
Walking Through “Death Alley”: Churches on Vermont Avenue and Narratives of Life

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This article explores the intersection between religion and the city as they appear on sidewalk life. According to the urban planner Jane Jacobs, the sidewalk becomes both the infrastructure that governs and influences city life, and a space that reflects the vibrancy of human life. This article takes as its focus a particular street in the Los Angeles area known as Vermont Avenue. This street was described in the *LA Times* (Cruz & Schwencke) by a detective in 2014 as “death alley” due to the high homicide rates that had taken place in it since 2007. Such a phrase is close to the biblical term “death valley,” which can be seen in expressions like: “the valley of the shadow of death” (Psa. 23:4, English Standard Version). At times, within such biblical passages that refer to death, there is also mentioned a *passing through*, or a transformation from death to life. On Vermont Avenue, or ‘death alley,’ its sidewalks and streets became spaces where death occurred. But is there a way to redefine these sidewalks and streets? To question such narratives of death this article uses walking methods and visual sociology—including photography and spatial semiotics as explored by Roman Jakobson—to explore religion on the streets and to consider how Vermont Avenue can be reframed as a street or road possessing narratives of life. The psalmist said: “I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” thus, the valley is meant to be passed through; death is a reality, but it is not a static narrative. Through the process of walking through this street, I consider how urban churches and religion on the streets embody what I term an *urban gospel poetics*, which reminds us of how such urban churches draw on Christian themes to fight against death and urban violence.

Streets tell stories. If you look closely enough into a street’s details—its buildings, roads, street signs, sidewalks, foot-traffic and its conditions—you may begin to learn a fragment of its tale. As I headed north on Vermont Avenue in South Central Los Angeles, I began near the Vermont/Athens Metro Train Station. Near the freeway, there was waste—shopping carts, mattresses, and trash scattered about on the floor. As I listened to cars pass swiftly on the I-105 freeway, I turned my attention to the train station underneath the large concrete bridge constructed over the freeway. A large design of a tree on one of the large pillars caught my eye. It was made up of green, black and white square tiles. The different hues of green and black caused the tree to take on a more realistic shape—yet the tiles were apparent. Metro train stations in the urban spaces of Los Angeles often have unique images of nature and LA culture. It reminds us of the city’s

attempt to beautify the streets with scenes of life. I began to walk down Vermont Avenue and spotted other forms of life that come from the religious communities that are situated on this street. On this Saturday morning, Vermont Avenue was quiet and empty, yet with time, people slowly appeared and the avenue trickled with more life. Walking from one street to the next, I noticed several remnants of religion on the sidewalk: signs with short evangelical phrases (i.e. “Jesus, The Way, The Truth, The Life, John 14:6”), multiple storefront churches on one block with biblical messages on their walls, tiles of Christian iconography, and murals that depict religious imagery or echo its sentiments. As I walked a bit further, I then saw a black boy’s face on a large yellow wall of a mechanic-shop with a text that read: “DOB 7/30/01” and “DOD 2/4/18.” It was a mural that memorialized a life that was too short. The boy’s name was AJ

(Anthony "AJ" Weber). While the mural remembers AJ's life, it also reminds us of the cold realities of urban violence that have torn across streets like Vermont Avenue. Between the worlds of urban violence and urban religion, in my walk, I continued to search for gleanings of life.

Introduction

In the city of Angels, from north to south, is a large main street called Vermont Avenue. Like many streets in the historically marginalized parts of Los Angeles, this street has a history of urban violence among black and brown communities. Vermont Avenue was described by a detective in 2014 as "death alley" due to the high homicide rates that had taken place in it since 2007 (Cruz and Schwencke 2014). I grew up in South Los Angeles in a small neighborhood called Watts, and indeed, the streets are filled with their fair share of urban troubles, street violence and crime. Yet, as I often walked throughout the streets, I also discovered a Los Angeles that is filled with moments of vibrant religious life that poured out into the sidewalks. To use Robert Orsi's idea, since I was a young boy, I've always seen theology or religion on the streets (Orsi 1985). The streets could be filled with the sounds of gospel music or energetic preaching coming out the doors of African American and Hispanic storefront churches. In South Los Angeles, multiple urban churches appear in every street corner and remind us of the communities that are searching for narratives outside and beyond death. An urban Christian materiality of the common people (McDannell 1995) fills these streets. The written text and symbols of the Bible run across church walls and signs. Some walls bear paintings and images that suggest themes of *life*—in human, spiritual, and religious ways.

To revisit my childhood-streets, in the summer of 2022 I decided to walk around the streets of Vermont or 'death alley,' and to remember *life*. Like a classic urban ethnographer and street photographer, I took up a creative walking methodology to help me understand how religion, religious histories, and religious materiality, narratives and themes can begin

to alter the overarching narratives that can be placed on communities and which become "labels." In these neighborhoods, parents, families and communities mourn for the loss of their black and brown children, and indeed we should remember and mourn with them. Yet, we should also remember the ways such communities commit themselves in their quest of faith and hope of life. In my walk through Vermont Avenue, I walked to remember the lives taken on the streets, and the black and brown Christian communities that attempt to resist death, bringing and creating narratives of life back into the streets.

The history and character of Vermont Avenue, along with theories of sidewalks as generators of city life, visual sociologies, and urban anthropological approaches to walking allow us to engage "death alley" in nuanced ways. In this essay, while I draw from scholars in these areas, I particularly focus on their reflections of urban space in *poetic terms* and in my exploration center on Christianity. In this street's walls and buildings, at times one can see direct themes about human and spiritual life, and at other times, the ancestors' "old time religion"—the beliefs and familiar scriptures that brought them out of death or bondage (Hinson 2000, 106-107).¹ In my view, churches on the streets like African American and Latinx storefronts, embody an *urban gospel poetics* which echo the Christian themes that fight against death. Centering on urban Christianity, sidewalks as both the infrastructure that governs and influences city life and as a space that reflects the vibrancy of human life, contains narratives of life from a religious viewpoint that reframe the "death" narrative.

Such a study engaging the urban street and religious life follows the work of scholars like Katie Day. In her work *Faith on the Avenue, Religion on a City Street*, Day explores various religious expressions on Germantown Avenue in Philadelphia and notes how both "place" and "faith" matter in "shaping the diverse and dynamic urban corridor[s]" (Day 2014, 8). Relevant to this article, Day references one example of how a church community directly brought "life" back into the city street. A congregation, Brand New Life, was looking for a new meeting place and discovered an old funeral home. Many of the congregants felt that

¹ Hinson explores "old time religion" mainly in connection to spirituals and songs, yet a significant point that he draws out is that traditions continue to live on as church goes draw help from the faith of their ancestors and scriptural heritage. While Hinson is focusing on African American churches and sanctified churches, in principle, many Protestant groups find value in the same way. "Old time religion" becomes the invaluable spiritual lessons that are passed on from generation to generation.

their presence in this funeral home transformed this place, once known for death, into a place of life (49). In my view, the role of storefront churches and religion on the streets in communities ridden with violence should be considered in a similar way.

Vermont Street Defined as ‘Death Alley’

In 2014, in a news article by the *LA Times* entitled “South Vermont Avenue: L.A. County’s ‘death alley’,” Nicole Santa Cruz and Ken Schwencke wrote about the high homicide rates on Vermont Ave near the South Los Angeles area since 2007 (Cruz and Schwencke 2014). This article appears under “The Homicide Report” section, and provides a statistical account of the deaths in this area. Cruz had been a part of a large project to document homicides in historically marginalized communities akin to this area.²

In this article on Vermont, Cruz and Schwencke specifically highlighted a two-mile stretch which a detective renamed “death alley.” Providing a detailed geographical map of the homicide locations, the news article states next to this image: beginning from 2007, 61 people had been killed in this two miles between Manchester and Imperial Highway. In addition to the homicides on Vermont Avenue, “100 people—nearly all of them male—have been killed in the 1.8 square miles wedged between the city of Los Angeles and Inglewood.” Vermont Vista, towards the east near “death alley” had only half the number of homicides. The article records that Westmont’s homicides were highest overall, highlighting its amount of gang activity, drugs, and violence. Although the level of violence has decreased over time, violence is still “an everyday fact of life.”

Documenting the national and local statistics of the areas’ African American and Latinx communities, the authors of this article further state: “Men account for nearly 85% of homicide victims. One of every three males killed is between the ages of 17 and 25. Latinos, about half of the county’s population, account for nearly half of all killings since 2007.” Regarding the African American population, 8% of the country’s population are inordinately impacted, amounting to 32% of homicides. They elaborated on this detail, writing: “Last year, black people in L.A. County were killed at more than seven times the rate of all other racial and ethnic groups combined.” In another place they also noted: “Blacks in Westmont are killed at four times the rate as Latinos, although each group makes up about half of the 30,000 residents.” Though the Homicide Report had plummeted from 941 in 2007 to 594 the prior year, the homicide rates for the African American community remained obstinately high. The violence in Westmont “provide[d] a window into chronic issues facing urban communities” since homicides were occurring more in this neighborhood than in others.³

One of the interviewees, Caver, had lived on Vermont for more than a decade. Cruz and Schwencke document that, “Two years ago, [Caver] was shot seven times inside his car. He lifted up a red Buccaneers jersey to reveal a thick, jagged scar that runs down his stomach.” Caver’s only response was: “It’s just Vermont . . . It’s one of the most dangerous places in LA.” This small account is a window into such realities of violence.

²“Nicole Santa Cruz.” *ProPublica*. Accessed November 11, 2025. <https://www.propublica.org/people/nicole-santa-cruz>. The website *ProPublica* highlights that Cruz moved to ProPublica, yet, originally, she worked in the *LA Times* for twelve years as a staff writer. The website notes: Cruz took the lead as “[a] lead reporter on the *Times’* Homicide Report, a groundbreaking public service project that documents every homicide victim in Los Angeles County . . . [and] reported on the lives of hundreds of people, highlighting neighborhoods that were disproportionately affected by violence and uncovering trends, including an increase in women being killed even as officials hailed a decline in murders.” These reports worked within a larger project to document and inform the public of the number of deaths in marginalized communities.

³In this article, Cruz and Schwencke also captured the actual structures on the street, the social class, and various forms of violence. They record that these two miles “north from Imperial Highway are home to churches, liquor stores, mortuaries, and one of the highest rates of homicide in L.A. County.” Describing the class status, Cruz and Schwencke further state that few residents have a college education and that in this area residents are generally poor, with 40% living in conditions below poverty. The article provides several descriptions of violence and illegal activity; to name a few: death on front doors, drive-bys, shoot-outs, weapons and drug-use, public-beatings, house break-ins, ongoing gunshots, domestic violence, graffiti, and lastly, children living in fear.

Now on Vermont there is a middle island with park trails in the middle of the street.⁴ While I was there, I saw only one person walking on it. And, as I stood on the center island, I had only a sense of isolation and separation. Perhaps, urban planning cannot always fix these issues. This island signaled more of a separation than a useful infrastructural organ or artery. Design is only one side of urban planning, and perhaps, the communities there have a significant role.

Jane Jacobs & Sidewalks as Means for Generating Life and Community

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs criticizes the “principles and aims that have shaped modern, orthodox city planning and rebuilding” (Jacobs 1961, 5). In her book she offers other or “different” principles that take into account “how cities work in real life,” which she contends have often been ignored in the process of city planning (5, 9). For Jacobs sidewalks become places that encourage safety, contact, and the assimilation of children. Sidewalks can be used as forms of security as peoples’ eyes view and survey the street (38-47). Sidewalks can be a means of balanced contact of public and private life (77-78). And they can be places for assimilating children, and where children can play (105-106). Jacobs highlights these three aspects of sidewalks as crucial for spontaneously fostering forms of vibrant life and community. In a simple way, where there are sidewalks, with sidewalk life and business, more opportunity for public contact is available (108).

In the first chapter, Jacobs poetically uses the metaphor of a ballet or a dance to explain—along with the networks of usage that could possibly take place—the ordinary movements that already take place on the sidewalk (70). Dance becomes a metaphorical expression of the vibrant life on sidewalks. She goes on to describe the details on Hudson Street that make up the “intricate sidewalk ballet” (66). The dance of pedestrians becomes the expression of the unique movements and changes of life of the individual yet

interconnected citizens. The dance becomes the “animated city streets” or the streets full of life (71-72).

Jacobs’ goals for the use of sidewalks have very practical concerns, yet for a moment she sees a poetic dance taking place across the sidewalks, which metaphorically for her represents forms of vibrant life and community. In Christian thought dancing is the antithesis of mourning. It reminds us how religion can alter experience; as the psalmist said: “Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing” (Psa. 30:11, KJV). This also reminds us of how many African American and Latinx churches in urban areas embrace the ritual of dancing as a form of praise (Gonzales 1996, 20-23).⁵ Yet, the transformation or process from mourning to dancing, or death to life, is what is significant. In a similar way, other classic Psalms remind us that the Lord as the Shepherd walks with His people through the valley of the shadow of death (Psa. 23:4), and how He makes the valley of weeping into a place of streams (Psa. 84:6). In my reading, sidewalks on Vermont Avenue become sights that echo such *urban gospel poetics* into the streets.

Approach for Research: Visual Sociology, Photography and Spatial Semiotics

Centering on religion in urban space, Roman R. Williams and Timothy Shortell advocate for the need for “visual social science to properly understand and engage religion and spirituality in cities” (Williams and Shortell 2021, 49). The authors specifically encourage the incorporation of photography in the study of religion and cities. The images are then analyzed using spatial semiotics. They explain: “Spatial semiotics is an attempt to integrate quotidian mobility practices (walking, riding the bus, etc.), interactionism, and image-making (photography or video) in order to analyze the range of interpretations of what can be seen in public spaces and what it reveals about the patterns of social life” (54). Focusing on the spatial structure of images, they note the Russian linguist, Roman Jakobson’s “structural approach to contrast different communicative practices regarding signs of identity.” Jakobson defines six approaches to the process of

⁴In the same article, it is noted: “The street was once two way, but in 1996, the Sheriff’s Department requested that it be changed to a one way to help with crime-fighting efforts.”

⁵For example, Justo Gonzales reminds us that worship for Hispanic communities is like a fiesta, which is “characterized by movement and by sensuality” (23). In these churches, movement to rhythm is as important as singing.

signification with particular functions: (1) referential, (2) expressive, (3) conative, (4) phatic, (5) poetic, (6) and reflexive (Williams and Shortell 1921, 55). These will be expanded upon further, but a key point is identity, and specifically how religious-ethnic identities are created and perceived in these spaces.

Each of these signs contains a particular function (55-56). For example, the (1) referential sign contains a “message [which] calls attention to the context of communication.” The most “obvious referential function for religious identity” in urban settings are intended or unintended religious structures. The (2) expressive function “emphasizes the motives of the producer of identity signs.” These signs become forms of agency in urban settings. Often icons function as “expressive signs of religious identity,” and ordinary people in urban settings adopt such icons to “personalize their space, fixed or mobile.” Additionally, religious dress can have an expressive function. The (3) conative function is to influence other people. Williams and Shortell write: “When our understanding of an identity sign focuses on the cognitive or affective state of the audience of a sign, we are using the conative function.” The audience of such a group would be ones who “share [a] particular space with the signs” even if they were not present in the construction of the signs. “Concentration” in the conative function, in relation to space, becomes important. For example, when there are multiple signs in a space which we identify with a particular religious group, we consider such space as “theirs.” The authors highlight that this often happens with religious, ethnic, or linguistic minorities. The (4) phatic function is defined as “signs that are oriented to contact.” Phatic signs can operate to “facilitate social interaction” between in-group members. Due to a “shared culture,” insider-status can be verified; usually religious attire or other practices can have this function.

The (5) poetic function, highlights specifically the use of “street art” and “murals,” which will appear throughout this essay in many forms. The authors define the function in the following way:

[The] poetic language draws attention to itself as a form of expression, rather than primarily as the medium of a message. Visual signs in public space may emphasize the aesthetic dimension of identity, or they may simply call our attention to the identity as the message. Street art is one common type of poetic sign of identity. (Williams and Shortell 2021, 56)

There were many murals, paintings, and objects of street art on this two-mile stretch that bring to mind questions of identity.

The (6) reflexive function takes note of the “code of communication.” This function can be seen in signage that is in a foreign language (particularly towards the majority). When people see such signage, for example in “non-Latin alphabets,” they understand that those messages are not for them regardless of the message. Similarly, religious practices can operate in this way. If a religious practice like prayer or meditation takes place in a public setting, one may come into contact with this religious practice, that is not their own, yet still be partially aware of its religious dimension (56). Those around, see such signage, and though they do not fully comprehend it, they know at least it is not for them.

Using these signs with their functions, I attempt to analyze how religion and spirituality is perceived on the sidewalk. Images of Latinx and African American urban churches become reread to understand their role in streets like Vermont Avenue. As the authors note, researchers can use “Visual data to understand social processes and to communicate them” (60). Additionally, these visual methods carry a “qualitative” dimension and aid the process of thick description. Through such “image-making,” I try to capture on the sidewalk the convergence of cities and religion and use spatial semiotics here as an attempt to “analyze the range of interpretations” (60) as revealed in this street. Using Jakobson’s structural approach and signs, I examine 23 photos that I took on Vermont Avenue. In total, I took close to 40 photos, which captured the religious elements of life and community on this two-mile stretch. The main questions I bring to these photos are: do these photos bear signs that redefine, reframe, re-describe this avenue? Can we reimagine “death alley” and find traces of life and community on the sidewalk? Can we change overarching narratives made by the news’s headlines about this street? Jacobs has shown us that sidewalks are spaces of vibrant life and community. In connection to Christianity, is there some way to capture such spaces?

In my use of photos, another scholar this study follows is Martin Krieger’s *Urban Tomographies*. For Krieger, “Urban tomography is about multiple aspects or slices of a presumed whole” (Krieger 2011, xv). He uses different mediums to capture this “whole” relying heavily on images. He adds: “we appreciate that whole from those concrete aspectual images. We shall say technically, there is ‘an identity (a place, an object, a

phenomenon) in a manifold, presentation of profiles” (xv). Notably, Krieger went on to identify and focus on religion as a subject on the urban streets of Los Angeles as well. While traversing the streets, he casually noticed many storefront churches. He then decided to seriously document them. In the process he acquired a plethora of images. He notes that these images could be understood “theologically [in context] and as historical artifacts” (71). For example, noting both areas of study, he writes: “When we examine hundreds of these churches, in light of Scripture and the source of Pentecostalism, actually, being in Los Angeles[,] . . . there is much to be seen from the street. The city itself is an archive” (71). Krieger explains how different textual references on the churches could be observed and studied, such as “ethnicity, language, religious denomination or sect, and theological stance” (73). Through such references, one can discover unorthodox religious perspectives representative of cultures in the urban city. Krieger explains:

How those references are to be understood might well be *unorthodox*, given the systems of authority and education for many of those who participate in and lead storefront houses of worship. Yet these interpretations are in effect commonplace in this culture, not at all esoteric, and may *reflect a new orthodoxy*. Of course, for storefront houses of worship of denominations other than Pentecostal, or other religions, one might expect different scriptural themes, drawn from different scriptures. (Krieger 2011, 88)

Krieger reminds us of the ubiquitousness of urban churches on the streets of Los Angeles and that their very presence tells of different things: modern religious histories, ethnic and religious cultures, urban theologies and specific beliefs. In a similar way, in the textures of these walls, I tried to identify narratives of life as reflected in these new orthodoxies.

Michel De Certeau and “Walking in the City”

How can one engage the space that one is studying? And can that approach bear any meaning? Walking in an urban space, that is, immersing oneself

in it, becomes an important part of this study. Several scholars have used walking methodologies to explore urban space noting how it can be used in various ways: for example, to record one’s understanding of place and histories of place while “on the move” (O’Neill & Roberts 2019); and to explore an entire city or place in proximity (Helmreich 2013). In his classic work, Michel De Certeau’s “Walking in the City” from his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) similarly reminds scholars of the importance of studying things from the ground. “Walking” for De Certeau is an approach that questions the “visual, panoptic, [and] theoretical constructions” from above that categorize spaces, and suggests the practice of “walking” “down below” to capture how ordinary people or “practitioners” make use of spaces that cannot always be seen (93). Michel De Certeau, like Jacobs, similarly saw the importance of the practice of ordinary life in cities. In his book he notes that everyday practices must be taken into account, and that practices as “tactics” cannot always be contained within sociological models, or what he calls “strategies” (59). For De Certeau, strategies are used to implement particular structures or “strategic models”; however, practices in the form of “tactics” seek “opportunities” to reuse and resist these structures for their own benefit (xix).

His chapter on “Walking in the City” presents these two views in a visual way: one from an overarching and overpowering panoptic view, and the other from a view down below (91-93).⁶ From a high tower above one can see the city as a whole and becomes an all-seeing eye. Whereas, from down below, one walks the streets and uses them in unintended ways: “[t]hese practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen” by the panoptic, all-seeing eye (93). Religion on the sidewalk of Vermont leaves traces of how its users reuse the sidewalk to express their religious and spiritual lives. In my view, they become the religious “poetic and mythic” experiences that resist, reshape and redefine death (93). As I walked on the ground, visual sociology along with spatial semiotics, was used to capture such re-usages of street spaces.

⁶The beginning of his chapter begins above from “Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center” looking down on the city (91) which creates an “immense texturology spread out before one’s eyes” (92). This view from above is like an informative and well defined map.

From the Tower to the Ground

In Cruz and Schwencke's article "South Vermont Avenue: LA County's Death Alley," there is an image which contains an aerial view of the street landscape, documenting 61 deaths since 2007 in this two-mile stretch.⁷ I decided to take a walk on this street and to view "death alley" from the bottom view. For De Certeau, when one looks down on the city, they "[totalize] the most immoderate of human texts" (1984, 92). When one treads the ground, they escape "the imaginary totalizations" and enter other spaces. We leave the geographical and enter "an 'anthropological,' poetic and mythic experience of space" (93).

Arriving at Vermont Avenue

Driving over to South Los Angeles from the Inland Empire, I took a couple freeways and eventually was on the 105 heading west. My exit was Vermont Avenue. I pulled off the freeway, made one right, and then one more right, and parked on 115th Street near some run-down apartments, a mechanic shop and cars that maybe have been on the street for months, or even years.⁸

Since I grew up around this area, these streets brought me back to the days of my childhood. On 115th street, I was right next to Imperial Ave—the very street where I once lived for a decade. Imperial Avenue is full of warehouses, factories, liquor stores, worn out apartments, and of course urban churches. Sometimes the small streets near Imperial looked a little intimidating to walk down. The large factories and warehouse buildings often covered the corners of these streets and overshadowed the pavement. Whenever you entered such small streets, it felt like you initially walked into a shadow. But if you kept walking, you would see a few people sitting in their front yards and ordinary houses picketed off with fences. That's what I saw that day.

On 115th street and Vermont there was some peace and quiet. I looked down at Vermont and got ready to head towards Manchester. Immediately, the hustle and bustle of the road got louder and louder. As I walked on the street, car engines bustled, gangster rap and *corridos* blasted out of car stereos, small foot traffic went about, and the faces of browns and blacks colored the street. Some were selling things (i.e. clothes, fruits, tacos, miscellaneous objects) on the sidewalks; some were walking into stores to buy something maybe to eat and drink; some were walking to a destination using their phone; and some were just roaming the street due to homelessness. The sidewalks, street corners and vacant lots on Vermont Avenue were at times covered with waste, yet here and there religion permeated into the street. I began my walk through 'death alley' looking for gleanings of life.

Walking on Vermont Avenue & Finding Narratives of Life

Moving forward, I will cover topics thematically to help the structure of this article. The photos cover different themes, with some overlap, such as social injustice, religious symbolism, religious signs with evangelistic purposes, religious schedule of services, and lastly, murals with religious significance.

As noted above, the first photos to consider are related to a young African American boy named Anthony "AJ" Weber, who was shot and killed by a Los Angeles sheriff on February 4, 2018 just a mile from his home (Solis 2020). The online article—and there are not that many—states that AJ was shot 16 times. The police said that he had a gun on his waistband, however at the scene they did not find a gun. The mural of AJ (Figure 1), painted by an artist named Pasacio, is a large painting on the wall of a Hispanic auto parts store called Manuel's Auto Parts. One sign operating here is the poetic sign. It functions to express an "aesthetic dimension of identity" (Williams and Shortell 2021, 56). Simultaneously, because this is a portrait of AJ, his identity—including

⁷ Please find the aerial image here: <https://homicide.latimes.com/post/westmont-homicides/>

⁸ See "Mapping Religion among Vermont Avenue." *Fowler Museum at UCLA*, accessed November 11, 2025. <https://fowler.ucla.edu/mapping-religion-along-vermont-avenue/>. Notably, this study is also in conversation with the Fowler Museum at UCLA and their project entitled "Mapping Religion among Vermont Avenue." Patrick Polk (curator of Latin American and Caribbean Popular Arts) and Any Landau (Director of Education and Interpretations) have also been documenting religion on Vermont Avenue, creating a "spatial database of sites of religiosity" that covers a 22-mile stretch. Their aim is to capture a "true composition, representation, and modes of religious activity in Los Angeles."

his race and age—becomes its very message. The mural expresses the identity of an African American life that was lived too short. In aesthetic form it memorializes him. It echoes into the streets racial injustice issues at large. Religion can be seen here if one views this mural as a memorial—a positive remembrance of AJ, which simultaneously mourns the loss of his life. As noted on the lower left of the mural, he lived from 7/30/2001–2/4/2018.

Figure 1
Mural of AJ, Los Angeles



Earlier on the street, before I reached this mural, I saw a small sign that read “Justice for AJ” (Figure 2) and wondered who this was referring to? A few blocks later,

⁹ This, and all other photos in this article, are my own photography.

¹⁰The same article states that AJ’s family attempted to sue the police. The investigation that took place generated over 700 pages, yet mainly focused on questions that revolved around whether AJ had any gang affiliation, and if he had a gun before the event (Solis, 2020). The information about AJ’s involvement remained unclear due to the lack of witnesses. The public only knows that he became a target, which his mother protests for unjustifiable reasons. While the sheriff’s department has said they would provide transparency, Demetra has felt they have done otherwise. The article records: “Demetra says, ‘It was a lie. It was a complete lie that he [sheriff official Alex Villanueva] was going to be transparent. It’s been two years since AJ was killed and we just got those reports. Other than the officer’s original statement there was no investigation into that officer’” (paras. 10). Adding the global pandemic into the article, the author writes that Demetra wanted to participate in the recent Black Lives Matters protests, however, was unable to do so due to sickness. The author documents that on May 28, 2020, 20 officers raided Demetra’s home with no mask and without providing a warrant. The source indicates that “[a]ccording to a complaint filed on behalf of the family by the American Civil Liberties Union, LAPD officers said they were looking for a suspect with a gun” (paras. 18-19). After the raid, Demetra caught the virus. This article’s details contextualize this mural and AJ’s life within a moment of crisis—including both the global pandemic crisis and racial issues in society.

I learned a little bit more about AJ. His mother Demetra, is now a voice for police accountability.¹⁰

The public mural and message (“Justice for AJ”) can be seen as a poetic sign reflecting aesthetic forms of identity, particularly of the marginalized African American community. This mural also reminds us of Vermont Avenue’s history of homicides and title (“death alley”), yet it begins to problematize this narrative as it points to a remembering and honoring of human life.

Figure 2
Justice for AJ



The poetic sign and other signs were seen on other mural paintings near the sidewalks of Vermont Avenue. There are religious implications in these other murals, particularly, themes of life that stand in direct contrast to death. In relation to identity, the mural below (Figure 3) contains a strong

representation of ethnic identity, reflecting both the African American and Latinx communities in South Los Angeles, their histories and shared struggle. In this mural, there are historical figures (MLK, Cesar Chavez, etc.) depicted within these paintings recalling important landmarks in the history of social progress. Many symbols depict minority identities and their historical struggles connected to social injustice (the raised fist, protest signs with slogans and figures, depictions of labor workers, etc.). Such symbols or

“icons” contain elements of the expressive function as seen in the icon of the raised closed fist associated with the empowerment of marginalized ethnic groups; additionally, the poetic function again is seen in relation to identity, aesthetically representing minority identities. The expressive function (aided by the poetic function) in these murals demonstrate the forms of agency minority groups employ to “personalize their space” (Williams and Shortell 2021, 55).

Figure 3
Mural Wall on Vermont and 88th



In relation to religion, in the center of this mural on social justice (Figure 3) is a tree and written over it are the words “Tree of Life” in English and Spanish, recalling the biblical story of the garden of Eden and the tree of life in the story in Genesis. With the roads leaning towards the tree in the middle, the theme of life seems to be at the center of this mural. The weaving of religion and social justice echo religion’s role and influence on social movements in general. In the same mural, as it stretches around the 88th & Vermont Apartments, the mural emphasizes further themes that express human life and forms of religious and spiritual life.

The image of an embryo (Figure 4), immediately points to the beginning of life—the antithesis to death. Across this mural wrapped around the apartments, several themes of life emerged into the city streets.

Figure 4
Embryo on Vermont and 88th, Los Angeles



There was also an image of a blue bird (Figure 5), which relates to another specific religious symbol that reappeared on Vermont Avenue—the dove.

Figure 5
Blue Bird on Vermont and 88th



The symbol of the dove was one that reappeared as I walked through Vermont Ave. The classic symbol of the cross reappeared as well, yet I will focus on the dove. The dove, in the Christian religious imagination, signifies the Holy Spirit, who is associated with life in the New Testament. George Ferguson has noted the symbol of the dove as appearing in the scene of Noah's ark after the flood as a symbol of peace. Additionally, as a symbol of purity when viewed in its sacrificial usage. But he states its most important use in Christian art is “as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The symbolism first appears in the story of the baptism of Christ. ‘And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him’ (John 1:32). The dove, symbolic of the Holy Ghost, is present in representations of the Trinity, the baptism, and the annunciation to Mary” (Ferguson 1966, 15-16). All of these, especially in connection to baptism, remind us that the dove represents life and the beginning of spiritual life. Further, the dove as a symbol can operate as an expressive sign to express one’s religious identity; however as different churches adopt the symbol we are reminded of the connotative function. That is, particular signs for ethnic groups remind us of a “concentration” of ethnic identity in such places (Williams and Shortell 2021, 56). Across ethnic groups, I noticed that different church groups contain the similar symbol of a dove, reminding us of the expressive function of this religious symbol. However, some of the titles on these churches are specifically in Spanish (Figure 6) and thus immediately

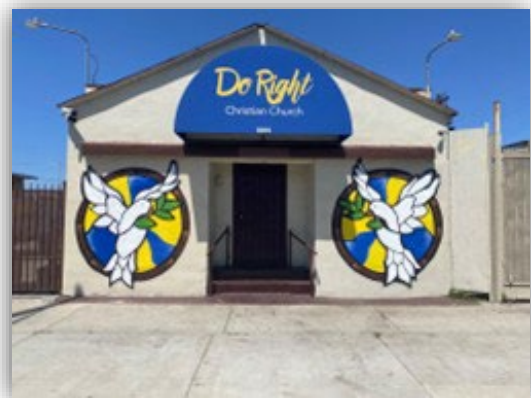
communicate to Spanish-speakers in these communities. The other groups communicated to English speakers. Further study would be needed to understand the usage of the same symbol along with the multicultural dynamics of this space.

Figure 6
Dove on “El Buen Samaritano”



Furthermore, the dove appears in a very particular way on two other church buildings on Vermont Avenue. One church named “Do Right Christian Church” upholds two large painted doves on the front wall of its building directly facing each other (Figure 7).

Figure 7
Two Doves on Do Right Church



While another group contains multiple tiles on its outer wall with a dove descending (Figure 8) and actual

text which identifies the symbol with its biblical interpretation. The dove here is directly connected to the Holy Spirit.

Figure 8
Tile of Dove



The second picture of the dove descending was actually from a church building (Southside Christian Palace Church) near the intersection of Vermont Avenue and Imperial. The building (Figure 9) embodies the referential sign due to the large logo that reads “SOUTHSIDE” running across the side of the building. Immediately, it stands out, yet it breaks away from the normal style of typical church buildings. The referential function causes the eye to focus on the building like cathedrals or other large religious structures normally do, yet there remains a distinction (Williams and Shortell 2021, 55).

Figure 9
Southside Church



As one approaches the building more closely, one begins to see the religious dimensions more clearly. The building’s wall near the sidewalk is filled with many tiles that reflect a mosaic style. Four of them (Figures 10-13) contain symbols which connect them to the four gospels of the New Testament. The images become the gospel narrative spilled out into the streets. The symbol of the king, ox, man, and eagle are identified with the four gospels accordingly.

- Figure 10.** Tile of Crown (top left)
- Figure 11.** Tile of Ox (top right)
- Figure 12.** Tile of Man (bottom left)
- Figure 13.** Tile of Eagle (bottom right)



The other tiles on the wall represent more items of religious belief within Christianity, as in symbols of the Bible, the birth, healing, the cross (Figures 14-17) and the epistles, which is not depicted. These tiles contain the expressive function. While some tiles possess a more iconographic use than others, they reassert a religious identity upon this space. These titles capture what Krieger describes as the “scriptural themes” that pour out into the streets, and specifically center on the New Testament’s account of Christ’s incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection.

- Figure 14. Tile of the Bible (top left)*
- Figure 15. Tile of the Birth (top right)*
- Figure 16. Tile of Healing (bottom left)*
- Figure 17. Tile of the Cross (bottom right)*



has indicated, such forms of evangelism, reminds us of how churches in urban neighborhoods perceive and engage the streets as “recruiting grounds” (McRoberts 2003, 86). Furthermore, the creation of religious signs also allows residents to establish a sense of agency in their urban space. The message of salvation in these signs contain divine promises to its readers concerning eternal life and salvation through receiving Jesus Christ as one’s Lord and Savior. Most of the signs reference Bible verses and directly quote them—attempting to sacralize the street with the written word. Typically, these signs are all over cities and usually appear on freeway bridges, city walls, church buildings, fences, street poles, etc. The photo with a white poster (Figure 18) was placed on a fence that was covering a construction site. The message on this poster is related to the act of confession. Citing Romans 10:9-10, the religious message expresses: through the act of believing in Jesus Christ’s substitutionary death and resurrection, and through verbal confession, one becomes saved. Thus, the purpose of these signs—operating as expressive signs—contains the religious mission of salvation. Those who posted them on Vermont Ave did so with this intention.

Figure 18
White Sign on Sidewalk



Perhaps some people would not be able to fully make the connection between the text and the symbols. Maybe some symbols, such as the ox, man, and eagle, would require more background knowledge than others (cross, bible, etc.). Thus, some of these symbols, like phatic signs, are perhaps only understood among a “shared [religious] culture,” which makes their meanings more accessible to those with more insider knowledge (Williams and Shortell 2021, 56). The biblical symbols can also function as reflexive signs, since some symbols are identifiable to outsiders while others are not. They may know these are religious symbols because of some level of exposure to them, but still may not pay too much attention to them.

On Vermont Avenue, another religious element that was commonly seen was religious verses or messages on the sidewalk. Religious verses and messages operate as expressive signs. They recall the motives of their producers and work as identity signs with evangelistic purposes. Like Omar M. McRoberts

Additionally, I noticed the dimensions of time (Figure 19) and assistance (or help) on the streets. To my disadvantage, there are hardly any pictures I took that capture the amount of actual foot-traffic on Vermont Avenue in relation to religious activity. There was foot traffic for ordinary events (shopping on the

street, traveling, etc.). However, the actual religious activity of people was not captured on the sidewalk. I considered how I could reimagine such activity? Can anything help to understand the movement of traffic, or life on the sidewalk? The only thing I could think of was the schedules advertised on these structures that indicated when their religious services took place. On set times, especially Sunday mornings, the traffic of footsteps on sidewalks is on high and many shuffle in and out of these church doors.

Figure 19
Order of Service



These signs function as invitations and as means of promotion, recalling the expressive sign since there are particular “motives” behind their usage (Williams and Shortell 2021, 55). The conative function is also at work for the times of these services on these various church buildings magnifies moments of concentration, both religiously and ethnically if one considers the aspect of language (Figures 20-21).

Figure 20
Iglesia Cristiana and Schedule



Figure 21
Iglesia Juan 3:16 and Schedule



Conceptually, these signs became windows of foot traffic and capture what Jane Jacobs would call the vibrant life or “daily ballet” on the sidewalks (Jacobs 1961, 70). Jacobs also frames the ballet as happening at different times of the day. Reiterating the conative function, additionally in Figure 21, there is a direct reference to a classic scriptural verse (John 3:16) written in Spanish, which reminds us of the gospel message of eternal life being communicated to the Hispanic community.

Lastly, as I walked through streets, murals filled with religious imagery and sentiments were painted across walls. In fact, in the two mile stretch where I walked once existed the famous painting of Jesus with his hands extended by the muralist Kent Twitchell—yet it was removed and painted over. The painting reminds us of the ubiquitous number of images of the Passion in urban streets and the acceptance of religiosity in black and brown communities (Vergara 2015).¹¹ Another mural by *SMART* painted down the street conveys a gesture of help (Figure 22), but in a more poetic and visual way.

Figure 22
Mural of Two Hands Holding



Near this mural, on the side of the same building, an image with more religious connotations is painted. It captures a woman in the act of bowing, possibly praying, and holding a small cup (Figure 23). This woman's act expresses the reflexive function, since many know she is bowing or praying, but are not fully aware of all the religious dimensions operating. In the mural, located on the front of the building, the hand from above contains clouds on the wrist, and echoes religious symbolic interpretations.

Figure 23
Bowing (praying?)



George Ferguson writes: “In the early days of Christian art, Christians hesitated to depict the countenance of their God, but the presence of the Almighty was frequently indicated by a hand issuing from a cloud that hid the awe-inspiring and glorious majesty of God, which ‘no man could behold and live’ (Exodus 33:20). The origin of this symbol rests in the frequent scriptural references to the hand and the arm of the Lord, symbols of His almighty power and will” (Ferguson 1966, 47). The hand, in this religious interpretation, as descending from a cloud contains supernatural references. Yet this painting still reflects the more human side of help and compassion, as seen in the hand's normal skin and features. The depiction of a hand reaching out to help, reminds us of religions' tendency on sidewalks to reach out and to be factors of life in urban communities. In these murals (Figures 22, 23), though religious interpretations can be made, they contain ideas of ordinary human acts as well. Helping on Vermont Ave. is spiritual, but it is also practical. It is not limited to the religious dimension, though religion has its role. The mural of the hand reaching for another hand (Figure 22) functions as a poetic sign to represent forms of religious and social life on Vermont Avenue. This act of help is realized in both the religious centers offering spiritual and practical help, and in community centers like the local YMCA supporting the needs of the youth. Here, communities

¹¹ Here you will find Kent Twitchell's mural along with other murals of Jesus in urban neighborhoods by different artists. There are a significant number in the Los Angeles area.

work together so that human life can thrive and urban churches, in their own ways, remain a part of that story.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show that on the ground there are narratives of life across the textures of the sidewalks on Vermont Avenue. These images along with spatial semiotics have provided me with a glance at how “death alley” is not only a site with a narrative of death. On the ground, near its sidewalks there are forms of life which appear in many forms. The sidewalks become a place that tells stories. Though some sidewalks have been sites of pain and loss, sidewalks on this street also express life and community, as seen in works of art, religious structures and imagery, and community organizations on Vermont Avenue. This walking method, in conversation with photography and spatial semiotics is merely an entry into understanding urban religious life. Of course, more work could be done and is needed in direct conversation with community voices. Yet, through walking, this article tries to uncover stories of religion already written across the urban fabric.

In a limited way, the vibrancy of life can be documented to some degree through these photos. Through walking these streets of my childhood, I attempted to redefine the narratives of death placed on Vermont. These photos try to capture those forms of religious life that are a part of resisting such accounts of death, and in their own ways, inscribe life onto the streets. Like many streets in Los Angeles—urban churches and religious imagery are a part of the city’s fabric. They not only represent “theologies of the streets,” and unique materializations of Christianity, but an *urban gospel poetics* which in the hands of Latinx and African Americans have been used to change situations ridden with death into moments that celebrate life.

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