Statement of Research Interests

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My research agenda focuses on four interconnected areas: (1) Forensic Sociology and Environmental Criminology; (2) Real Estate and Housing Policy; (3) Race, Urban Redevelopment, and the Political Economy of Tourism; and (4) Climate Change, Environmental Risk, and Post-Disaster Rebuilding. Within each of these four areas, my interests have focused on several themes and topics, as described below. At any one time, I have several major projects going on: some that I am beginning, some that I am in the middle of, and some that I am completing.

1. Forensic Sociology and Environmental Criminology

I am currently working on a book titled *Practicing Forensic Criminology* with Daniel B. Kennedy (professor emeritus, University of Detroit Mercy) that draws on examples from actual court cases and expert witness reports and testimony to demonstrate the different uses of criminological theories, methodologies, data analytic techniques and literature reviews in the applied setting of civil law and the courts. The book is currently under contract at Elsevier Press. Our goal is to provide a readable, informative discussion of how forensic criminologists can apply their research and testifying skills to assist judges and juries in rendering legal decisions. Our chapters include excerpts from forensic criminological investigations, in-depth discussions of the methodological and analytical bases of these investigations, and important lessons learned from actual litigation cases. The book includes specific examples of social science investigations in the forensic realms of premises liability, administrative negligence, workplace violence, and wrongful conviction litigation. We focus on these areas to illustrate how criminology can reach beyond the academy to influence legal proceedings.

The book reflects my longstanding interest in understanding the impact of evidence-based criminological theory and forensic social science investigations in the legal system. In both my classes and my criminological work, I use expert witness reports and testimony to reveal the intricacies and nuances of forensic investigations and the synergies and conflictual dynamics governing law and science in the production of forensic social science knowledge and evidence. The theoretical orientations I use in my empirical and forensic work include environmental criminology, defensible space theory, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), situational crime prevention, routine activities theory, rational choice theory, and urban crime analysis. A goal of my research is to demonstrate how forensic criminologists can carry out basic and practice-oriented research, conduct evaluations, assist in policy analysis, and prepare and provide expert testimony before the courts.
Broadly, my interest in forensic sociology, criminology, and law is to advance the development of a “translational criminology” – i.e., the translation of knowledge from criminological theory and research to forensic practice – as an expedient to forming robust interactive relationships among criminological social scientists and policy makers. This interactive process involves the work of scientists in the discovery of new tools/ideas for use in the field and the evaluation of their impact. In turn, practitioners can offer novel observations from the field that stimulate basic investigations and catalyze public policy reform. To achieve the goal of a translational criminology, we describe the different roles and activities of the practicing forensic criminologist in the legal system with an eye toward improving the translation of forensic knowledge, theory, and methods into policy and practice. The translation of knowledge from research to policy and practice is a varied, dynamic, and sequential process in criminal justice. As I see it, practicing forensic criminology can be a vehicle for translating academic criminological theories into the concrete applications in the legal realm as well as fostering greater interest among students to think forensically. Through my research, I seek to strengthen the scientific foundation of criminological research and improve the quality of forensic social scientific research in the legal system.

2. Real Estate and Housing Policy

I have longstanding research interests in understanding the linkages between racial residential segregation, housing policies, and the transformation of the real estate sector. Several of my publications examine the segregative effect of federal housing programs, the racially discriminatory aspects of post-World War II urban planning, and the negative effect of neighborhood racial composition on mortgage lending (e.g., redlining). I have also investigated racial conflicts over federal efforts to locate low-income housing in suburban areas, the role of community identity in the emergence of a local anti-expressway movement, the negative consequences of the market-centered orientation of federal housing policy, and the impact of real estate blockbusting on neighborhood racial transition. I have also published articles with colleagues that examine the links between the built environment of public housing and the symbolic meanings that people attach to spaces in the city. My book, Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2010, (SUNY Press, first edition released in 2002, second edition released in 2014) explores the interlocking nature of racial discrimination and class factors in the origin and development of racial residential segregation. I emphasize the importance of analyzing housing as a system of social stratification and provide a novel account of the history of the real estate industry and housing policy in the racialization of space. Other research I have been involved in explores the impact of city revitalization efforts and pro-growth strategies on metropolitan development and neighborhood socio-economic stability. Some of this later research informs my edited volume on urban redevelopment, Critical Perspectives on Urban Redevelopment (Elsevier Press, 2001).

A closely related research interest is on the globalization of the U.S. real estate industry and, in particular, the institutional and political changes that have occurred in the financing of real estate over the last few decades. Theoretically, I am interested in explaining how a spatially fixed commodity like real estate is transformed into a liquid security that buyers and sellers in different places can understand and exchange. Empirically, I examine the impact of state laws, charters, and regulations in the expansion of the secondary mortgage market, the creation of the commercial mortgage-backed securities market, and the development of real estate investment trusts (REITs). Throughout my various articles, I highlight how the state activity shapes the
development of global real estate flows and networks of activity through the creation and control of liquid resources. In several publications, I investigate the origin and demise of the New Deal housing system, examine the impact of deregulation initiatives in the 1970s and later, and analyze the development of new housing policies and financing mechanisms since the 1980s. The production and financing of real estate and housing connect to wider economic and social processes, including transformations in the political economy of capitalism, state regulatory policy, and the political power of interest groups.

3. Race, Urban Redevelopment, and the Political Economy of Tourism

Another research agenda focuses on the linkages among tourism (re)development, gentrification, and urban socio-spatial transformation. In past publications, I have examined the synergies among cultural identity and tourism development; the role of race and ethnic identity and conflict on tourism development; impact of tourism on processes and patterns of urban gentrification; the conflictual and contradictory nature of using tourist spectacles to revitalize urban neighborhoods; connections among commodification and rationalization in the historical development of tourism; urban mega-events as forces of creative-destruction; changing global-local connections in tourism development; and sources of opposition and resistance to urban entertainment spectacles.

My book, Authentic New Orleans: Race, Culture, and Tourism in the Big Easy (New York University (NYU) Press, 2007) illuminates the interlocking nature of conflicts over race, culture, and authenticity in New Orleans and traces historically how tourism practices have displayed and articulated these conflicts. My historical narrative spans almost two centuries and is built from archival sources, government documents, ethnographic data, and qualitative interviews. My book begins in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina amid the whirlwind of speculation about the rebuilding of the city and the dread of outsiders wiping New Orleans clean of the charm and authenticity that made it famous. I then examine the origins of Carnival and the Mardi Gras celebration in the nineteenth century, the planning and staging of the 1884 World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, and investigate other image-building campaigns and promotional strategies to disseminate a palatable image of New Orleans on a national scale. In other chapters, I discuss conflicts over the commercialization of heritage and cultural difference, efforts to promote Mardi Gras as a tourist attraction, and tourism development in the French Quarter.

As I show, tourism practices have long intertwined with notions of race and class. The phrase “authentic’ New Orleans” does not mean an immutable or objective reality but refers to a plurality of socially constructed and idealized representations of the city that residents, organizations, and tourism boosters have constructed over the decades. Like all constructions of reality, the term “authentic” New Orleans is a malleable, fabricated, and heterogeneous category that different groups use to define urban culture, create and express identities, and reinterpret the past. Like the terms “place” and “culture,” authenticity is deceptively slippery and often taken as a historically given in New Orleans. As my book documents, symbols and framings of “authentic” New Orleans have always been in flux and transformation. On the one hand, I analyze the social construction of “authenticity as a conflictual and contested process by which different groups and interests struggle to legitimate their own collective beliefs and values as authoritative representations of local culture. On the other hand, I analyze “authenticity as a manufactured image, whereby powerful tourism interests project onto local culture what they believe are tourists’ expectations, preferences, stereotyped images of the city. Overall, the
purpose of my book is to understand and explain the ways in which local people have defined authenticity over time, the role of power and conflict in the construction of the authentic, and various historically changing ways tourism practices have shaped and (re)defined what is authentic. In 2008, my book was awarded Honorable Mention for the Robert Park Outstanding Book Award, Community and Urban Sociology Section (CUSS) of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

4. Climate Change, Environmental Risk, and Post-Disaster Rebuilding

From 2006-2014, I worked with Miriam Greenberg (Sociology, University of California, Santa Cruz) on a comparative historical analysis of the political, economic, and cultural effects of the recovery and rebuilding process in New York and New Orleans following the 9/11 disaster and devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. Our book, Crisis Cities: Disaster and Redevelopment in New York and New Orleans (Oxford University Press, 2014), is based on years of research in the two cities including long-term ethnographic field observations, participant observation, and dozens of semi-structured interviews. In our book, we contend that New York and New Orleans have emerged as paradigmatic crisis cities, representing a free-market approach to post-disaster redevelopment that is increasingly dominant for crisis-stricken cities around the world. We demonstrate the limitations and negative consequences of the privatization of disaster aid, devolution of recovery responsibility to the local state, use of tax incentives and federal grants to spur market-centered redevelopment, and branding campaigns to market the redeveloped city for business and tourism.

Over the years, I have worked with scholars to establish several interdisciplinary networks of researchers from Tulane University, Xavier University, and the University of New Orleans to conduct research on the dynamic interactions between people and natural ecosystems in the New Orleans region and in other metropolitan areas. Our research has focused on generating knowledge about human-natural system interactions that individuals, groups, governments, and other organizations can use for disaster prevention and mitigation planning, maintenance and enhancement of environmental quality, and the development of urban redevelopment tools. Several external grants have helped further research on the drivers of urban vulnerability and social-ecological resilience, the impacts of disasters on the pace and trajectory of ecological recovery, and the feedbacks and reciprocal effects among patterns of post-trauma urbanization, ecological consequences, and human responses. I list these externally funded projects in my CV.

My funded research has produced several papers dealing with the intersections of climate change risk reduction and the contradictions and crisis tendencies associated coastal restoration, using a case study of southern Louisiana. I explore the antinomies or contradictions of risk reduction measures (e.g., coastal restoration) in an extractive economy dominated by oil and gas production. Several papers highlight the socially constructed dimensions of risk “reduction” and hurricane “protection”, the political-economic dynamics of climate change risk, and the challenges of risk governance. My basic finding is that the coastal restoration process is intensifying rather than alleviating risks associated with coastal erosion and climate change driven sea-level rise. As I point out, coastal restoration takes place on an aggressively contested institutional and ecological landscape in which newly emergent risk reduction measures are interacting conflictually with inherited regulatory arrangements and social-ecological patterns to expose communities to climate change risks.