

FIRE DREAMS

Laura McTighe,
with Women With A Vision

FOREWORD BY DEON HAYWOOD

MAKING
BLACK
FEMINIST
LIBERATION
IN THE
SOUTH



**PRAISE FOR *FIRE DREAMS*
AND WOMEN WITH A VISION**

BUY

“In the tradition of Callie House, Queen Mother Moore, and other foremothers, Women With A Vision organizes with the belief that caring for the people is inseparable from speaking truth to power. That is why this grassroots New Orleans group of Black women has won policy fights that others thought impossible. This book shows us how the history of Black women’s resistance continues to birth new movements for structural change.”

—Mary Frances Berry, Geraldine Segal Professor of American Social Thought, History, and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania

“Unapologetically rooted in experiences and visions of Black women and trans people living at the intersections of multiple interlocking oppressions, drawing on thirty-five years of fierce Black feminist resistance to abandonment of Black HIV-affected women, the war on drugs, and criminalization of sexual and reproductive autonomy, and consistently centering Black women’s dignity, self-determination, and cultures of care, *Fire Dreams* illuminates what Black feminism in action looks like and shines essential light from the South on the path forward in this moment.”

—Andrea J. Ritchie, cofounder of Interrupting Criminalization and coauthor of *No More Police: A Case for Abolition*

“What are the possibilities for all of us, if we liberate poor Black women, cisgender and trans, in the Deep South? *Fire Dreams*, which documents the history of the work of Women With A Vision, shows how one organization in New Orleans has shouted this question to the world, with its bold model of organizing, policy advocacy, and service provision, using a Black feminist praxis for the women whose power is most often ignored and rarely channeled toward radical change.”

—Kenyon Farrow, writer, activist, and contributor to *Healing Justice Lineages: Dreaming at the Crossroads of Liberation, Collective Care, and Safety*

“We are all indebted to the minds, hearts, and work of Women With A Vision. They’ve lovingly and forcefully led our collective movement to build deeper relationships and create more expansive visions. They’ve shifted power so that they could demand accountability for the people and the communities that need WWAV’s *Fire Dreams* to be reality.”

—Kassandra Frederique, Executive Director of the Drug Policy Alliance

“wwwWAVD (What Would Women With A Vision Do?) has been a constant question and guiding principle throughout my life as an activist. WWAV has taught us all what it means to center the health, rights, safety, and self-determination of people in drug-using and sex worker communities, and to unwaveringly use the power of harm reduction to free us all. Their story is inspiring, it is incredible, and it is necessary for anyone working toward liberation.”

—Cyndee Clay, Executive Director of HIPS (Honoring Individual Power & Strength)

“*Fire Dreams* captures the essence of Women With A Vision brilliantly—beautifully resilient, perfectly intersectional, and Black community-centered. The history, struggle, and sacrifice are Herstory that all of us should celebrate.”

—Heidi Williamson, Principal Creative and RJ Advocate,
Hummingbird Black Creative

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“What would our world look like if Black women, queer and trans people of color, sex workers, and drug users had everything they needed to survive, to thrive? Women With A Vision answers this question through radical acceptance, love, and transformation, and by guiding so many of us to stay and fight back. Through all the floods and fires, WWAV’s ethic of Black Feminist community building has been the force that has led our repair and restoration.”

—R. Cielo Cruz, writer, cultural organizer, Racial Justice facilitator, former WWAV board member, former sex worker, longtime New Orleans local

“A community of practice that has been coming together to learn and serve our people for nearly forty years, with a track record of meeting needs and saving lives. What an honor it is to follow the leadership of Deon Haywood and the Women With A Vision family.”

—Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, Co-Executive Director,
Highlander Research and Education Center

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*for
Bunny,
Jaliyah,
Earlneishka,
and all the other Young Women With A Vision
who will carry this work forward ever*

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FOREWORD

May 2023

In the spring of 2012, during a planning session, a facilitator asked us what would happen if Women With A Vision (WWAV) ceased to exist. No one in the room could truly answer the question. Instead, we replied, “The work will continue to get done, no matter what.” Little did we know, weeks later, on May 24, 2012, someone would try to burn our offices, our work, and all that we stand for to the ground. And yet, we’re still here. More than a decade after the attack, WWAV is working in community to stay the course and fight the fight. You can’t look at WWAV’s work and not know that it’s important to the moment we’re living through.

It’s been just under a year since the US Supreme Court issued the *Dobbs* decision on June 24, 2022, triggering a total abortion ban in Louisiana. That day, all of us at WWAV felt weary but not surprised. We knew this was coming. We had been fighting it for years. However, in the months since that decision, the unrelenting attacks on so many rights that our ancestors fought and gave their lives for—the attacks on Black and Brown people, Indigenous people, women and birthing people, transgender people, and queer people—these attacks have taken a toll on us all. Now is the time to get back to basics, to the methods we have always used to free us. We need space to share our greatest fears and to come up with our own solutions. We need to help each other open the windows and doors of our imaginations to envision the futures of our dreams, and we need to honor the ways that we

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are already working to build those futures in real time. Most of all, we need to revisit our history to move forward. Who's gonna keep us safe? WE ARE.

As an organization, WWAV has survived the very tactics of white supremacist terror and dispossession that are everywhere right now. None of these tactics are new, even if they feel like they're happening on a whole other level. Terror is always reactionary. White supremacists see our power, they see us—Black folks, Brown folks, queer folks—living our full lives, and they're grasping at the straws of the old world to try to stop the new one we are building.

WWAV was born out of necessity and in the long history of Black women coming together to make what their communities needed to survive. The arson attack on our offices happened just two months after we successfully led the NO Justice fight to remove hundreds of mostly poor, Black, and LGBTQ+ folks from the Louisiana sex offender registry for engaging in survival sex work. We are here because our community stepped in and stood with us, and that is precisely what we need to do for each other now.

The question that propelled our foremothers to action in the depths of the AIDS crisis is the same one that drove our work to fight criminalization in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and it is the same one that guides our work now to build an intersectional approach to reproductive justice in the South today: *What are we willing to do?*

Every day, we honor our community's refusal to bow to white supremacy. Fire means something, especially in the South. Just as terrorists, too cowardly to show their faces, set crosses ablaze under the cover of night in an attempt not only to violently interrupt radical freedom work but also to warn others who might dare to refuse to bow in the face of oppression, our attackers aimed to punish us for daring to fight for our own liberation. Ours is not a story of resilience. Black people have had to be resilient for too long. And the powers that be are too quick to label us "resilient" while refusing to question why our lives require such resilience. Ours is a story of refusal. We refused to stop fighting for the rights and dignity of sex workers, drug users, poor Black and Brown women, and LGBTQ+ people. And that's exactly what we'll continue to do.

Our attackers thought the flames would put an end to WWAV's work. They were wrong. Those flames, meant to destroy us, birthed new dreams. This book is our story of why. This book shows how something created from need, in community, became powerful. In the eleven years since the arson attack and the thirty-five years since WWAV was founded, our work has only

expanded. WWAV has been so successful because people see themselves in WWAV. We come from these communities. We know sex work. We know homelessness. We know single motherhood. We know how to listen to our people. We have always been willing to do and say the things that other people were afraid to. Our people's lives depend on it. We have also been kept out of spaces because people were afraid of what we'd say—and we went back anyway. We understand that our freedom is tied to everyone else's freedom.

There is a place for all of us in this fight. We need to be everywhere—to start in New Orleans, to work across the South, to move nationally and globally. The challenges we face every day are everywhere issues. Our whole world is on fire. We need to move quickly and in unison to stop the destruction that is happening. We must also remember that fire can be a powerful force for rebirth. The future is ours to create. We can already see the embers of a new world glowing all around us, sparking new dreams and new realities.

So I'll ask you again: *What are we willing to do? How far are we willing to go?*

Please stand with us as we forge a path to freedom. The work will continue to get done, no matter what.

In solidarity,

Deon Haywood

Executive Director

Women With A Vision

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is a gift. It is an offering of love.

It is first and foremost an offering for every person who has ever touched or been touched by the work of Women With A Vision (WWAV). Everything we are is because of *you*: the people who have trusted us to be in community with you and to make the impossible possible each and every day. May this book honor our hard-won survival work and the dreams we have turned into reality through it all. May it also serve as a testament to what it means to truly commit to community and to one another.

This book is also an offering to WWAV's foremothers, Catherine Haywood and Danita Muse: to the original women and the vision they made reality. As Catherine's mother and Deon's grandmother, Mildred Farlough Gray, always said, "If you are who you say you are, then be who you say you are." Our foremothers took these words to heart. In the early days, they never kept a record of the truths they were making, because they were so busy doing the work. Too much has been taken from WWAV over the last thirty-five years. This is a story that a whole lot of people wish did not exist and worked *hard* to erase. May this book serve as a form of reparations. May it return to our foremothers what has always been theirs. May it also be a portal for bringing that healing to generations past and generations future.

We make this offering with gratitude to so many. As abolitionist organizer and educator Mariame Kaba teaches us, "Everything worthwhile is done with other people." We give thanks to the movements that have held us down and to the friends, family, comrades, and mentors who have nurtured us in this work.

Our work started at the intersections of harm reduction, HIV prevention justice, queer liberation, and sex workers' rights. Today we are proud to call Orisha Bowers, Tracie Gardner, Deborah Small, Cyndee Clay, Shira Hassan, Dázon Dixon Diallo, Naina Khanna, Venita Ray, Waheedah Shabazz-El, Laura Thomas, Kenyon Farrow, Allen Kwabena Frimpong, Catherine Hanssens, Brook Kelly-Green, Terry McGovern, and so many others our movement family. The unapologetic work you grow in the world every day is the ground that makes ours possible. Being enmeshed in these movements also sharpened the focus of our organizing for reproductive justice, abolition feminism, and drug policy. We honor Loretta Ross, Byllye Avery, Monica Simpson, Paris Hatcher, Jasmine Burnett, Marcela Howell, Andrea Ritchie, Mariame Kaba, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Beth Richie, Laura Whitehorn, Andrea James, Victoria Law, Charlene Carruthers, Mary Hooks, Kay Whitlock, Kassandra Frederique, Asha Bandele, Roz Lee, Nakeisha Lewis, and more as our coteachers and codreamers. Each of you has helped to link our movements' work together under ever-expanding visions for liberation. And to Kimberley Hinton and Heidi Williamson, we thank you for your DC friendship, mentorship, deep thoughts, and ideas. You have been Deon's steadiest touchstones for Black women seeing each other and strategizing in ways that are achievable.

We also hold close to all of our movement family here in New Orleans and across the South: Ashley Shelton and the Power Coalition for Equity and Justice; Latona Giwa and the Birthmark Doula Collective; Ashley Hill Hamilton, "The Uptown Doula"; Ursula Price; the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice; Mama Jennifer and the Community Book Center; Norris Henderson and the Voice of the Experienced (VOTE); Sade Dumas; the Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition (OPPRC); Wendi Cooper; Milan Sherry; the House of Tulip; Shana M. griffin; R. Cielo Cruz; Wes Ware; Jordan Flaherty; S. Mandisa Moore-O'Neal and the Center for HIV Law and Policy; Aesha Rasheed, Wendi Moore-O'Neal, and Southerners On New Ground (SONG); Steph Guilloud and Project South; Nsombi Lambright; Valencia Robinson; Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson and the Highlander Research and Education Center; and so many more. Through our work with you, we know, as historian Robin D. G. Kelley put it, that "the reason why the South is so repressive is because it's the most radical place in North America." We commit again and again with you to building the world we need in real time. And to Eddie Burke, we will continue to honor your spirit and the legacy you have trusted us to carry forward each and every day.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2012 arson attack on our offices, WWAV was able to continue because of the support of all these movement partners and more. To the members of the NO Justice Project legal team—Andrea Ritchie, Alexis Agathocleous, Bill Quigley, Davida Finger, Sunita Patel, Nikki Thanos, David Rudovsky, Jonathan Feinberg, and Seth Kreimer—who filed a new class action lawsuit just one month after the fire to secure the removal of more than eight hundred people from the Louisiana sex offender registry, we offer thanks for your unwavering commitment to the freedom dreams of our people. To every person who organized a fundraiser or donated to our work; to the foundations who stood by us and resourced us more deeply; to First Grace United Methodist Church, who provided us with our first safe haven after the fire; and to the people who have depended on us for harm reduction supplies and gave us sometimes the only pennies they had so the work would continue to get done: you showed us again and again what solidarity built through care feels like and looks like in revolutionary praxis.

As we began our research as survival in the wake of the fire, we were blessed to be held in scholarly community by Courtney Bender, Josef Sorett, John Jackson Jr., Elizabeth Castelli, Mary Frances Berry, Melinda Chateaufort, Micol Seigel, Jenna Lloyd, Sarah Haley, Dan Berger, Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, Lila Abu-Lughod, Farah Griffin, Sam Roberts, and Angela Zito, among others. Thank you for consistently honoring with us the wisdom of both the academically based and community-trained scholars who give our work shape and meaning. We also want to offer special thanks to Courtney, Josef, John, and Elizabeth: you committed to so much more than reading and nurturing the pages of writing produced through this research (which you did, and then some!); you also cared for each of us and for the work itself and helped this project have wings. And to Mary, our teacher in all of this work and more, thank you. To have you call us when you see something move and say “I know that was you” is the biggest gift possible.

We received vital support from the Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life at Columbia University, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the Institute for Citizens and Scholars to get our foundational research off the ground; from Florida State University’s College of Arts and Sciences and Department of Religion to see *Fire Dreams* to publication; and from the Henry Luce Foundation to bring the Born in Flames Living Archive into the world.

So many more people have made contributions to us and to this work so that it would continue. To Laura's parents, Sue and Art, for knowing that WWAV is family and for making our family yours. To Ashley Wennerstrom, Tara Thierry, Olivia Ford, Camille Roane, Terranisha Hiley, Pascal Emmer, Danielle Sered, asmara tesfaye rogoza, Jules Netherland, Anand Venkatkrishnan, Shireen Hamza, Yesenia Barragan, Mark Bray, Lucia O'Barr, Sarah Chiddy, Hakim Ali, the Reverend Doris Green, Kimberly Wallace-Hutson, Khweze Mkhize, Suzie Ferguson, Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh, Vaughn Booker, Samira Mehta, Matt Harris, Elayne Oliphant, and Daniel Vaca for always providing soft places to land and for searching with us for the tools to reimagine and remake our world. To our New Orleans crew, Anisa Parks, Erica Williams, Kim Seals, Rhonda Broussard, Shelley Stiaes, and Dimitri Blutcher, for love and friendship and more. And to Kali Handelman, our friend, editor, and confidant: thank you for never losing faith in or sight of the possibility of what this work could and would become. To say that we are here because of you is no overstatement.

When a project is nurtured for as many years as this one, the webs of care continue to multiply. To Megan Raschig for the years of covisioning the otherwise anthropology that we at WWAV and you at the Colectiva de Mujeres were creating, and to all of our cotravelers in this journey, including Deborah Thomas, Lisa Stevenson, Aditi D. Surie von Czechowski, Savannah Shange, Roseann Liu, Talisa Feliciano, Celina de Sá, and karen g. williams. In our hands, the otherwise came alive as a deeply enduring, liberatory project. To Yana Stainova for the possibilities we were able to grow by method making in concert between our New Orleans world and your Venezuelan one. And to Judith Weisenfeld for the gift that *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* has been for us and so many, and for the community of religio-racial study built with Matthew Cressler, Jamil Drake, Megan Goodwin, and Sylvester Johnson. We first spoke our concept "theory on the ground" into being as part of this collective. Each of you helped to sharpen the offering we make now.

Thank you to the entire community at the Dartmouth Society of Fellows for making space for this work to rest and grow in interdisciplinary conversation. To our dear scholar-comrades Bethany Moreton, Pamela Voekel, and Yui Hashimoto: the week of WWAV colearning we were able to host for Dartmouth students and Upper Valley organizers was our first glimmer of all the audiences that this book could and would need to speak to; it is also our model for taking the show on the road now that it is in print. And

to Zahra Ayubi, Tish Lopez, Jason MacLeod, Mary Coffey, Asma Elhuni, Treva Ellison, Nathalie Batrville, Derek Woods, Becky Clark, and so many others who sustained us in this time: thank you for joining us in writing and speaking and living this work in the world.

We are grateful for the academic spaces we were invited into and those we were able to make through the American Studies Association, the American Academy of Religion, the American Anthropological Association, the Association of American Geographers, and the American Public Health Association. Thank you also to the members of the Black Religious Studies Working Group at Princeton University for your careful readings that shaped the ways in which we now center our collective authorship as one of the core interventions of this book. Thanks to the members of the Dartmouth Feminism Inquiry Seminar for your guidance on making early versions of chapter 2 into what it has become. And to the members of the American Religious History and Religion, Ethics, and Philosophy colloquia at Florida State University, especially John Corrigan, Michael McVicar, Sonia Hazard, Martin Kavka, John Kelsay, Barney Twiss, Aline Kalbian, and Matt Day, thank you for engaging so deeply with the possibilities held in chapter 3.

We have likewise been nurtured, challenged, and enlivened by public-facing spaces of study and struggle, including the International Drug Policy Reform Conference, the International Harm Reduction Conference, the Southern Harm Reduction Conference, the United States Conference on HIV/AIDS, the International AIDS Conference, the Collective Power for Reproductive Justice Conference (formerly Civil Liberties and Public Policy), Creating Change, the INCITE! Color of Violence Conference, Facing Race: A National Conference, the Allied Media Conference, and the Southern Movement Assembly, as well as those spaces built and maintained by our movement family at In Our Own Voices, SisterSong, Desiree Alliance, Positive Women's Network—USA, SisterLove, Black Feminist Future, the In Our Names Network, Critical Resistance, and Interrupting Criminalization, among others.

These many overlapping academic and movement spaces were our pathway to meeting Elizabeth Ault, our editor at Duke University Press. Elizabeth, we thank you for your steadfast commitment to this project and to us as authors at every stage. You heard in this work the challenge and offering it would be for scholarship and practice otherwise, and you ensured that it was put into the hands of reviewers who united with these aims and would nurture it to shine as brightly as possible. To that end, we also want to thank our reviewers for your deep and generous engagements with our work. Your

reports showed us what is possible when *Fire Dreams* is not only engaged on its own terms but also used as the toolkit we hope it will be. To the entire (unionized!) team at Duke, to our designer A. Mattson Gallagher, and to our indexer Josh Rutner, we are so grateful for all that you have done to ensure that this work is alive on the page as it enters the world. And to Livia Tenzer, our project editor, you have been an unparalleled advocate over the last year. Thank you for steering this book through the production process with such care and understanding for all that it holds.

As this book has continued to take shape, the young organizers and students we have met have provided us with some of the steadiest visions for what *Fire Dreams* can and will do in the world. To Gabriela Rosario, Lauren Dominguez, Hannah Mandatta, Lydia Moss, Devin Burns, Rebekah Gordon, Sam McLoughlin, and Sam Davis for hearing the calls that this work makes and sharing its histories with the communities you hold close. And to our dear scholar-friends Erin Runions, Nikia Robert, LaToya Eaves, and to so many more of you whom we have already named throughout these acknowledgments, thank you for welcoming us into the communities you have built with your students and for nurturing all that we have made together. We also offer our continued appreciation to Sean King, whose first day as a Mount Holyoke student intern at WWAV was the day after the arson attack. Thank you for sticking with us and for giving so fully of yourself to build our emergency communications network in the fire's wake. It has been a thing of beauty to bear witness to the organizer you have become.

Last, we extend our deep gratitude to our Tallahassee community, especially Kristin Dowell, Peggy Wright-Cleveland, Michael Franklin, Dan Luedtke, Malia Bruker, Dave Rodriguez, Anasa Hicks, Eli Wilkins-Malloy, Ilana Goldman, Jeannine Murray-Román, Jorge Luis Hernández, and Hannah Schwadron, who made way for the whole Haywood family to evacuate in the wake of Hurricane Ida. We know that mutual aid is present in every crisis, and we learned in new ways just how deeply Tallahassee is committed to holding us down and caring for the worlds we make together.

Love is this offering and love is also sewn through its pages. To vk, you are the surprise that Laura waited a lifetime to find. You turned your home into a writer's retreat to see this book to completion, and you celebrated each and every step, big and small, on the way to its publication. Most importantly, you opened yourself and your heart to the relationships that ground this work, knowing that caring for Laura meant caring for the people she loves, and making ways for all of us to become part of your life and world.

And to Rowan Bell, sweet sun baby: you are the dream that Laura dared to imagine for herself, one that she and vk worked hard to make a reality. We all reminded her, repeatedly, that what is hers was already here. And you were. You are also all of ours. You grew inside of Laura during the very months that *Fire Dreams* moved through final review and into production. Your light illuminates every single word of this text. Together, we commit to building a much better world for you to make your own.

Our intention is to claim all the beautiful things in 2024.

This book will enter the world as the year begins. As we continue to grow the Black feminist geography charted in these pages, we do so with anticipation for the conversations that *Fire Dreams* will animate, the new activists and scholars it will mobilize, and the long-standing networks it will help to bring into tighter formation. This is the promise through which we continue to fight for all the good things that this world must be. And so we know that the love offering of this book is most especially for Bailey “Bunny” Haywood, Jaliyah Davis, Earlneishka Johnson, and all of the Young Women With A Vision members. Your generation will carry this work forward. We cannot begin to imagine the truths you will write in the course of making your own fire dreams. But we know they will be beautiful to behold. *Forward Ever.*

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INTRODUCTION

BORN IN FLAMES

Sometimes people try to destroy you, precisely because they recognize your power—not because they don't see it, but because they see it and they don't want it to exist.

—bell hooks, *Reel to Real*

It was a Thursday evening, late in May 2012. Memorial Day weekend was upon us, bringing with it the New Orleans double feature of the annual Greek Fest and the Money Wasters Social Aid and Pleasure Club Second Line. Women With A Vision (WWAV) was just coming off an unprecedented victory for sex work decriminalization and abolition feminism, and we were all taking a moment to rest and to celebrate before beginning the next steps in our organizing work. Earlier that day, WWAV's executive director Deon Haywood and her wife and WWAV's director of research evaluation, Shaquita Borden, welcomed their friend and WWAV's resident writer and board member Laura McTighe to New Orleans for the summer. The three of us—Deon, Shaquita, and Laura—were now watching a horror film at home with a few others, alternating between mocking the film and plotting our summer WWAV organizing. Together, we wanted to create an oral history

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archive and toolkit to show how this decades-old Black feminist organization had been able to fight back against the destabilization of Black New Orleansians' worlds through predatory policing after Hurricane Katrina—and *win*.

Mid-conversation, Deon's cell phone rang. As she picked up the call, Shaquita and Laura turned their attention back to the movie. Shaquita pressed pause when she heard the tone in Deon's voice shift. "Women With A Vision is on fire. WOMEN WITH A VISION IS ON FIRE!" Deon waved her hand emphatically, motioning us toward the door. En route to WWAV's offices on North Norman C. Francis Parkway,¹ she started a telephone tree to get word to WWAV's cofounders, her mother Catherine Haywood and friend Danita Muse; board members Rosana Cruz and Shana M. Griffin;² her best friends, Shelley Stiaes, Erica Williams, and Dimitri Blutchter; and her children, Cynthia and Brandon. When we arrived, about half of that community was standing on the sidewalk. The air was thick with humidity and smoke. Sirens wailed on a shrill loop. Red lights rolled across the front of the building. Yellow hoses snaked in through the front door. First responders flowed in and out of the fire truck, up and down the steps, in and out of the flames raging in the office.

When the police finally came to speak to Deon, they pulled her away from us and forced her to go inside the office alone, without anyone with her for support. She was shaken when she came back. It felt like she had been gone for hours. In vivid detail, she recounted what she had borne witness to. First, the arsonists had whittled the dead bolt off the back door. Then they moved through the space, setting small fires in the meditation alcove, singeing the faces off Black women in posters, and tossing out the window into the alleyway below all the awards WWAV had received from leaders in movements for sex workers' rights, ending mass criminalization, HIV prevention justice, reproductive justice, racial justice, human rights, LGBTQ rights, women's health, and more. In the outreach office, they stacked WWAV's educational breast models three-high, covered them in accelerant, and ignited a blaze strong enough to melt the blades off the ceiling fan fifteen feet overhead. Decades of participant files, harm reduction supplies, and outreach materials were reduced to ashes. It was a vile act of white supremacist terror intended to exterminate WWAV's efforts once and for all. It took years before Deon publicly recounted the violence of that night: "They refused to let anyone walk in with me, so I experienced that trauma alone. Having to stand in each room at that moment. Normally, they let people go the next day, but we went the same night when it was still *hot* and smoky."³

We went back together the next afternoon. The smoke had only cleared slightly. The pain of walking through that charred rubble was gut-wrenching. It conjured the terror of the Ku Klux Klan burning crosses and the firebombing of Black homes, churches, and political organizations. The arson attack could have harmed or killed members of the WWAV community. Deon fielded a call from a detective who said he had a few leads in the case: “We talked to witnesses and everybody seems to say the same thing. There was a white male running from the scene of the fire, coming from the alley of your building.” We could hear Deon reply, “So do you know who it is?” Her face turned. She told us as soon as she got off the phone what he had answered: “No, what I want to know is which one of the women who work for you is fucking a white man? Cuz see, what we think is, *somebody*—it could be somebody is mad at them. Or it could be one of these crackheads y’all helping.” Deon shook her head in refusal: “There are moments like this that remind us how you’re criminalized in more ways than the media will ever show you.”⁴

Unraveling the Racial Capitalism Playbook

The arson attack on WWAV was never investigated. We knew it would not be as soon as Deon spoke with the detective who blamed WWAV for the violence we survived. That accusation was from the same playbook as the attack itself: ISOLATE people from necessary social services; BLAME them for the abuse they survive; CRIMINALIZE them for their survival; DESTABILIZE their communities; ERASE them from the city of their birth; and then TAKE their land.⁵ WWAV theorizes these operations of racial capitalism in our daily lives and worlds as the “racial capitalism playbook.”⁶ And we refuse that playbook with our very existence. Importantly, this playbook has a history that extends much deeper than our neoliberal present. It was first fashioned by the settlers and planters who made the Crescent City through colonial rule and chattel slavery, and it has been refined and perfected in response to the constant rebellion and fugitivity of Native Americans, Africans, Afro-Creoles, and African Americans.⁷ WWAV, too, is the afterlife of this history of struggle.⁸ And, like our ancestors, everything about WWAV, past, present, and future, flies in the face of the racial capitalism playbook.

In 1989, a collective of Black women operating out of an RV in Central City New Orleans set out to address the HIV epidemic in their community. They called themselves “Women With A Vision.” The so-called war on drugs

had already been raging for nearly two decades, and the impacts of these criminalization policies were deadly. Our foremothers were on a mission to improve the lives of Black women, their families, and their communities by addressing the social conditions that hinder their health and well-being. To make that vision a reality, they used street outreach, health education, mutual aid, community-engaged research, relentless advocacy, and any other tool they could put to liberatory ends. Their work was slow and patient and present, grounded always in a love for their people. By building relationships, our foremothers stood in solidarity with the very people most criminalized in our current order. In community, they celebrated the strategies that people crafted to survive and make ends meet in a world that was hell-bent on erasing them. They spoke these truths together, and they spoke them in the local, national, and international halls of power where our current order was produced and reproduced. There, they worked tirelessly to identify, reclaim, and redistribute the resources that have been steadily siphoned from their people's hands. In so doing, they *made space* for their community to belong to one another and to the land of their ancestors. And they were damn good at doing it.

After Hurricane Katrina, WWAV worked to dial back the disaster-accelerated consolidation and expansion of the racial capitalism playbook. While white developers and legislators unabashedly imagined how the storm could be used as a “clean sheet to start again,” WWAV steadily organized in counterpurpose to the punitive policies that were being enacted to permanently erase Black people from the city of their birth.⁹ We fought back against each layer of the isolate-blame-criminalize-destabilize-erase-take racial capitalism playbook; we did so by refusing the violence of our present and building the world we needed. WWAV *made space* for our community to belong to one another, to grieve together, to heal in concert, and to nurture our visions for a New Orleans “otherwise.”¹⁰ The arsonists who set fire to WWAV tried to *take that space*. What they could not take were the relationships that produced that space, which were always already rooted in this land.

In the wake of the arson attack, with nearly all material traces of WWAV's decades of work destroyed, research became a form of survival.¹¹ To ensure that WWAV could and would continue, we had to reframe and fight the official narratives of the fire as a singular event instigated by someone within WWAV's own network, which were rapidly being disseminated by police and city officials alike. Between the reality of WWAV's grassroots organizing

and the labor exerted to suppress, invisibilize, and exterminate it, there was a vast terrain to map. To do so, we had to become “undisciplined”; the work we were doing required new theories and methods of research.¹² When we centered WWAV’s own expertise and the knowledge our community was producing about the fire, we could see clearly that this was no isolated attack. Nor was it merely an attack on a singular organization at a single moment in time. Reckoning with the full extent of the erasure being willed against WWAV was physically, historically, and epistemologically rigorous work. The territory of WWAV’s knowledge about the attack extended most immediately into the disaster that post-Katrina recovery efforts had wrought for Black New Orleanians. But it also stretched deeper—into the recesses of WWAV’s own organizational past amid the targeted criminalization of drug users and sex workers, and the government’s willful neglect of structural HIV vulnerability in Black communities. And it reached deeper still to the generations upon generations of Black women who had seen their own work to realize healing justice for their communities eviscerated through the same tactics of white supremacist terror.¹³ We stitched the coordinates of these histories together deliberately and without compromise. *Fire Dreams* is our collective, collaborative reckoning with these pasts and the ways in which they press on WWAV’s present. These are the grounds on which our research began.

Dreaming with Our Eyes Wide Open

As a contribution to the world, *Fire Dreams* is a social movement ethnography and an ethnography of Black feminist thought. But it is not simply a book to be read. It is a toolkit for, in Walter Rodney’s words, “making knowledge to serve the liberation of our communities”;¹⁴ it is also a call to revolutionize that knowledge into praxis in order to build the world otherwise. The work held in these pages has been guided by three iterative and relational questions:

- 1 What is so threatening about Black women’s leadership?
- 2 What would it look like to tell the history of Black women’s organizing in the South so that WWAV’s work had a place in it that could not be erased?
- 3 How would telling this history with WWAV firmly located within it change the way that we understand American history and leverage our pasts toward more livable futures?

Answering these questions is liberation work. We ask that you, our readers, hear—indeed, speak with us—WWAV’s history in and through the stories of generations of southern Black feminist organizers. We also call you into the work of ensuring that these deeply enduring resistant visions for living and thriving otherwise—these *fire dreams*—can take place and have a space, that they can root and stay rooted.

In undertaking this project, we take inspiration from scholar-comrades like Mary Frances Berry, Andrea Ritchie, Mariame Kaba, Barbara Ransby, Cathy Cohen, Sarah Haley, Dayo Gore, and Emily Thuma, each of whom braids together social history and Black feminist thought to illuminate Black women’s major contributions to theory and activism.¹⁵ Like theirs, ours is not a traditional social movement study, organized by chronology or campaign theme; it is an intellectual history of the present, a story of our collective, a practice of our vision for liberation, a workbook for change. In *Fire Dreams*, we place emphasis on the persistence of WWAV’s Black feminist ideas, relationships, and methods for doing the work. That is because we lead with *why* questions, not *how* questions, to recall one of Robin D. G. Kelley’s famous analytics. For Kelley, *how* questions tend to reify traditional expectations of what counts as political—voting in elections, lobbying elected officials, participating in grassroots social movements—whereas *why* questions expose the paradox of engaging with political institutions and processes that traditionally have not proven to be attentive to the concerns of poor and working-class Black people.¹⁶

For all of us at WWAV, the most important question after the fire was not *how*, but *why* will we recover? Answer: “The work will continue to get done, no matter what.” Saying this requires us to hold both the imperative of WWAV’s liberatory vision and the weight of our willed repression. Long before Hurricane Katrina, policies of systematic divestment and forced removal dressed up in a whitewashed, teleological language of “development, improvement, and progress” were already conspiring to erase the very forms of Black and Indigenous life that had built the city now called New Orleans.¹⁷ The disaster that followed the levee breaches in August 2005 was *man-made* through interlocking systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and bigotry, just like the fire that burned WWAV down.¹⁸ Legislators and developers alike have branded it the “new” New Orleans. That divestment, and its acceleration, has been built through the violent destabilization of long-standing Black New Orleanian worlds, through the dismemberment

and disappearance of entire communities. Today, the city bears little resemblance to the streets our foremothers once walked. So many of our people have been displaced through organized abandonment, gentrification, and racist violence, separated from the traditions and knowledge keepers who held our communities together for generations. That is why we know that in order to free ourselves we have to *dream*, as Kelley's mother taught him, with our eyes wide open. The two eyes at the center of our heads will never let us forget the violence that surrounds us. But we can also learn "to live through our third eyes, to see life as possibility . . . to imagine a world free of patriarchy, a world where gender and sexual relations could be reconstructed . . . to see the poetic and prophetic in the richness of our daily lives . . . to visualize a more expansive, fluid, 'cosmos-politan' definition of blackness, to teach us that we are not merely inheritors of a culture but its makers."¹⁹ And to do so with our hearts afire.

"Fire dreams" are quite literally *born in flames*. But more than that, they are the creative and life-giving sparks amid the ashes of our violent pasts and presents, in and through which new and more livable futures are rising. This sense of the double nature of fire—and the deliberate (re)claiming of it as a creative force (that is, to contest *fire* with *fire*)—rests on knowledge that WWAV produced immediately after the arson attack: "Fire has long been a tool of terror in the South," Deon explained at one of the first postfire community fundraisers organized for WWAV in New Orleans, "but it can also be a powerful force for rebirth." As a creative and life-giving force, *FIRE* has many inflections in WWAV's lexicon. There is the cyclical power of the phoenix rising from the ashes, the unifying speech of the fire of Pentecost, the galvanizing spark of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, and the *Words of Fire* through which Beverly Guy-Sheftall connects centuries of Black feminist thought. *DREAMS* honor what is being created. Dreams are the stuff of prophets and of everyday folk. They would almost seem like nonsense if they did not materialize again and again. They are the visions of what life could be that Kelley shows us have been passed down for generations, the windows and doors through which Angela Davis imagines that social realities can become malleable and transformable across vast expanses of time and space, and the science fiction that Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown remind us that all organizing is.²⁰ Fire dreams are how we make the world otherwise. And WWAV has been stoking them and blowing on them to ignite change every day since our founding.

WWAV History Is Movement History

Over the last thirty-five years, the small but mighty crew behind WWAV has become a force to be reckoned with. Today, WWAV's full-time staff of twelve supports eight distinct program areas, thousands of participants locally, and hundreds of thousands of movement comrades nationally and internationally. In the early days, we were an all-volunteer operation that ran on donations. Our first office was a closet in one of our foremothers' homes, and our work was largely done after business hours. The spark that set our work into motion was "a meeting at the crossroads," which showed our foremothers just how deeply and intimately tied their vision was to the change that was rising nationally, indeed, globally.²¹

As the story goes, Danita Muse and Catherine Haywood locked eyes across a crowded New Orleans Health Department conference room at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. At the time, Catherine, or "Lady" as she is more often called, was working for the Children's Pediatric AIDS Program on a project focused on increasing access to HIV testing among people who inject drugs. Danita was working for the Office of Substance Abuse (now the Office of Behavioral Health) and running groups with people struggling with addiction. HIV would soon become a leading cause of death for Black women between the ages of twenty and forty-four, and it has remained so ever since.²² That lethal fact was far from inevitable. Violent narratives (of "welfare queens" and "crack babies," of whole communities as vectors of disease, of HIV as divine punishment) greased the wheels of the racial capitalism playbook. Both Catherine and Danita further witnessed how the largely white-led early public health responses extended the lethal racism of these narratives by emphasizing individual behaviors and assigning hierarchies to which communities deserved saving.²³ Gay bars in the French Quarter were the cornerstone of the city's condom distribution programs. *No one* was reaching out to poor Black people in the city's housing projects, which had the highest documented incidence of HIV transmission in the city. It was a classic move from the isolate-blame-criminalize-destabilize-erase-take racial capitalism playbook. The next time a meeting was called by the Office of Public Health, both Catherine and Danita were in attendance. This time, they ensured that their Uptown neighborhoods were on the outreach list, including the St. Thomas, Magnolia, Melpomene, and Calliope Projects.

Catherine always says, "You have to build a relationship." Relationships are what make all of WWAV's work possible. During their first years of work,

our foremothers' relationships grew exponentially, stretching through the city's underground latticework of safe havens by and for drug user and sex worker communities. Gradually, this presence in relationship and in community enabled our foremothers to start producing their own knowledge about precisely how the logics of systemic poverty and targeted criminalization were driving HIV vulnerability and a whole host of other health issues. Simply put, the problem was not individual behaviors; it was racial capitalism. After their first five years of work on the ground in New Orleans, Danita and Catherine started searching for other people who were working in community like they were. That search landed them in a just-forming national harm reduction movement being created by drug user communities. At its core, harm reduction is a philosophy about meeting people "where they're at" and transforming the conditions in which harm arises, along with reducing the harm itself. Putting that philosophy into practice was world-building work. Alongside national and international movement leaders, Catherine and Danita built and refined models for community health and liberation rooted in a structural analysis of racial capitalism. They did so by being in relationship with the very people whom service providers and government agencies could only see as problems to be managed. And they spoke that analysis and practiced those models wherever they went, funding be damned.

In 2006, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, it was WWAV's ongoing presence in and solidarity with drug user and sex worker communities that made our organization the destination for those who had been able to return to New Orleans after the storm. Catherine and Danita asked Deon if she would be willing to step out of her role as WWAV paid staff and assume the role of executive director, so that the organization had more stability in these uncertain times. Then, one by one, people started showing up at WWAV with photo IDs that read "SEX OFFENDER" in red block letters. Deon, Catherine, and Danita figured out that the police were booking people arrested for street-based sex work under the felony-level "crime against nature by solicitation" (CANS) statute, instead of (or sometimes *in addition to*) the state's misdemeanor prostitution charge. That policing was targeted. Ninety-seven percent of people with CANS convictions were cisgender and transgender women; 80 percent of people were Black.²⁴ A single CANS conviction mandated registration as a sex offender for fifteen years. Upon a second conviction, a person would be classified as an aggravated sex offender and mandated to register for the rest of their life. The statute thus, when capacitated through decades of punitive criminalization policies, was

in effect a strategy of permanent banishment. It was another classic move from the racial capitalism playbook.

Under Deon's leadership, and with her wife Shaquita at her side, WWAV decided to fight back using the same theories and methods that had guided our foremothers since the organization's founding. The knowledge of people with CANS convictions led each and every step of the process. When recounting the everyday toll of being on the sex offender registry, one woman snapped, "There is NO justice in Louisiana!" Her words became the organizing call moving forward; WWAV deliberately used the all-caps "NO" as both a shout and a shorthand for New Orleans in forming the NO Justice Project. Just like Catherine and Danita had done back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Deon and Shaquita assembled a trusted group of movement comrades—local organizers, civil rights attorneys, and national activists (like Laura) to bring a community-led challenge of the statute. The campaign against CANS roared through the city, through the state legislature, and through the federal courts. On March 29, 2012, the tireless efforts of the NO Justice legal team secured a federal judicial ruling against the statute, thereby facilitating the removal of more than eight hundred cisgender and transgender women from the state's sex offender registry. Immediately after this victory, we worked with members of the legal team to furiously write and publish our own press releases, op-eds, and policy briefs on the NO Justice Project through mainstream and independent media, just as we had been doing throughout the organizing process.²⁵ In late May, we came together to launch an oral history project to document the theories, methods, stories, and new forms of knowledge that we produced with our partners during the NO Justice Project—to offer with love the tools and lessons of what our Black feminist organizing looked like in practice. Then, on the evening of May 24, 2012, the erasure of our people, which we had been working to combat since Hurricane Katrina, hit intimately and painfully close. That was the night when WWAV's offices were firebombed and destroyed by still unknown arsonists.

Despite the fatal intent of the arsonists, WWAV's work *did* continue. We continued, like we always have, by linking our intimate community care work on the ground to the national and international movements of which we are a part. Deon and Shaquita went on the road for months, naming this white supremacist terror in every social movement space and gathering they could reach. Locally, in New Orleans, we also launched a sex worker organizing program, which built on Black feminist and abolition feminist

visions for a world free from all forms of violence, including surveillance, policing, and punishment.²⁶ The program brought people diverted from court into an intentional community of support and political transformation, so that they could, in the program's name, *Emerge*. It took four years of this deliberate, hard-won survival work to make space for ourselves again. In the fall of 2016, WWAV stepped into our first home since the arson attack, a space that embodied our deepest hopes "to be able to live and thrive, and not just survive."²⁷ The front porch of that home provided us all a place to rest and restore. Slowly, it also became the grounds for speaking the next phases of WWAV's work into being. And it held us all as we gathered the stories of WWAV's three and a half decades of work into this offering as *Fire Dreams*.

The Tricycle Effect

This is the terrain in and through which we have produced this undisciplined, collective, collaborative ethnography. WWAV history is movement history. The spaces that first brought us into relationship as coauthors further underline this truth. Laura and Deon met in May 2008 at a national gathering at the intersections of HIV and mass criminalization: UNSHACKLE (Uniting a Network on Sentencing and HIV/AIDS with Community Knowledge Leading our Efforts). Laura had been invited by her longtime comrade Waheedah Shabazz-El, a cofounder of Positive Women's Network—USA. Laura and Waheedah met in 2003, just days after Waheedah's release from jail, while Laura was doing community outreach around the health care crisis in the Philadelphia jails. The two had been working together as organizers, writers, and cothinkers ever since.²⁸ The UNSHACKLE convening, for Waheedah, was taking the ground-up analysis of HIV and the carceral state that she and Laura had built alongside AIDS prison activists to the next level: recognizing that people with HIV are disproportionately affected by criminalization *because* mass criminalization is a structural driver of the domestic AIDS epidemic.²⁹ Deon had been invited through similarly intimate and insistent means. Shana M. griffin, a cofounder of the INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans people of Color Against Violence New Orleans chapter, a cofounder of the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic, a cofounder of the Women's Health & Justice Initiative, and a board member at WWAV, pitched the meeting to Deon as a chance to share the theories and methods that WWAV had been growing in New Orleans for twenty years by that point; she also believed that these national

relationships would be essential for ensuring WWAV's survival after the storm. Shana, in turn, had been invited by Kenyon Farrow, the former field director for the New Orleans office of the prison abolitionist organization Critical Resistance. Kenyon was also the coordinator of the UNSHACKLE convening, holding the delicate line between prison abolitionist organizers and the more reformist-minded prison health care folks. He had recruited Laura to write one of the "Think Pieces" to frame discussion.

Laura and Deon still laugh about being placed in a small group and figuring out quickly that neither of them really liked people all that much, but they really liked each other. After the meeting, Laura was hired by the UNSHACKLE convening organizers, the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project, to turn the collective conversations into an organizing toolkit.³⁰ She first piloted the toolkit in September 2008 at the tenth anniversary gathering of Critical Resistance in Oakland with Kenyon and Waheedah, and then presented it again in October at the annual United States Conference on HIV/AIDS in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She and Deon reconnected at both meetings. At the Fort Lauderdale conference, Deon pulled her aside in the hallway so they could talk. There, Deon recounted the story of the first time someone showed her their sex offender photo ID card. Deon asked Laura to think about how many times she had to show her ID in the course of a day and paused. That method for sharing knowledge about the everyday terror that CANS criminalization wrought in the lives of Black women, queer people, gender-nonconforming people, and transgender people would become the foundational outreach strategy of the NO Justice Project.

In 2009, Deon invited Laura to New Orleans to facilitate the coalition meeting that launched WWAV's local organizing against the CANS statute. At the time, Laura was working full-time as the field organizer and project director for UNSHACKLE. She made a commitment to return to New Orleans every other month. In between visits, she and Deon connected by phone: Deon would talk, and Laura would type. Deon used this method to apprentice Laura to WWAV's decades-honed Black feminist theory, relationships, and methods for doing the work. Laura then took what they talked about, wrote it up, shared it with Deon for review, revised it, and put it up on WWAV's website and out through the organization's virtual networks. That cemented Laura's role not simply as a movement partner and accomplice, but as a member of the WWAV crew. And with each trip she made back to New Orleans, the chosen family bonds growing among herself, Deon, and Shaquita also deepened.

This method for producing knowledge in service of liberation was one that Deon, Shaquita, and Laura further refined in person as the three-part “tricycle effect.” Deon gave our trio the name “tricycle” one day in the thick of WWAV’s NO Justice Project when we were refining WWAV’s framing language to describe the crippling terror that Black women, queer people, gender-nonconforming people, and transgender people were navigating daily in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and to underline their will to imagine and build otherwise. The tricycle effect was the steady layering of our brains and hearts in three-part harmony: forward-facing, practice-oriented Black feminist theory (Deon), with a biting intersectional public health analysis (Shaquita), built through multimodal methods of storytelling (Laura). It was also an affirmation of the power of the bond we shared: that affective force, built through love and joy, that was capable of breaking through and unraveling the racial capitalism playbook.³¹

In the wake of the fire, we turned our NO Justice tricycle effect into a full-on emergency communications response system to keep the arson attack in the national and international media. We also started to ask the three questions that drive this book. As the summer of 2012 ended, we talked in earnest about how to design a collaborative research project to answer these questions. In 2013, we launched the “Born in Flames” oral history project to rebuild the archive of WWAV’s pre-arson work; in 2014, we launched the ethnographic arm of the project to track the organization’s persistence since the fire; and in 2015, Laura moved to New Orleans to begin eighteen months of dedicated research and organizing with WWAV.³² Since that time—through this amalgamation of oral history, collective storytelling, archival tracing, and doing the work—we have been moving in partnership to document (and reconstruct) the theories and methods that have guided WWAV’s work for three decades. This book unfolds in the intimacy of these relationships.

Relationships as Method

Relationships are everything at WWAV. All our work grows from and is accountable to the power we know and share by being in deep, committed relationship with one another. This power is what Audre Lorde understood as the erotic, and recognizing it is what she believed could give us “the energy to pursue genuine change within our world.”³³ Relationships connect us with our truest knowledge about the operation of racial capitalism in our daily political lives—they also connect us with our most creative visions for contesting it.

That is because, to quote Mariame Kaba, “Everything worthwhile is done with other people.”³⁴ Her words underline a core principle shared by all who dare to imagine beyond the violence of our present, to dream with our eyes wide open, to share in the power of the erotic. WWAV’s work shines so brightly precisely *because* we do it together. Or, as Gloria Anzaldúa taught us, “We don’t want to be stars, but parts of constellations.”³⁵

This organizing truth is also our research method. *Fire Dreams* is a story that has been stitched through time, in space, through pictures and porch talks, in the context of our relationships as comrades, friends, and family, both born and chosen. The relationships that anchor this book are those among WWAV’s cofounders, Catherine and Danita; WWAV’s current leadership, Deon and Shaquita; and WWAV’s resident writer and board member, Laura. We have been joined by myriad others who have cycled in and out of staff positions at WWAV (many of whom readers will meet during the porch talk that grounds chapter 1), participant roles (for example, within the Emerge program profiled in chapter 4), and the national and international movements of which we are a part. *WE* are one.³⁶ The point of speaking in the collective “we” is not to erase the differences of labor but rather to emphasize the practice of solidarity that undergirds this work, which flows from and is accountable to Black women’s leadership.³⁷ There are also points in the text when we choose to step out of that “we” and speak about ourselves in third-person singular or plural, as you have already seen. We do this because rendering these differences visible and thus differently actionable is also part of our methodology and our work.

Our processes for turning ideas into theory, into practice, and into text are as living as the relationships in which we do this work.³⁸ At any given time, every member of the WWAV crew has their role. We learn these roles by stepping fully into our power and using our gifts in service of the knowledge we are making together, in community. As one of the writers in the crew, Laura’s role has most often been to commit the WWAV vision and practice to paper, working closely with Deon and the rest of the WWAV leadership to refine the message that is shared, and talking through drafts and dreams on the front porch, as we will show in the stories that ground each chapter. The labor of writing is inseparable from the organizing and theorizing that we are writing about. We have struggled with how to represent these complex processes of collaboration and world-making in a byline for academic publications; “with WWAV” is our attempt to signal the breadth of WWAV’s multitudes as a living, breathing organization, founded and led by Black women

in the South, which has also been dynamically shaped by the people doing the labor of turning its vision into practice. We use the preposition “with” here, as we do in all our published work, in the spirit of Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan in *Fumbling towards Repair*, who distinguish “with,” which signifies active, engaging copartnership, from terms that signal top-down, dependent, or disengaged forms of relationships, like “for” or “not.”³⁹ The story we tell in these pages is a story written *with* WWAV. And it is also a story shared *with* you, our readers.

Research as Survival

This praxis of relationships as method has guided our research since the fire. With nearly all material traces of WWAV’s decades of work destroyed, we held on to what could not be extinguished: our stories. There was the story of WWAV’s founding across that crowded health department conference table, and that of the methodical process through which our foremothers figured out how to do community outreach. And the stories shared on front porches or at home health parties organized by community gatekeepers. There were the stories of going to little holes-in-the-wall in Texas to teach service providers about doing community outreach, and those of the researchers who contracted with the WWAV foremothers to gather data on drug use and sex work and then stole the methods that WWAV used to get that data. And there were those of fighting the local government officials who kept trying to take away necessary supports from our community, and those of bringing a grassroots challenge against the state of Louisiana and *winning*. These stories were alive in the intimacies of our work on the ground, and they stretched deep into the histories of the long Black feminist freedom struggle in the US South and up through the national and international movements steadily rising around us.

Telling these stories together was life-giving. Doing so built a shared understanding throughout the WWAV network of what really happened. And that truth underscored a second: why telling the stories matters. These two truths drove our work to collect every life-giving ember we could into the Born in Flames Living Archive, which now fills this book.⁴⁰ That work started in the immediate aftermath of the arson attack, as we gathered what photographs, posters, and documents had survived the fire, most of which had been kept safe in the homes and private collections of our foremothers. In the summer of 2013, we began documenting the individual life histories of the

people who had shaped and been shaped by WWAV's decades of work. That summer we also started to document WWAV's work to build shared analysis with our communities through collective storytelling, most often on front porches. Our life history interview list included the founding WWAV collective members; all the people who had interned or volunteered with WWAV over the years; our current staff; the New Orleans community members who always had our backs (and those who did not); the organizers who moved the vision forward in their own ways, locally, nationally, and internationally; and anyone else these people said we needed to talk to. Our interview format was intentionally open-ended and expansive. We decided to ask each person we interviewed about the whole of their lives and work, not just the portions that explicitly related to WWAV, so that we could be present in our archive building as fully and complexly as WWAV has always been in community. Recording porch talks, community listening sessions, panel presentations, and other collective storytelling sessions further enabled us to document the methods through which WWAV had long turned everyday knowledge about the intimate and structural conditions that produce violence into a shared analysis of racial capitalism and a plan for coordinated action.

Building this living archive, thus, has been a relational art of listening to stories and also between them. We began from and proceeded through a critical hapticality: "The feel that what is to come is here."⁴¹ Through the act of telling stories, we learned to appreciate the persistence of WWAV's more than three decades of Black feminist theory, relationships, and methods for doing the work. But we were also struck again and again by how profoundly *new* every facet of the work our foremothers pioneered was. In relationship, in space, in time, WWAV was building an otherwise analysis of our social world—not as empty-able, domesticate-able, or dispossess-able, but rather as deeply and radically connective.⁴² The WWAV foremothers worked intimately and deliberately, moving among communities that had been banished or abandoned by our current order, so that they could nurture the connections that give life and sever those that kill.⁴³ Their work materialized in the shadows, beyond the glaring light of surveillance that willed the destruction of their communities, and through liberatory spatial practices of community building that kept them rooted in the land. On our own front porches, WWAV's life-giving, creative labors could be sustained and protected. There, our foremothers crafted vibrant worlds and shared histories—*fire dreams*—that held the potential for upending our current order's fatal logics. As we

cared for their stories together in the fire's wake, our research as survival began to crystallize into a counter-playbook for living and thriving otherwise.

Theory on the Ground

To imagine, much less to create, the world anew is profoundly rigorous work. The fire dreams that we elucidate in this book grow from our shared analysis of the lethal violence that racial capitalism has long wrought in our communities; they also embody the knowledge we have produced about Black feminist persistence in the Gulf Coast landscape and our methods for transforming that knowledge into praxis. To emphasize the sustained grassroots labor it takes to get these fire dreams going, we sometimes use the more descriptive term “theory on the ground”—theory developed in the midst of lived struggle, which carries forward the deeply enduring resistant visions of generations past and grows them in and through the geographies of the present, toward new and more possible futures.⁴⁴ But let us be clear: WWAV’s fire dreams are not *data* that need to be theorized (which is why we do not use the term “grounded theory”⁴⁵); they are *theory*. In approaching WWAV’s theory on the ground in this way, we are drawing on a long lineage of Black feminist scholarship that epistemologically privileges the everyday knowledge people most affected produce about the systems of violence governing their lives, and that commits to an engaged research praxis of justice and transformation.⁴⁶ We are also answering calls that reverberate throughout the academy and on the ground for decentering scholarly claims to legitimate knowledge production, and engaging the theoretical precision and world-transforming visions of grassroots theorists’ work and ways of knowing.

Saying this is an affirmation of our responsibility to one another and to this work. It is also a critique of how normative research ethics emphasize and perpetuate the harmful myth of “objectivity” as the ideal research position. Our theory on the ground exposes how demands for detachment and omniscience in research extend each step of the racial capitalism playbook: ISOLATE yourself from the people you “study”; BLAME them for the violence they survive by turning them into data; CRIMINALIZE them by attaching their lives and choices to academic theories that were only ever meant to oppress them (which are often also used to make laws that criminalize them); DESTABILIZE the knowledge they produce about their own lives and liberation; ERASE the communities in which this knowledge is

grown and made actionable; and then TAKE their theorizing and pass it off as your own. In operationalizing this critique into a counter-playbook for liberatory study and struggle, we have worked strongly in the lineage of Black feminist and abolitionist thinkers who have taught us that telling the stories about what we witness, theorize, envision, and practice is the most rigorous kind of knowledge we can make.⁴⁷ It is, because our lives depend on it. This critique also has palpable and material effects when it is smuggled into the space of academic inquiry. We might think of it as an epistemological and ontological match. WWAV's theory on the ground, like the fire dreams it ignites, transforms the territory of our texts. The goal is not to describe what is; it is to offer the theory and method needed to build together what must be.

By being in relationship at WWAV, we have learned a very different way of analyzing, and in turn transforming, our world. Too often when studies try to describe the contours of what we call the racial capitalism playbook, they end up “descriptively rehears[ing] anti-black violence” and extending its logics in the process.⁴⁸ Our current order profits from a perception that systems of white supremacist dispossession are totalizing, othering, debasing, isolating, eviscerating, and abstracting. What is obscured from view are the hands—the *intimacies*—through which this totalizing, debasing, isolating, and eviscerating abstraction happens.⁴⁹ What also becomes unfathomable are the otherwise possibilities that are always smoldering around us.⁵⁰ Human life is deeply and radically connective—in the clutch of an arresting officer's hand, in the cut of a judge's tongue, in the grimace of a store clerk, in the pressing of two fingers together to strike a match and set an organization's lifetime of work ablaze; and also in the scarce resources shared within community after a tragic attack, in the cascades of laughter that fill the darkest of institutions, in the interstitial expanses on which stories from the day are turned into plans for coordinated action.⁵¹ Telling stories, sharing our theory on the ground, brought these intimacies into focus. It also bent time and space. Together, we could feel how generations of southern Black feminist organizers were already pressing on our present, demanding justice.⁵²

After the fire, everyone at WWAV consistently spoke about how the arson attack underlined the long racist history of fire being used in the South to destroy Black geographies and the traditions they keep. And we also emphasized fire's transgressive history in Black women's abolitionist organizing, from the plantation economy to Jim Crow modernity to the present day.⁵³ By rising from the ashes—that is, by literally resurrecting ourselves on this contested land—WWAV would not only ensure that our work continued, we

would also carry forward the stories of this southern Black feminist tradition. These deep and enduring histories of struggle were anything but past; they also conjured futures that were always already present in time and in space. That is why our counter-playbook refuses the emptiness of linear time imposed by settler colonialism, disaster capitalism, and arsonist assault, which severs us from the fire dreams enchanting our present and hermetically seals them in a time called “past.” The labor of speaking the names of southern Black women organizers past as present, of braiding their stories together with WWAV’s own, and of carrying this Black feminist tradition across generations within the organization’s own history—this labor is also the power of the erotic.⁵⁴ As theory on the ground, it calls us into “a new way to ‘enter’ into space (conceptually and materially),” one that uncovers a generations-honed geographic story to build worlds in which it is possible to live and thrive, and not just survive.⁵⁵ And it attunes us to the fact that we already have the tools we need to free us. We live them every day.

This simultaneity of present, past, and future in WWAV’s fire dreams is constitutive of the enduring, enchanted Black geography of New Orleans.⁵⁶ Indeed, remembering this truth is, as M. Jacqui Alexander taught us, “the antidote to alienation, separation, and the amnesia that domination produces.”⁵⁷ It also calls to mind one of the elements of Alice Walker’s definition of a “womanist” as: “Traditionally capable, as in: ‘Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.’ Reply: ‘It wouldn’t be the first time.’”⁵⁸ Speaking the fire dreams that fill our post-arson present has enabled WWAV to care for these transgenerational memories and stories in this land we call home. Care is life-giving; it is sustaining. This care holds the residues and forms of life that have been able to persist despite constant and lethal forms of surveillance. It also holds the always present possibility of abolishing racial capitalism and living into the radical transformation of worlds otherwise. There and then, here and now, our fire dreams are the creative and life-giving sparks from which new and more livable futures are rising. Centering our fire dreams does not just change the angle from which the story is written. It changes history itself.

Living the Future Now

Through *Fire Dreams*, we claim our thirty-five years of life-giving work at the intersections of Black feminist struggle and the “wellsprings of dreams” that have steadily been sheltered in these grounds for generations.⁵⁹ We track

and refuse the histories of white supremacist dispossession, too often masked in the language of “progress,” which erase the worlds otherwise that Black New Orleanians have held and nurtured in this place.⁶⁰ We render visible the tactics through which Black women and the worlds they make are systematically being isolated-blamed-criminalized-destabilized-erased-taken by the racial capitalism playbook.⁶¹ We speak WWAV’s future as an organization founded and led by Black women, by and for the people of New Orleans, into existence. And we call you, our readers, into doing the same. Telling this story is the first contribution of this book.

Part of telling this story is *showing* how we made the story together. And here we are also calling you, our readers, in. From its inception, this research has been framed by and accountable to the life and death questions that unfolded at WWAV in real time in the wake of the fire. We have known that our findings would need to be leveraged as interventions against the academic narratives and theories that have for too long been complicit in the systematic erasure of generations of southern Black women organizers’ work—arson attacks of a different sort. However (or perhaps, *therefore*), the academy’s questions have not been at the center of our work; our commitment to liberation has. Showing how we have made this story together means showing how we have come to understand that commitment through action. It means showing when and how we have leveraged, ignored, or flat-out refused the conventions of academic knowledge production. It also means showing the principles and practices we have crafted in order to approach this research as a project of liberation. This showing is the reason that the argument of *Fire Dreams* is not linear, but rather accumulates. Because this project refuses the white supremacist violence of “progress,” it also refuses to yoke WWAV’s liberatory work to its forms for marshaling arguments. This ethnography unfolds cyclically, iteratively, simultaneously. Events and stories are shared and repeated again, as new and different knowledge is produced, in the tradition of Black feminist storytelling. This showing is the second contribution of this book.

Typically, academic texts aim to make one of these two types of interventions: to change what story is told, or to change how it is told—that is, to change the tools we use to tell it. By doing both at the same time, *Fire Dreams* underlines the inseparability of these two dimensions of liberatory praxis and scholarship. Together, they push us out of a speculative mode of imagining beyond and enjoin us in the work of building together what must be. Tina Campt calls this the “grammar of black feminist futurity,” which is defined by

“a politics of prefiguration that involves living the future *now*—as imperative rather than subjunctive—as striving for the future we want to see, right now, in the present.”⁶² The principal question of our research as survival—*What is so threatening about Black women’s leadership?*—underlines this imperative, as well as the contemporary and historical forces that have been leveraged to exterminate it. Throughout the years of our work together, we asked this question over and over again. It became a mantra of sorts, and provoked sustained, collective reflection. It mattered to us to be able to name that our existence is political, and to track how the world *must be* otherwise.⁶³ The labor of asking this question, however, was not the answer to it. But asking it over and over again did attune us to what was. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes in her essay “Are You Afraid of Black Feminists? Or Just Your Own Freedom?”:

I wonder if the freedom of Black women is a threat, not because it oppresses anyone else, but because it challenges all people to be free. Are you afraid of me and other Black feminists who consistently challenge oppression? Or are you afraid of the bravery it would take to live into your own freedom?⁶⁴

As the WWAV crew repeated in unison on the front porch during one of our collective storytelling sessions, “They ain’t ready.” This is also the threat of *Fire Dreams*. Again, this is not simply a book to be read. It is also a counter-playbook for liberatory study and struggle. It calls you, our readers, into doing this work with us.

Using Our Counter-Playbook

For this collaborative undertaking with one another and with you, we have developed a layered methodology which we distill in activist form as a four-part toolbox: accomplice, refusal, otherwise, and speech.⁶⁵ We invite you, our readers, not only to use these tools from our counter-playbook to read this book, but also to practice them in the worlds that you make. That means that we are calling you in as *accomplices*, our first methodological principle.

The demand from within WWAV after the fire—to tell the story of Black women’s organizing so that WWAV could not be erased or exceptionalized—is one that now reverberates globally. Hashtags like #TrustBlackWomen, #KnowYourHistory, #StopErasingUs, and #CiteBlackWomen have done immense work in the public sphere to push back on the mundane and exceptional forms of misogynoir through which Black women’s work is attacked,

invisibilized, and erased.⁶⁶ “Accomplice” is a methodological response to these calls. In using this term, we are invoking the contrast that Indigenous Action Media has drawn between accomplices and allies in their 2014 manifesto “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex.” Of academics and academia, they charge and demand:

Although sometimes directly from communities in struggle, intellectuals and academics also fit neatly in all of these categories. Their role in struggle can be extremely patronizing. In many cases the academic maintains institutional power above the knowledge and skill base of the community/ies in struggle. Intellectuals are most often fixated on un-learning oppression. These lot generally don't have their feet on the ground, but are quick to be critical of those who do. Should we desire to merely “unlearn” oppression, or to smash it to fucking pieces, and have its very existence gone? An accomplice as academic would seek ways to leverage resources and material support and/or betray their institution to further liberation struggles. An intellectual accomplice would strategize with, not for and not be afraid to pick up a hammer.⁶⁷

For Laura, as a white queer woman, an abolitionist, and an academic, to be an accomplice in this project is to be a partner at every level of the organizing, theorizing, and turning that theory into praxis. It is a commitment that Deon called her into, and one that she made to Deon, Shaquita, Catherine, and Danita before any part of our research as survival began. And it is why we have published *Fire Dreams* as a collectively authored book, with all royalties going to sustain WWAV's next thirty-five years of work. Being an accomplice is a skin-in-the-game approach of literally and figuratively driving the getaway car for the fugitive work already unfolding on the ground. Accompliceship is a stance that takes power away from the racial capitalism playbook and bolsters our liberatory work otherwise. To not simply call for a reconfiguration of local injustices, but to actually reconfigure; to not just make a case for reparations, but to actually repair. To, in our case, also not be afraid to pick up a match.

Accompliceship goes hand in hand with *refusal*, the second methodological principle in our counter-playbook. This project, in its very design, refuses the logics of violence that give shape to our world and that drove someone to set fire to WWAV; it also refuses the ways in which these same logics of violence prefigure the academy's own categories and modes of analysis. We understand this practice of refusal as it has been richly and deeply theorized

in Black, Indigenous, and postcolonial studies, as well as on the ground in our struggles for freedom and liberation.⁶⁸ WWAV's goal is not to make slow, incremental reforms to systems, nor to be incorporated into them. WWAV is trying to build a world in which it is possible to live and thrive, and not just survive. In the early days, our foremothers turned neighborhood bars into underground needle exchanges, so they could quite literally keep abandoned and dying Black people who used drugs alive. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Deon similarly opened WWAV up to sex workers who were being criminalized into oblivion, so that they could make home, find respite, and organize into more livable futures. These barroom needle exchanges, like the NO Justice sex worker story circles, were embodied and relational practices of WWAV's refusal of the ways in which our community was consistently caught in the webs of the isolate-blame-criminalize-destabilize-erase-take racial capitalism playbook. Refusal as methodological practice in this project undergirds the framing of our questions and every level of our research as survival: the designing of our undisciplined study; the centering of WWAV's theory on the ground; the choice of which other theories to engage with and how; the form and manner in which our research is shared and presented through stories, photographs, and porch talks; and the ends toward which this living archive of WWAV's work is leveraged.

There is already a hint of the *otherwise*, our third methodological principle, in this description of how accompliceship and refusal are operationalized as methods in the writing of *Fire Dreams*. The otherwise is the accumulation and the ungrounding; it holds the liberatory epistemologies of WWAV's transformative knowledge production and world-building. The otherwise has been gaining traction among scholars from numerous disciplines who want to "glimpse" or gesture at the possibility for making the world differently, often drawing on phenomenological and continental theoretical lineages. We use the otherwise, however, in the tradition of global liberation movements and academic fields founded in these social movements, such as Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American, postcolonial, queer, and gender studies.⁶⁹ These liberatory literatures not only attune us to the deeply enduring and resistant visions that could never fully be vanquished through colonialism, enslavement, and criminalization; they also emphasize how these often-hidden histories of struggle are growing, moving, and transforming our present into worlds otherwise. As Ashon Crawley wrote in the wake of the People's Uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, following the police murder of Black teenager Michael Brown:

To begin with the otherwise as word, as concept, is to presume that whatever we have is not all that is possible. Otherwise. It is a concept of internal difference, internal multiplicity. The otherwise is the disbelief in what is current and a movement towards, and an affirmation of, imagining other modes of social organization, other ways for us to be with each other. Otherwise as plentitude. Otherwise is the enunciation and concept of irreducible possibility, irreducible capacity, to create change, to be something else, to explore, to imagine, to live fully, freely, vibrantly. Otherwise Ferguson. Otherwise Gaza. Otherwise Detroit. Otherwise Worlds. Otherwise expresses an unrest and discontent, a seeking to conceive dreams that allow us to wake laughing, tears of joy in our eyes, dreams that have us saying, *I hope this comes true*.⁷⁰

Otherwise as methodology, thus, means being with and caring for the deeply enduring and resistant visions that all of us at WWAV are carrying forward to build new and more livable futures. The materiality and urgency of this work is also the reason that space—and specifically the embodied, relational space of front porches—takes on such significance in this research. WWAV is not trying to speculate on the possibility of the world otherwise; we are trying to build it here and now, in relationship, and through the interstitial geographies of our present where our resistant visions have long been sheltered and stoked.⁷¹

This labor of being with and caring for brings us to the final methodological principle in our counter-playbook: *speech*. Speech has been a central ethic and tool of this work—to speak the stories of WWAV’s pasts destroyed in the arson attack, to speak the analyses that WWAV has crafted, to speak also the histories of generations of Black women organizers in the South, to speak them alongside WWAV’s own. This speech is creative: to speak into existence. It gives voice and care to the otherwise possibilities already around us. It disrupts the aural purification of our current order. It enchants our world with the sounds and stories of a new world a-coming.⁷² This speech is also cautionary. Words have weight. They have power. As Toni Cade Bambara reminds us:

Words are to be taken seriously. I try to take seriously acts of language. Words set things in motion. I’ve seen them doing it. Words set up atmospheres, electrical fields, charges. I’ve felt them doing it. Words conjure. I try not to be careless about what I utter, write, sing. I’m careful about what I give voice to.⁷³

In refusing to speak in the grammar of “progress,” WWAV refuses to yoke our story to the eviscerating scripts of the racial capitalism playbook. Our refusal to speak some words also comes with the affirmation of WWAV’s own world-building speech as prefigurative of the Black feminist futures we need.

Taken together, these four tools—accomplice, refusal, otherwise, and speech—have enabled us to expand the boundaries, forms, and methods of the knowledge we are sharing with you. Using them has also been an exercise in restraint. There is danger in shining too much light on the things that have been carefully concealed so that they might endure. There is also a recklessness in assuming that things must be visible to matter.⁷⁴ No one at WWAV is clamoring for “recognition” by the systems of racial capitalism that will our destruction.⁷⁵ Our demand from the front porch is simple and uncompromising: to be able to live and thrive, not just survive. That demand is as much a refusal of what has been as it is a conjuring of what must be. “To be able to live and thrive” bespeaks a world in which fire dreams do not have to be sheltered from the glaring light of surveillance that wills their erasure, in which it is possible to simply be. This book is our counter-playbook for speaking that world into existence in real time, and we are grateful to share our stories and tools with you.

A Roadmap

Before we begin and take a seat on WWAV’s front porch, we want to offer you a roadmap for the journey ahead. In each chapter, the body text holds our conversations *about* WWAV—about doing the work, about the social movements of which we are a part, about the theory on the ground we have built over the last three decades. The endnotes hold our conversations *with* WWAV’s Black Feminist Library—conversations with what we have read, with the scholars, writers, poets, and artists who help us dream with our eyes wide open. As you progress through the pages of this book, we hope you will work with the theory on the ground that we share in the text—like the racial capitalism playbook and our counter-playbook—and reflect on it using the study and struggle practices of your own communities. That may look like drawing a diagram of the isolate-blame-criminalize-destabilize-erase-take playbook, or pulling out different steps and thinking them together in different orders, or sharing stories about what each process looks like in your own lives and work. Our theory on the ground is meant to be used, and we hope that you visit the digital space we have created for *Fire*

Dreams in the online home for the Born in Flames Living Archive to share your own creations.⁷⁶ We also invite you to bring your own literatures, libraries, and book altars to those threaded through the endnotes of *Fire Dreams*. Ultimately, we have worked to keep this book grounded in the organizing and scholarly literatures read most at WWAV. We know there are texts that are beyond the bounds of our own conversations, even if they are very much in line with it. We honor the connections you make and hope that you will share them with us. We are so excited to learn from the work that *Fire Dreams* inspires, supports, and enlivens for you in your corners of the world and to bring it back to our own.

Our story begins in chapter 1 on the front porch of WWAV's first organizational home after the arson attack. It is late 2015; WWAV's rebirth is certain. From this interstitial expanse of southern storytelling, on the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, we take stock of the so-called resilient city of New Orleans and ask what is concealed in its official language of strength in recovery. This porch talk is the stage for setting up the contest between two very different systems for producing space: the enduring, rebellious logics of WWAV's "front porch strategy" and the white supremacist violence of "resilience space" that was being operationalized across New Orleans by government officials and developers alike (and which fueled the arsonists who set fire to WWAV). "Resilience space" is naturalized by disconnecting it from the historical circumstances of its production. This makes it seem as if "resilience space" extends indefinitely into the past and therefore also indefinitely into the future. "Front porch strategy," as a result, is denied the possibility of coevalness; it seems always secondary, reactive, and dependent, or somehow outside the time that "resilience space" has colonized.⁷⁷ We undertake a double move: first, provincializing "resilience space" by suturing the historical circumstance of its production back to it; and second, simultaneously rendering visible the physical, historical, and epistemological depth of the *fire dreams* that fuel WWAV's own "front porch strategy."⁷⁸

To do this, chapter 2 dives into the intimate work of completing oral histories with the WWAV foremothers after the fire. Storytelling is essential theory and method at WWAV: we tell stories so that the work will continue. Through these oral histories, we enumerate the key principles for "doing the work"; we also build a sense of how these principles are bigger than WWAV in historical and geographic scale. WWAV makes worlds—worlds that connect deeply and radically, worlds that heal across generations. By listening

to our foremothers' stories of what really happened, we learn what it meant for them to live and work in the incommensurability between the realities of anti-Black violence and the Black feminist possibilities they were nevertheless living as now.

Their focus on radical connectivity becomes our mode of analysis in chapter 3 for understanding the criminalization of WWAV's community in the wake of Hurricane Katrina through the CANS statute and its mandated sex offender registration. We lift up the key educational strategy from WWAV's NO Justice Project: asking people to think about how many times they have to show their IDs in the course of a day, and then asking them to think about the impact of having "sex offender" stamped on it in block red letters, as well as the matrix of everyday surveillance that it would capacitate. We then use this strategy as a hermeneutic for opening a window into the everyday and intimate texture of Black women's criminalization in the New Orleans pasts. Here, we underline how, throughout American history, technologies of surveillance had to continually be expanded and reasserted by official state actors precisely *because of* Black women's refusal of them. This fact brings historical momentousness to WWAV's founding vision, the challenge of the CANS statute, and our organizing work since.

Chapter 4 takes up this emphasis on Black feminism as a worldmaking politics and practice in order to trace the work of rebuilding WWAV after the fire. There are two levels to this tracing: first, Deon and Shaquita's constant work on the road to speak WWAV's fire dreams nationally and globally; and second, the steady reconfiguration by staff and partners of WWAV's New Orleans-based work in and for community. By tacking back and forth between these scales constantly, this chapter shows the dynamism of fire dreams, as the dreams that had long been sheltered at WWAV were stoked on the ground and on the international stage, in and through movements for liberation rising up worldwide. In so doing, we also illuminate how these multiple registers of doing the work steadily refined, reconfigured, and at times transformed the futures being imagined.

This local, national, and global work makes possible WWAV's homecoming in 2015. Chapter 5 opens on move-in day and flows with the WWAV foremothers and the organization's newer staff as they feel through the full archive of the organization's work that is being unpacked now that WWAV can again take place and have a space. It also zooms out temporally and spatially to reckon with how past, present, and future are held in the intimacy

of this moment. In 2022, as we approached the tenth anniversary of the arson attack, our country was burning. It was hardly the first time. In the epilogue, we reflect on the stories and the practices—the what and the why, the dreams and the fire—that made possible WWAV’s rising from the ashes. And we ask how we can be accomplices in bringing into being more livable futures by blowing on the creative and life-giving embers that are already smoldering around us.

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NOTES

Introduction: Born in Flames

- 1 At the time of the arson attack, Norman C. Francis Parkway was still named Jefferson Davis Parkway. In August 2020, following sustained protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder by the Minneapolis Police Department, the New Orleans City Council unanimously voted to rename this street in honor of Dr. Francis, a Black educator and institution builder whose vision transformed Xavier University of Louisiana during his tenure as president from 1968 to 2015.
- 2 Throughout this book, we mirror the intentional (non)capitalization of names that activists themselves use.
- 3 Deon Haywood recounted this story during her presentation at the Know Her Truths: Advancing Justice for Women and Girls of Color Conference organized by the Anna Julia Cooper Center at Wake Forest University on April 29, 2016. See Haywood et al., "Front Porch Strategy: Organizing for Black Women's Lives at the Intersection of Service, Activism, and Research"; Speeches, Presentations, and Writings in the Born in Flames Living Archive.
- 4 Haywood et al., "Front Porch Strategy."
- 5 The first three layers of this playbook map onto Beth Richie's discussion in *Arrested Justice* of the intersections among intimate, community, and state violence against Black women, or what she calls the "violence matrix" (133).
- 6 In describing this as a "racial capitalism playbook," we are building on and contributing to generations of collective work rooted in a commitment to Black liberation. Since the first usage of "racial capitalism" by anti-apartheid activists in South Africa to its elaboration by political theorist Cedric J. Robinson (*Black Marxism*, 1983), the concept has underlined the interlocking relationships between race and class in global capitalism. We specifically draw

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on Ruth Wilson Gilmore's "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," which helps us understand the connections among what she calls "racial capitalism's dramatically scaled cycles of place-making" (266), as well as how criminalization functions in each cycle by naturalizing certain people, bodies, ways of being, and forms of life as always already out of place.

- 7 In emphasizing the continuities among these historically changing and nevertheless interconnected systems of racial capitalism, and also emphasizing the precarity of these systems in the face of the constant rebellion by Native Americans, Africans, Afro-Creoles, and African Americans, we are building on the work of Clyde Woods, especially his contribution to Woods, Camp, and Pulido, *Development Drowned and Reborn*, and carrying forward the stories that have long circulated among Black and Indigenous peoples in the Louisiana Gulf Coast. We will return to these systems in chapter 1. We also take inspiration from Rashauna Johnson's meticulous reconstruction of enslaved people's social and cultural worlds in antebellum New Orleans in *Slavery's Metropolis*, and Jessica Marie Johnson's history of how Black women in the Atlantic world, and in New Orleans specifically, used their intimate and kinship ties to develop a practice of freedom that laid the groundwork for nineteenth-century emancipation struggles in *Wicked Flesh*.
- 8 As Saidiya Hartman writes in *Lose Your Mother*, "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery" (6).
- 9 Joseph Canizaro, one of New Orleans's wealthiest developers, quoted in Rivlin, "Mogul Who Would Rebuild New Orleans." See also Saulny, "Clamoring to Come Home to New Orleans Projects."
- 10 We revisit "otherwise" in greater theoretical depth at the end of this introduction. What is important to underline now is that the "otherwise" is not something to speculate or abstractly imagine. It is already *here* with us.
- 11 Women With A Vision, "Rebuilding Our Archive"; Speeches, Presentations, and Writings in the Born in Flames Living Archive.
- 12 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13. We discuss the theories and methods we made together in the second half of the introduction. At this point, we want to note that we have chosen to use real names throughout this book (except when stated otherwise) as a practice of our research as survival and a refusal of the erasure willed against us.
- 13 We trace this history of violence against Black women back through Jim Crow terror with the support of Danielle L. McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street*, and back through chattel slavery with Angela Davis's "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." Our Black Feminist Library includes many more histories and biographies of Black women's organizing in the South and across the nation, with focuses on reparations, mutual aid, anticriminalization work, housing advocacy, and other interlocking struggles. We explore this library in depth in chapter 4.

- 14 Rodney, *Grounding with My Brothers*, xi; see especially the introduction to the 2019 edition by Carole Boyce-Davies.
- 15 See, e.g., Berry, *My Face Is Black Is True*; Ritchie, *Invisible No More*; Kaba, *We Do This 'til We Free Us*; Kaba and Ritchie, *No More Police*; Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*; Cohen, *Democracy Remixed*; Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens"; Haley, *No Mercy Here*; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*; Thuma, *All Our Trials*.
- 16 Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem," in *Race Rebels*, 78.
- 17 See especially McKittrick and Woods, "No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean"; and Katz, "Bad Elements."
- 18 The phrase "interlocking systems of oppression" was introduced by the Black feminist Combahee River Collective in their 1977 "Combahee River Collective Statement" and further developed as "intersectionality" by Kimberlé Crenshaw in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" and "Mapping the Margins." The triad of "white supremacy, patriarchy, and bigotry" is one that Desiree Evans advanced as part of the porch talk that grounds chapter 1. See "Resilience"; Collective Storytelling Sessions in the Born in Flames Living Archive.
- 19 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 2.
- 20 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*; A. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*; Imarisha and brown, *Octavia's Brood*.
- 21 We call this "a meeting at the crossroads" to underline its power for our foremothers and the boundary they crossed together. In many Black religious traditions, the crossroads symbolizes a mystical barrier that separates the material world from that of the ancestors and the divine. A meeting at the crossroads thus conjures the presence of generations past, just as it opens pathways toward new futures for what must become.
- 22 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Mortality Attributable to HIV Infection among Persons Aged 25–44 Years."
- 23 We will return to this point in chapter 2, using Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism from *Golden Gulag*: "the state-sanctioned and/or legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies" (28).
- 24 Center for Constitutional Rights, "Just a Talking Crime." We discuss these statistics, as well as the tremendous research that the NO Justice legal team undertook to produce them, in chapter 3.
- 25 See, for example, Haywood, "OUR WIN"; Speeches, Letters, and Writings in the Born in Flames Living Archive. For the decision, see Center for Constitutional Rights, "Judge Rules That Sex-Offender Registration for 'Crime Against Nature by Solicitation' Convictions Is Unconstitutional." See also Alexis Agathocleous's "When Power Yields to Justice" and "Building a

Movement for Justice”; and Andrea Ritchie’s “Crimes Against Nature” and *Invisible No More*.

- 26 See Kaba and Ritchie, *No More Police*; A. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*; Bierria, Caruthers, and Lober, *Abolition Feminisms Vol. 1* and *Abolition Feminisms Vol. 2*; and Bernstein, “Sexual Politics of the ‘New Abolitionism.’” We intentionally specify the Black feminist and abolition feminist lineages we work in due to the co-optation of “abolitionism” by anti-sex work activists. See, e.g., Bernstein, “The Sexual Politics of the ‘New Abolitionism.’”
- 27 These words were spoken by Desiree Evans during the porch talk that grounds chapter 1. See “Resilience”; Collective Storytelling Sessions in the Born in Flames Living Archive.
- 28 Their work around HIV criminalization in Philadelphia in the early 2000s is the focus of McTighe, “Our Relationships Carry the Movement.” See also McTighe, Shabazz-El, and Miller, “Refusing to Vanish.”
- 29 This structural approach brings into focus the immediate and long-term health impacts of incarceration’s sustained destruction of familial bonds, social support systems, economic relations, and more. Rucker Johnson and Steven Raphael (“Effects of Male Incarceration,” 2009) were among the first to show that the structural link among race, imprisonment, and HIV is so strong that it almost completely explains the disproportionate impact of HIV in the Black community. See also Fullilove, “African Americans, Health Disparities and HIV/AIDS.”
- 30 McTighe, “Project UNSHACKLE.”
- 31 In his keywords essay “Affect,” Joshua Javier Guzmán explores the power of relational bonds through a beautiful reading of Lizzie Borden’s film *Born in Flames* (1983), emphasizing the “textured ways we come to know about each other’s suffering—the *sensing* of commonality—while transmitting a willful desire to feel the world differently” (16, emphasis in original). See Guzmán, “Affect” in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*. As Audre Lorde taught us, this is the power of the erotic, of love between women.
- 32 We titled the oral history project “Born in Flames” because this was a core slogan of our rebuilding after the arson attack; it was also a shout-out to Lizzie Borden’s film of the same name. We discuss in the next section of the introduction how this oral history project grew into the Born in Flames Living Archive, which fills this book.
- 33 Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic” in *Sister Outsider*.
- 34 Ewing, “Mariame Kaba.”
- 35 Anzaldúa, “New Speakers” in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, 24–25.
- 36 In chapter 2, we discuss this principle of solidarity at WWAV through a lesson from Deon on how and why “WEEEEEE are one.” We further explore the complexities of difference in this solidarity in chapter 4.

- 37 See Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange's "Toward Thick Solidarity." We also appreciate how they experiment with a "polyvocal *us*" in the essay Shange and Liu, "Solidarity-as-Debt," inviting readers to step in and out of their linked yet distinct subject positions.
- 38 Karen Fields's "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly," written with her grandmother Mamie Garvin Fields, is a model of precisely the kinds of intergenerational and extra-academic modes of analysis and expertise that we are valuing and centering through our practice of collective authorship in this book.
- 39 Kaba and Hassan, *Fumbling towards Repair*, 67.
- 40 See the Born in Flames Living Archive collection of sources at the conclusion of this book, and explore the archive online at borninflames.com. Excerpts from the Born in Flames Living Archive are included in each chapter in the porch talks, life history interviews, speeches, and writings that we quote at length, as well as in the photographs and flyers that are woven throughout. See chapter 5 for a deeper discussion of the theory and method of the living archive's assemblage.
- 41 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 98.
- 42 Katherine McKittrick's "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place" is a model for us in tracing systems of violence without reproducing the analytical terms of our current order.
- 43 Ruth Wilson Gilmore's "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference" guides our theorization of nurturing life-giving connections and severing fatal ones, as well as our insistence that by centering communities most vulnerable to the racial capitalism playbook, we can develop new strategies for organizing for liberation, our counter-playbook.
- 44 McTighe, with Women With A Vision, "Theory on the Ground."
- 45 "Grounded theory" is an inductive research methodology widely practiced in the social sciences. First developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (*Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 1967), grounded theory prescribes a dynamic and cyclical process of conducting research, coding data, developing conceptual categories, and generating theory.
- 46 This dual commitment grounds Beth Richie's *Arrested Justice* (127–28). We also take inspiration from the Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement"; Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins"; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race."
- 47 Our work is unapologetically aligned with the politics of Black women's studies. As Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull and Barbara Smith write in their introduction to *But Some of Us Are Brave*, "Black women's studies must consider as primary the knowledge that will save Black women's lives." In this commitment, they distinguish Black women's studies from what they describe

as the reification of white male thought: “coldly ‘objective’ scholarship that changes nothing” (xxv). The pages of *But Some of Us Are Brave* gather essays, bibliographies, and syllabi of Black feminist thought, showing precisely what these foremothers mean when they insist that “research/criticism is not an academic/intellectual game,” but rather “a pursuit with social meanings rooted in the ‘real world’” in which the personal is political and the scholarly stance is engaged (193). See Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*.

We also have many touchstones in the story-driven methods of our research as survival. Patricia J. Williams’s autobiographical *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* has long been a model for illuminating the intersections of race, gender, and class through personal reflection. Likewise, Katherine McKittrick’s *Dear Science and Other Stories* centers Black storytelling and stories as strategies of invention and collaboration for living outside prevailing knowledge systems. We also take inspiration from the participatory action research done by and for abolitionist organizers, including Young Women’s Empowerment Project’s *Girls Do What They Have to Do to Survive* and BreakOUT!’s *We Deserve Better*.

- 48 McKittrick, “Mathematics Black Life,” 18.
- 49 Our thinking on intimacies has developed in conversation with Lisa Lowe’s *Intimacies on Four Continents* and Micol Seigel’s *Violence Work*.
- 50 Thomas, *Exceptional Violence*, 230–38.
- 51 In tracing these intimate registers of organized resistance, we are thinking of Cedric J. Robinson’s short chapter “The Nature of the Black Radical Tradition” in *Black Marxism*, especially his discussion of landed struggle and spiritual imaginaries.
- 52 As Saidiya Hartman writes in *Lose Your Mother*, “If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison” (133).
- 53 See A. Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves”; and Haley, *No Mercy Here*, chapter 5.
- 54 This labor also calls to mind Judith Casselberry’s concept of “spiritual labor” in *Labors of Faith*, her ethnography of Black women in the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith Inc. in Harlem, which helpfully reorients our well-worn attention to agency in the study of Black religion. It further recalls Marla F. Frederick’s *Between Sundays*, a careful study of “spirituality” in the lives of Black religious women in the rural South as the space through which social conditions are understood, interpreted, and reshaped.
- 55 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxvi.
- 56 In conceptualizing time in this way, we are indebted to Deborah Thomas’s “Time and the Otherwise,” in which she describes time as “neither as linear

nor cyclical, but as simultaneous, where the future, past, and present are mutually constitutive and have the potential to be coincidentally influential” (177).

- 57 Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 14.
- 58 Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi. We are grateful to Judith Weisenfeld for reflecting to us this connection with Walker's definition.
- 59 Woods, "Katrina's World," 430.
- 60 Thomas, "Time and the Otherwise."
- 61 Our work here builds on that of Shana M. griffin and other members of the INCITE! New Orleans chapter, who organized tirelessly after the storm to ensure that any community plan for rebuilding had a gender analysis and a demand for community accountability. See Bierria, Liebenthal, and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, "To Render Ourselves Visible"; griffin, "An Unfragmented Movement"; griffin, "The Women of New Orleans after Katrina"; and griffin, "The Politics of Reproductive Violence." We also stand in solidarity with New Orleans education activists like Ashana Bigard, who taught everyone in our movements during her July 18, 2015, testimony at the African American Policy Forum's "Breaking the Silence" town hall: "To buy into the narrative of the [charter school] experiment, you need to buy into the idea that Black women are complicit in the under-education of Black children."
- 62 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17. The idea of "prefigurative politics," as well as the term itself, has its roots in the anarchist and antiauthoritarian traditions, first gaining visibility with the revolutionary social movements that blossomed after 1968 and then again with the post-1999 movements opposing neoliberal globalization.
- 63 We return to #MyExistenceIsPolitical as core WWAV theory on the ground in chapter 5.
- 64 Gumbs, "Are You Afraid of Black Feminists?"
- 65 In realizing this method on the page, Aimee Meredith Cox's *Shapeshifters* has been an uncompromising model.
- 66 The term "misogynoir" was coined by Moya Bailey in 2010 to name the particular intersection of anti-Black racism and misogyny in Black cisgender and transgender women's lives, especially in digital culture spaces. In her 2021 book *Misogynoir Transformed*, Bailey explores this groundbreaking concept, as well as the world-building work of Black women's digital resistance.
- 67 Indigenous Action Media, "Accomplices Not Allies."
- 68 Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus* has helped shape a decade of scholarship on "the politics of refusal." We are especially moved by our friend and comrade Savannah Shange's work of refusal in "Black Girl Ordinary."
- 69 Essential works for us include Ashon Crawley's *Blackpentecostal Breath* and the *Otherwise Worlds* volume coedited by Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro,

and Andrea Smith. Laura did foundational work on this concept in the “An Otherwise Anthropology” collection she coedited and coconvened with Megan Raschig.

- 70 Crawley, “Otherwise, Ferguson,” emphasis in original.
- 71 On this incitement to “worldmaking,” see Dorinne K. Kondo’s *Worldmaking*; and Adom Getachew’s *Worldmaking after Empire*.
- 72 See, for example, Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming*. In thinking about sound in this way, we emphasize the ethics of listening and refuse long-standing post-Enlightenment sensory preoccupations that elevated sight as the sense of domination and degraded hearing as a site of submission (e.g., to be filled with sound). See Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*.
- 73 Bambara, “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyhow.”
- 74 Our respect for concealment and refusal of visibility here aligns with what Édouard Glissant has called “the right to opacity.” See Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.
- 75 Elizabeth Povinelli’s *The Cunning of Recognition* attunes us to the ways in which the modern project of liberal multiculturalism extends colonial legacies of power by demanding that Black and Indigenous people identify with and perform impossible standards of so-called authentic traditional culture in order to gain state recognition. In McTighe and Haywood, “Front Porch Revolution,” Laura and Deon examine this “cunning of recognition” through the post-Katrina commodification and parading of Black New Orleanian culture amid the organized abandonment of the city’s Black geographies and Black people. See also Thomas, *Desire and Disaster in New Orleans*.
- 76 See borninflames.com.
- 77 In *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian explores the denial of coevalness, which he terms “allochronism,” to illuminate how anthropologists create a temporal distance between the observer and the observed, between the West and the rest, thereby naturalizing the time of the West as now/real, and the time of the rest as past/primitive.
- 78 We use “provincializing” as a critical method developed by postcolonial scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (*Provincializing Europe*) and Talal Asad (*Genealogies of Religion*) to call attention to the ways in which settler colonial understandings (in our case, of the new New Orleans) are generalized as universal theories in ways that “other” the experiences of the colonized.

Chapter 1: Front Porch Strategy

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