



Passed On: African American Mourning Stories, A Memorial (a John Hope Franklin Center Book)

Karla FC Holloway

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Passed On is a portrait of death and dying in twentieth-century African America. Through poignant reflection and thorough investigation of the myths, rituals, economics, and politics of African American mourning and burial practices, Karla FC Holloway finds that ways of dying are just as much a part of black identity as ways of living. Gracefully interweaving interviews, archival research, and analyses of literature, film, and music, Holloway shows how the vulnerability of African Americans to untimely death is inextricably linked to how black culture represents itself and is represented.

With a focus on the “death-care” industry—black funeral homes and morticians, the history of the profession and its practices—Holloway examines all facets of the burial business, from physicians, hospital chaplains, and hospice administrators, to embalming- chemical salesmen, casket makers, and funeral directors, to grieving relatives. She uses narrative, photographs, and images to summon a painful history of lynchings, white rage and riot, medical malpractice and neglect, executions, and neighborhood violence. Specialized caskets sold to African Americans, formal burial photos of infants, and deathbed stories, unveil a glimpse of the graveyards and burial sites of African America, along with burial rituals and funeral ceremonies.

Revealing both unexpected humor and anticipated tragedy, Holloway tells a story of the experiences of black folk in the funeral profession and its clientele. She also reluctantly shares the story of her son and the way his death moved her research from page to person.

In the conclusion, which follows a sermon delivered by Maurice O. Wallace at the funeral for the author’s son, Bem, Holloway strives to commemorate—through observation, ceremony, and the calling of others to remembrance and celebration.

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