memorials, they are not merely haphazard monuments with materials depicting sympathetic,

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28 Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 49-50
intellectual, or emotional responses to gun violent homicides. Empathy and compassion are illuminated, here, in that groups of people gather to build the shrines, to support each other, while in a profound way “recognize the vital relationship between the life of the individual and that of her or his community.”\textsuperscript{30} Those gathered might sing, pray, share stories, offer words of wisdom, and/or sit quietly as they remember the loved gone forever. This captures one of the characteristics of black spirituality, community. Another characteristic of black spirituality is joy, its hallmark. The communal grief resulting from the shock of gun violent homicides eventually will give way to joy, the opposite of grief. Peter’s letter\textsuperscript{31} speaks of believers rejoicing in hope even while they suffer grief in all kinds of trials (1 Pet 1:6). From John 16:20, 22, “Your grief will turn to joy” and “no one will take away your joy.” “Joy is a sign of our faith and especially our hope. It is never an escape from reality, however harsh it may be. Indeed this joy is present in the midst of deep anguish and bitter tears,”\textsuperscript{32} allowing us the necessary energy and stamina to bear witness to our common humanity. In many ways the common humanity is marked by social practices that are either equitable, righteous, or truthful, or are inequitable, unrighteous, or untruthful.\textsuperscript{33} Black spirituals and lament also speak to these aspects of our common humanity.

\textbf{Black Spirituals}

Black spirituals comprise sacred songs, the blues, including the language of lament that emerge from some of them, perhaps drawing from the Psalms, the prophets, narratives about Jesus, various biblical images, among others. Songs sustained African Americans in separation and in captivity, helped them to respond actively to life situations, and gave them the ability to create new songs to answer new needs.\textsuperscript{34} In all of this, the black spirituals do not consist of separate components, some of which may be dropped, while others are retained. They consist of an organic complex of themes or motifs that speaks to the “heart and soul of a people who, with no viable future should have given into despair and defeat.”\textsuperscript{35} Black spirituals also contain double code messages that are “both compensatory and revolutionary.”\textsuperscript{36} During 2013, in Milwaukee, reportedly over one hundred gun violent homicides occurred and many death shrines were erected, creating sacred places at the roadside. The artifacts or symbols found in the death shrines also integrally interconnect lament and double code messages. Both lament and double code messages represent that “the beauty in black existence is as real as the brutality, and the beauty prevents the brutality from having the final word.”\textsuperscript{37} In essence lament speaks to us of the cries of anguish and outrage, groans of deep pain and grief, utterances of profound protest and righteous indignation over injustice, wails of mourning and sorrow in the face of unbearable suffering. Lamentation is a cry of utter anguish and passionate protest at the state of the world and its brokenness.\textsuperscript{38}

Lament depicts the frustrations and disillusionment with the government’s inability to put an end to senseless deaths due to gun violence. Lament helps to reflect on the disappointment at the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and its seemingly curious silence when people like Joe the Plumber declare that one’s constitu-

\textsuperscript{31} All of the passages from Sacred Scripture are taken from the New American Bible.
\textsuperscript{32} Black Bishops of the United States, \textit{What We Have Seen and Heard}, 9.
\textsuperscript{35} Hayes, \textit{Forged in a Fiery Furnace}, 71.
\textsuperscript{36} Hayes, \textit{Forged in a Fiery Furnace}, 77.
\textsuperscript{37} Cone, \textit{Cross and the Lynching Tree}, 95.
\textsuperscript{38} Massingale, \textit{Racial Justice and the Catholic Church}, 105.
tional right to bear arms trumps human life. For those in the African American and Latin@ communities, lament can be exemplified in passionate protest, in bearing witness to polarized Second Amendment debates and gun violent homicides that ultimately trump the sacredness of human life.

Furthermore, double code messages point intuitively to perhaps one perception of the black spiritual, artifact, and/or narrative and yet to another perception. In essence, more than one message conveyed in one's thoughts or feelings abound. Thus, lament and double code messages figure affectively in artifacts or symbols in the death shrines, especially in correlation with these black spirituals:

The lighted votive candles or the long stemmed candles can point to the Exodus Event where the Israelites are marching through the hardness of the wilderness, as God leads this travelling community “by night in a pillar of fire or light” (Ex 13:21), singing this African American spiritual, This Little Light of Mine...39 “The symbolism of light can also be associated with the hope of a New Jerusalem, where the city “has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev 21: 11; 21:23). The multiple numbers of teddy bears and plush stuffed animals are not only toys that comfort children; they can also warn of the need to watch out and care for another that brings Joy, Joy, Joy...40 that everything will turn out right. The empty liquor bottles or soda cans illustrate perhaps not only the social life of the person and his friends, but the pouring of something fluid at the death site points to the African traditional religious ritual of pouring libation as a toast to one who has Been Drinking from the Fountain...41 Flowers and heart-shaped colorful helium balloons symbolize the need for perpetual agape love for the one who has died and for those in the community. It is important to note that all these materials hang from either trees or light posts or are laid at their trunks of The Old Rugged Cross.42 In spiritually imaginative and creative ways, the presence of these materials speaks to life, death, and resurrection hope. Unanchored helium balloons ascend high into the sky, connoting a sense of freedom and liberation as captured in the sacred song, I’ll Fly Away.43 Soaring, the balloons leave behind the death shrines/memorials erected at the roadside. The earthly cries and anguish of the communities continue. In the next hour, day, and/or weekend more shrines are erected. This process restarts.

**So Where Do We Go From Here?**

Left up for a temporary period of time, the city of Milwaukee sanitation workers remove the death shrines/memorials. Rival gang members desecrate them too. Still much silence remains around the all too frequent cascade of bullets that take away human lives in Milwaukee. One death shrine is destroyed, yet another one is erected the next day, and/or three more over the following weekend several miles away. Polarizing debates on the meaning of the Second Amendment between pure gun rights advocates and commonsense gun control advocates lead to ongoing indifference and fragmentation.

In spite of it all, the amount of suffering and death as a result of gun violent homicides continue, generating unified sympathetic responses from the impacted communities. The artifacts or the symbols of the death shrines/memorials when viewed through the lens of black spirituality and the black spirituals comprising the lament yield cries of despair, hope, and healing. These sources along with political imagination and radical prophetic voices undergirded by empathy and compassion are of the urgent essence. Collectively, they must be employed to facilitate concrete dynamic action to redress this horrific ethical problem.

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39 Lead Me, Guide Me, no. 190.
40 Lead Me, Guide Me, no. 199.
41 Lead Me, Guide Me, no. 110.
42 Lead Me, Guide Me, no. 37.
43 Lead Me, Guide Me, no. 149.