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## REVIEWS

### **TOOTH FOR AN EYE: A CHOROGRAPHY OF VIOLENCE IN ORLEANS PARISH, DEBORAH LUSTER (2011)**

Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 64 pp., 29 illustrations  
ISBN: 1931885966, h/bk, \$75

*Reviewed by Eva Díaz, Pratt Institute*

I first encountered Deborah Luster's work at the Prospect. 1 Biennial in New Orleans in 2008. A selection of photographs from her *Tooth for an Eye* project were displayed at the Old US Mint, a hybrid treasury museum/contemporary arts venue on Esplanade on the edge of the French Quarter. In the series of large-scale, circular-format, black-and-white photographs, Luster documents sites in New Orleans where murders have taken place. It wasn't until I saw the work in a different location, at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York in February 2011, that I noticed the extended title given to the project: *A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish*, which also subtitles the book published this spring following the exhibition. Upon first appraisal, I misread 'chorography of violence' as 'choreography of violence', possibly because I'd never seen the word 'chorography' before coming across it in Luster's work.

According to Ptolemy's second century BC text *Geographia*, chorography is the study of small parts of the world, as opposed to geography, which demands a more scientific surveying of larger tracts of land and nations. The root 'choro' derives from the Greek word *choros*, or place; whereas choreography is rooted in the Greek *choreia*, or circle dance; two very different words, with quite distinct implications. My misreading – a choreography of violence in Orleans Parish – might imply that the artist herself was organizing these deaths, an unlikely interpretation. Certainly, Luster, like any photographer, *does* construct her images – she researches accounts of murders, and travels to locations around New Orleans in which the deaths took place and photographs these sites; she is obviously directing the viewer's experience of these histories and

1. In this sense Luster's choice of 'chorography' is interesting as an update of the Situationist's notion of psychogeography, of a study of more subjective experiences of place than what maps offer.
2. I have aggregated data on the numbers of murders from several sources. The total number of murders in 2005, the year of Hurricane Katrina, is in dispute as either 210 or 211. Additionally, several deaths previously deemed "justifiable homicides" on the part of the NOPD in the days following the hurricane are also being reconsidered as possible murders. For information about the dispute, see <http://www.bestofneworleans.com/gambit/spike-lee-danziger-and-nopd-statistics/Content?oid=1278082>. Please see <http://www.city-data.com/crime/crime-New-Orleans-Louisiana.html> for murder data (note the data for years 2005 and 2007 (209 murders) is missing; 2007 data can be found in Wellford et al. (2011) and 2005 data is found compared with 2006 at [http://www.nola.gov/GOVERNMENT/NOPD/Crime-Stats/2006-Yearly-Crime-Statistics/Stats on race and gender](http://www.nola.gov/GOVERNMENT/NOPD/Crime-Stats/2006-Yearly-Crime-Statistics/Stats%20on%20race%20and%20gender) taken from Wellford et al. (2011).

places. However, my assumption was that the (erroneous) word choreography implied *others* orchestrated the events she documented. In so many of her works, the same locations recur as sites of violence, as though there were some coordination or planning at play. Indeed, some places in New Orleans are visited by murder with unnerving regularity, on two, three or even four distinct occasions, the way dancers repeatedly hit their marks on the stage, every single night of the run of a show. Choreography is about repetition, about composing gestures, about rehearsing and executing those movements in a repeatable way. Chorography is about place, about mapping at a small scale; Ptolemy believed it should be undertaken by draftsmen and artists, as they were better prepared to represent details of local experience.<sup>1</sup> Not to dwell on that absent 'e' too long, but murder in New Orleans – the subject of Luster's book – intersects choreography and chorography, movement and place, intention and accident, repetition and trauma, in very specific ways. Looking at these violent events with hindsight, once you've seen the script of the inexorable finality of a death, these occurrences begin to feel depressingly practiced, predictable even. For the last twenty years, New Orleans has had the highest murder rate in the United States, a rate ten times the national average, which also makes it the third most violent city in the world. According to the best estimate, 2323 individuals were murdered in the city in the years 2000–2010; in 2009, a year not uncharacteristic in terms of these statistics, 91.5 per cent of those killed were black.<sup>2</sup> Most murders in New Orleans take place in historically black areas like the 1st and 5th Districts, which include the neighborhoods of Tremé, Mid-City, Faubourg Marigny, the 7th Ward, Bywater, the 9th Ward, and St. Roch (Wellford et al. 2011: 18). It is estimated that at least a quarter of the murder victims in New Orleans do not know their assailant; of these a great deal are casualties of seemingly random killings: drive-by shootings, botched robberies and muggings or stray bullets. The victims were in the wrong place at the wrong time; unfortunately for many, the wrong place is their own neighborhood. In my misreading, my insertion of that little 'e', I believe I was thinking about these kinds of systemic repetitions.

You can't talk about New Orleans without sensing that the city is a lightning rod for debates about the reproduction of inequality in the United States. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that what happened to Nola in the wake of Hurricane Katrina – the failure of the levees coupled with a hapless if not negligent response by a disinvested government – was a galvanic moment for ongoing critiques of corporate neo-liberalism internationally. One could even argue that demands for change that carried Barack Obama to the presidency grew out of public outrage about the Bush Administration's callous response to the catastrophe.

And you can't talk about culture in New Orleans without talking about race or class, either. The vibrancy of the city's music, food, architecture; of Carnival, second line parades and jazz funerals, exists in a perplexing inter-relationship to the near constant cycles of poverty and violence in the region. Sometimes it feels like the pleasures of bread and circuses act as a compensatory valve for the *real* project of New Orleans: the reproduction of social and racial disparities (in a city that was once the capital of the nation's slave trade, for example, why are 91.5 per cent of the murdered African Americans?)

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Luster's black and white images are round, shaped like peepholes or gun scopes. The circular format results from the particular lens she used in the

project. Rather than framing the image to the square or rectangular format of the camera's film, it offers a complete image of the view through the lens. As the artist describes:

These prints are 49 inches high, by about 62 inches across ... I have an old 8 x 10 Deardorff camera that I'd never used before and I had bought a lot of old lenses on eBay, so I started throwing all these lenses on this 8 x 10 camera and one of the lenses formed a perfect circle. It didn't cover the entire film plane, so you see what the lens sees in its entirety, it's surrounded by this little bit of fall-off called 'the circle of confusion'; I don't know, it images the city in a slightly different way, it does something to the grid, it reinforces the void. I thought 'yes this is it' so these are all circles, all of these images.

(Kitchen Sisters 2011)

The images were taken in extended, 90-second exposures, resulting in a great deal of ghostly blur in the prints. Anything moved by wind, or traveling through the image, becomes spectral and indistinct. Given the charged nature of these sites, where blood has been spilled and lives taken, these phantom presences create visually complex surfaces that are simultaneously disconcerting and eerie. In one image, taken from the point of view of the victim's parked car looking on to the murder scene, a large bush trembles with preternatural force. Buffeted by the wind, the shrub is captured in Luster's photo as a large and angry presence. In this case, 22-year-old Adolph Grimes III was shot by NOPD undercover agents early on New Year's Day, 2009, as he sat in front of his grandmother's house. According to Luster's deadpan textual commentary in the *Tooth for an Eye* book, 'Grimes was shot 14 times (12 times in the back) ... The case is under Federal investigation'.<sup>3</sup> This and other information about the crime is conveyed to the reader in Luster's careful cursive handwriting, facing the image, as indeed is the case for each site she documents. Each record is brief but methodical and employs the visual codes of the archive: a rubber stamp creates a template that names the project in its heading and retains blank spaces for identifying facts such as the location, date, names of victims and other notes. In these blanks, Luster painstakingly outlines the essential details of the murders. In the upper right of each grid is a second stamp with two numbers separated by a dash, a private code of Luster's project, filling in the enigmatically titled 'disarchive' section.

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I'm still hung up on that little 'e' I imagined in Luster's title. Probably because language is so important to her project, and captions are essential. In this sense, *Tooth for an Eye* is particularly suited to a book format, in which information about the victims and murder sites faces the large, circular images of the crime scenes. Luster's thoughtful essay at the conclusion of the book is a fitting coda to this iteration of her project documenting 28 crime scenes, abbreviated as it is from the many she has documented. But 'chorography' isn't the only puzzling aspect of Luster's title that invites further consideration. 'Tooth for an eye' is a deceptively familiar axiom, but Luster has transformed its original phrasing. She altered the 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' proverb found throughout the Bible into something

3. Grimes comes up again in Luster's book; it haunts her, one could say. Luster documents another police brutality case, in which 32-year-old Kim Marie Groves was shot in the head on 13 October 1994. According to Luster, 'N.O.P.D. Officer Len Davis ordered Paul "Cool" Hardy, a drug dealer, to murder Grimes in retaliation for her filing of a complaint of brutality against Davis and his partner' (note Luster's parapractic substitution of 'Grimes' for 'Groves').

more ambiguous and strange. The first occurrence of the saying is God’s command in Exodus 21: 22-25:

If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman’s husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

(New King James Version 1982)

In the New Testament, in Matthew 5: 38-40, a contradicting theological principle is put forward by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.

(New King James Version 1982)

The Old Testament usage is known as the juridical principle *lex talionis*, Latin for ‘law of retaliation’, which asserts that a punishment should equal the



Tooth for an Eye 05-09

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Location  
*St. Philip, near Park (Eastern Ave.) (Lover)*

Date(s)  
*September 16, 1989* .. *January 6, 2001*

Name(s)  
*Jabroni, Lora (60)* .. *Richard Schroeder (60)*

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Notes: *Lora - back with ball cut* .. *Schroeder - gunshot*

Tooth for an Eye 05-15

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Location  
*1500 Hoch Street, Street* .. *(7<sup>th</sup> Ward)*

Date(s)  
*September 14, 1984* .. *November 27, 2001 4:30pm*

Name(s)  
*Arthur Alvarn (55)* .. *Leonard Mitchell (49)*

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Notes: *Hit in head with the iron* .. *Gunshot to torso, flying on sidewalk*

Figures 1–4: From the book: Deborah Luster, *Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish*. (2011) Published by Twin Palms Publishers, Santa Fe. Photographs are toned silver gelatin; images courtesy the artist, Twin Palms Publishers, and Jack Shainman Gallery.

crime in severity. This retributive code of 'like for like' is opposed by Jesus in his call for generosity in the face of violence – what others have called the ethic of Christian pacifism. Luster transforms the saying into a third formulation – 'a tooth for an eye'. One possible meaning of this revision could be that the crime should not exceed the punishment; that the already retaliatory notion of exact retribution should not become something more punitive. Yet a literal reading of Luster's reformulation could be construed as contending that a punishment, though still retaliative, should be less harsh than the crime. We have more teeth than our more essential single pair of eyes, so a tooth for an eye would be a relatively lenient sentence (an eye for a tooth would be the more severe punishment).

But could it instead mean that her photography has bite, that it 'has teeth'? That her acts of witnessing, sometimes long after the murders were perpetrated, produce an archive empowering new considerations of the role of violence in society, that may even galvanize viewers to action? Luster's images picture an absent population, an absent public one could say, of New Orleans. But she shows it to *us*, the living, those who can use her memorialization of erased lives, these often forgotten people, in order to rethink why this large, missing public continues to be taken before its time.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Eva Díaz is Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art at Pratt Institute in New York City. She is currently revising her book on Black Mountain College called *Chance and Design*, which focuses on rival methodologies of experimentation practiced by three key Black Mountain teachers in the late 1940s and early 1950s: Josef Albers, John Cage and Buckminster Fuller. Her writing has appeared in magazines and journals such as *The Art Bulletin*, *Art Journal*, *Art in America*, *Cabinet*, *Frieze* and *Grey Room*, and she is a regular contributor to *Artforum*.