This talk poses a question: why does the distinction between homicide and suicide as cause of death matter to American politics? And, it proposes an answer: that the attention paid to categorizing the cause of (violent) death focuses on the particular/spectacular event and diverts attention away from ongoing conditions that are hostile to life in general. Grounded in New Orleans’ efforts to rebuild its municipal infrastructure in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, this talk considers the not-so-simple matter of distinguishing homicide from suicide by focusing ethnographic attention on an institution particularly well-acquainted with both: the local jail. The talk is organized as a mixtape, as an experiment in ethnographic vibration.

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