FOR THE LOVE OF DARKNESS – A DARK THEOLOGY

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## Contents

Acknowledgments............................................................................................................. 3

Introduction: A Confession of Darkness........................................................................... 4

Chapter 1. In The Dark...................................................................................................... 12

Chapter 2. Dark Faith: Finding God in The Dark.......................................................... 19

Chapter 3. Dark Power and Dark Love.......................................................................... 32

Chapter 4. Suffering and Language in Dark Theology.................................................. 48

Chapter 5. A Radical Possibility................................................................................... 61

Bibliography.................................................................................................................. 69
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Dear God, Lead me beside and into the still darkness – Amen
Introduction

Confession of Darkness

*Most of us appear totally incapable of realizing that there may be more light in blackness than we have yet begun to glimpse*—Vincent Harding

When discussing God, I strive to answer three interrelated questions. How is God known? Where is God? How might we face and meet God? Within these questions, I found a beginning to being “born again” in the darkness of God’s holy presence. Darkness, the mysterious place of unlearning and unknowing a previously believed conclusion is the location of my theological and social inquiry. As a theologian, I ask myself, how do I take the experiences often claimed as useless, worthless, dangerous, unworthy and named dark or darkness, and bring them into the notion of God’s ultimate promise of communion with human personality. Stokely Carmichael, referring to Black people, describes this coming together in an essay titled What We Want, “It is a society in which the spirit of community and humanistic love prevail”2. The intermingling of these ideas through seeking, is called, Dark theology.

The geographic context of my research will focus primarily on the present-day socio-political climate of the United States of America and later broadening to a global context to examine postcolonial language in African diaspora communities. Language is a powerful tool of communication that human beings like other sentient beings have used to exchange and transfer values and information. Although the cultural designation of “dark” as problematic, evil, wicked

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and lacking in positive spiritual qualities is part of the global white power structure, the primary focus of this decolonization of theological language project is United States (U.S.) specific.

The goal of this project is to weave marginalized voices that emerge from biographical accounts, theological study and social sciences into a transvaluation of the dark in the present moment. This reappraisal is not based in a claim of moral goodness; it is rooted in an unruliness that unbinds Blackness from definitions of darkness that remain anti-Black in their assumptions.

When writing about the U.S., it is necessary to make clear statements about the lack of equal treatment, systemic violence and the limiting of human rights on the basis of race, gender and class, I will do so. This will become increasingly important as the social relations between groups of people and embodied identities come under supernumerary pressure and are at risk of survival under the accelerated threat of an emboldened empire of U.S. politics, inaugurated on January 20, 2017. The experiences of Black people in the diaspora and revelation are my primary sources of information and voice.

Any exploration of God-talk should be centered and weaved into a story of human expression and lived experience. The biographical and autobiographical portions of this journey into darkness will support my research by grappling with the broader context of the social and theological questions surrounding the stories that have touched my thinking.

My own sense of darkness is important to note as we travel through the eyes of muses, partners and the deep reservoir of culture that have shaped my understating. My duty, in the words of Howard Thurman is to examine the difference between existential value and intrinsic worth, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because
what the world needs are people who have come alive.”

This coming alive is mirrored by nature’s preparation of seeds in the dark soil of the earth and the formation of children in the darkness of their mother’s wombs. Once in the world of human design and interaction, I envision the power of community having the ability to actualize human potential.

**Who is God in Dark Theology?**

I believe God is known when oppressed and marginalized people become alive together, synonymous with the story of dry bones in the book of Ezekiel chapter thirty-seven from the Hebrew Bible. The story of dry bones is about life being present in death. In this conception of Dark theology, principles that demonstrate a living people and flourishing communities are cooperation, nonviolence, collective work, restorative justice and equity in service of people living at the margins of society.

These principles together characterize “revolutionary love” which is akin to bell hooks reminder from M. Scott Peck defining love as, “The will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.”

Revolutionary love, in the United States means confronting systems that make love, faith and power so difficult to embody and practice for people living under the stress of its oppression. In the U.S., dark faith, power and love are the fertile grounds of being, where spirited creation takes place. I emphasize that Black love; faith and power can be deeply ingrained by the reoccurring event of their reoccurring failures. This experience of ebbing and flowing failure is where my love for darkness has been cultivated.

When a person extends himself or herself in the name of dark love, it is an exercise that moves through time and strives to maintain faithfulness to the matrix of co-existence and

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interrelatedness among oppressed people. However, dark love it is not limited to those matrices of conception. The chapters on dark faith, dark power and dark language will take a closer look at these ideals to draw out meaning from contextual circumstance.

God is therefore known in human efforts of “revolutionary love”, a transvaluation of values that prizing the weak, foolish and forgotten things, people and places in the world. Black people in the U.S., colonial populations across the globe and women are primary in this assumption. In this regard, God is known through the very bodies of the oppressed, their dark bodies and dark experiences carry the unconditional promises of love and justice of God. This leads to my next question, where is God?

**Where is God in Dark Theology?**

In the body of Jesus Christ, God was found close and with people who were poor, left out and marginalized. I consider the spirit of God to be in the bodies of people that have been most harmed by the culture of violence and indifference in our world, presently and historically. It is in these bodies and the places they are found that God is alive and able to be met, known and felt most deeply. The book of Isaiah tells the story of a suffering savior yet to be born, this savior is described as having no beauty, marred from any resemblance of humanity, a King of sorrow and taken away by a “perversion of justice.”

“He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.”

(Isaiah 53:2)

Speaking to the lives and conditions of communities and people living under the oppression of empire and facing daily forms of repression, the proclamation of a coming savior
that lives their daily reality is an affirmation of God’s will extended to them through the ultimate character of love, Jesus. God’s profound creative potential is existent in the infinite darkness that produced our known and finite world. From the opening cosmic entanglement in the book of Genesis the Bible dances in and out of a metaphorical usage of dark and light, stretching the metaphor to discuss a range of human ideals. (Gen. 1:2-3)

For the purpose of my thesis I will use a few biblical examples to discuss life and death, night and day, blackness and the dark. The book of Psalms for example is imbued with poetry, prayer and promise. In chapter one hundred thirty-nine, the writer suggests an unconditional valuing of day and night accenting both occasions as natural events. “Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.” (Psalms 139) The unconditional lens afforded to darkness is challenged by the overarching assumption of goodness symbolized by light; these designations are thematically represented in contemporary culture and scripture. In this project, the voices of focus and primacy are developed in the dark example of unconditional revolutionary love towards the “least of these among us” taught by Jesus. (Matt. 25:45)

Theologically, the debate concerning unearned suffering is significant and important. Nonetheless, this is not my argument; I am principally focused on locating God in the common cycle of life and death as it emerges in the contextual environment of suffering. This environment is the place of exact finitude where human life is bound to material existence. After locating God in the dark and deriving a purpose of God’s extended love towards what is despised and hated by the world’s white power structure, there is a third movement of introduction that becomes apparent. Where do we face, interact and meet God in Dark Theology?
How Do We Meet God in Dark Theology?

We meet God when our lives and destinies are joined with the poor, left out and marginalized as we give ourselves to the work of truth revealing, healing and transformation. I believe we face, interact and meet God, when the localized works of community embody the example of Jesus described in Isaiah and in the Gospels. God is the presence that promises to be with us by the name Emmanuel. From that proximity to God and our neighbor, we draw the strength to live in circumstances of darkness and learn the gifts therein. Throughout this dialogue with darkness, I will affirm the importance of language that I believe creates an inner and outer dynamic of environment or home.

At the opportunity to fight against the culture of violence and domination of one group over another, we are just beginning to meet and feel the presence of God. When we fight and resist, we are living into the liberation we seek by overcoming the failure of definitions to restrict our humanity.

A New Beginning

When I entered Seminary in August of 2014, the U.S. was in the midst of mass protests and uprisings due to the killing of unarmed Black people by law enforcement and the persistent social justice advocacy work of the Movement for Black Lives and the Black Lives Matter Network. On August 9, 2014 Michael Brown Jr. was shot and killed by a Ferguson, MO police officer named Darren Wilson. This led to weeks of resistance followed by a state sanctioned occupation and acts of violent escalation committed by local police and the National Guard against community members and eventually protestors.
During the fall semester of 2014, Union Theological Seminary faculty and students actively engaged questions about our proximity to those most in need. We decided to organize a bus and heed the activist’s call for mass mobilization. Traveling to the city of Ferguson was like a pilgrimage; we were a small group of students among tens of thousands of people that mobilized as a result of the local organizations call to action. In that week, observing our calling to be witnesses, my classmates and I went to the memorial of Mike Brown Jr. on West Florissant Ave., the street where Mike Brown was killed. As we stood by the memorial of teddy bears, balloons, cards and well wishes, I was breathing in the full effect of the community’s pain at the epicenter of police violence in the U.S. Through conversations with neighbors and walking the distance marked as the final moments of Mike Brown’s life, it felt like a complete darkness had surrounded us and we joined the mourners in a few moments of silence before leaving.

The book written by the mother of Mike Brown, Lezley Mcspadden, Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil is the human story and voice I use to ground my proclamation of a dark faith. The concepts in this project are animated by the voices and lives that have been written off as useless, dangerous and are locked in cages because of their resistance and hard fought for existence. The synonyms for darkness are the same terms used to describe people who are incarcerated and even upon release, treated and tracked as less than human.

The chapter on dark power is initiated by writings included in If They Come in the Morning, Voices of Resistance collection of letters and essays edited by Angela Davis, written by political prisoners and their defenders. Her collections of testimonies are a clear example of dark power. On a timeline of U.S. history, the writing of If They Come in the Morning, Voices of
Resistance precedes the period of hyper and mass incarceration in this Country and served as a prophetic moment of naming a coming terror.

In the next two chapters we will encounter the possibility of living in the impossible darkness of faith and I’ll recall an experience of traveling through an underground cave system that is the origin of my research. Shelly Rambo, author of Spirit and Trauma contends that the middle space between the events of the cross and the resurrection is largely overlooked because of Christian triumphalism and supercessionism. Life in the aftermath of a violent event is speckled with flashes of courage and moments of disbelief and emotional dislocation. It is my charge to keep, that the uncharted and unknown stories that have traditionally fallen outside the range” of western theological reflection are overdue for rigorous attention. This is a lesson landed in the wilderness or jungle of unpredictability that complicates what is taken as a surety. The beginning point to our dialogue of dark matters will be the opening of a cave system in Jaguar Paw, Belmopan Belize.

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CHAPTER 1

In the Dark

In the summer of 2016, my friend Dante and I had the honor of wading over the waters of the Caves Branch River at Jaguar Paw in the Cayo district of Belize. This cave system is known for its connections to mysticism, religion and the spirituality of indigenous communities that lived in Belize before European influence. After a mile’s journey into the cave, our instructor requested our group turn off our headlamps and remain still for a few minutes. We listened, our small group stopped moving and each member shut off his or her headlamp, giving ourselves over to a complete and utter experience of darkness.

Time did not have its usual effect and with our eyes wide open we still could not perceive any light. There were no markers for distance and any sound we heard had a backdrop of stillness that echoed the drops of water and the slightest movements. As we continued to sit, the darkness that was surrounding all of us became physical and I could feel it layered on top of my skin. A verse describing the plagues of the Exodus story came to mind, “Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be felt." (Exod. 10:21)

With a cold chill rising from the waters the abiding physicality of the darkness was welcomed. It stayed quiet until our director began sharing the K'iche' mythology of the Mayan people that once lived in this region and used the cave systems to their benefit. Xibalba, the mythological location of the cave we navigated was considered a place of testing and initiation because of its darkness. The challenge put to initiates of this cave system was to navigate the
underworld and confront personal fears that would surely overwhelm them as they made the journey through the cave.  

The spirituality of the K’iché Maya posited darkness as necessary for growth of the human will and honored the capacity to be in tune with a diverse spiritual realm. The characterization of darkness as necessary in finding God, interrogates traditional moral claims to the goodness of light and denigration of dark. There is power in these ancient stories that originate with indigenous people’s histories, thinking and eschatology’s. Honoring these traditions are essential to my spiritual claims of a Dark theology. As our group exited the cave, I committed to the clarity I felt rising up in me and named it dark faith. Darkness became as bright as day to me, it was the glowing luminous darkness inside the caves of Jaguar Paw that lingered as most significant from my time in Belize.

**First Encounter**

This unexpected and exciting experience at Jaguar Paw was my first encounter with what would become my openness to a dark faith. In the dark, I was turned inward for answers, moved away from the comfort of what I could see. Surviving the loss of hope that was available in the light reignited the prospect of darkness being the key ingredient in catalyzing a shift from the hopeful, “another world is possible” to its accompaniment “another world is happening”.

The turn towards darkness adds an important element of unknowing the possibilities we have seen or envision as acceptable, respectable and knowable. The major shifts in human development from succeeding epoch changing stages, hunter gatherers, agriculturalists, industrial revolution, then technology and finance set a grand scale of time and transition for consideration, Grace Lee Boggs asks, “what time is it on the clock of the world?” She writes, “These are the

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times to grow our souls. Each of us is called upon to embrace the conviction that despite the powers and principalities bent on commodifying all our human relationships, we have the power within us to create the world anew.”\(^7\) Boggs work calls us to a deep investment in the intrapersonal and interpersonal worlds of relations.

Continuing her framing of history and time, Boggs positions the contemporary period of History in the tension between social relations and imagination, “we’re now on verge of cultural revolution” and this revolution is just beginning. The questions that will guide our next phase of movement are important as we encounter the possibility that our beginnings are met at the end of our knowing and the dissolution of Christian hope.

**Grounds for Growth**

Another important question to be led into this discussion by is, “what grounds do we begin to plant or enter a theological home?” My constructive theological proposal is grounded in a “theology of remaining” as discussed by Shelly Rambo in, *Spirit and Trauma*. Rambo’s voice and research speaks from a middle space between life and death, and resides in the language at the intersection of trauma and theology. This voice from the middle, as presented by Dr. James Cone, allows us to observe the Black body of Jesus, lying in the darkness of a tomb on the second day of the celebrated resurrection narrative. One day before Easter morning and one day after the crucifixion, this voice speaks from the space of eternal darkness. The envisioning of Jesus as black, is not a cursory mention, it is instructive.

The title of Black Jesus or Black Christ is centrally important to my argument. The critical work of Dr. Cone and other Black liberation theologians speak directly to Black people

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who have been denied such accessibility to God by western theological reflection. The writings of Womanist theologians who have questioned traditional theological positions of salvation through a male framed God and claimed the perspective of Black womanhood as essential for reading scripture, have informed my thinking and project as well. The confrontation between the images of a white androcentric Christ and the challenge of Blackness is a crux of Christological formation. In this account of Dark theology, liberation of Blackness and an un-gendered Jesus are norms for Christology and is a response to the question of which tradition am I calling forward?

The “Holy Saturday” construct is a source that is inclusive of the community of believers and non-believers that are witnesses to the state sanctioned killing of an innocent Black person named Jesus and how they manage to with live after this injustice has occurred between a raised cross and a sealed tomb. I am asserting that God’s most holy presence is found in this darkness, conjuring resistance and renewal. Thus a greater hope emerges in the failure of a hope first believed. This second hope is conjured from a distinctly different source, the dark and not the light as the greater hopes initiator.

In reflection on the Christo-centric salvation narrative, the greatness of Jesus’ life is often measured by the power of resurrection and not the pain of the grave and the cross. This question is worthy of honest development because Black lives in the U.S. throughout history, though remembered by social movements and the retelling of their names; the dead bodies and dry bones are not raised from the dead or remade in the image of God. Where might the hope of redemption live when no physical or emotional resurrection is available? In the revaluing of
darkness – the sealed grave is a resonating face of the deep out of which a whole earth found its creation and the world found its standing.

My research will now turn towards a tomb where Jesus’ body was laid during Holy Saturday. The lingering effects of that traumatic event extended through the individual and community that remained. This passing of time marked by tragedy is often referred to as a “dark time” and framed by emotions and circumstances such as depression, sadness, incarceration, isolation and suicidal ideations. In these so called, “dark moments” the dark power of God is most available and close to people who are targeted for violence because of their identity, personhood, gender, economic status, or humanity. The Christian aim of Dark theology is to hear the question, “Son of man can these bones live?” and respond by saying “Lord, you alone know”, lead me beside and into the still darkness so I can truly see. (Ez. 37:3)

For followers of the Christian faith and the life of its principal character Jesus, living in active remembrance of that journey by placing our bodies in close proximity to the dark people, places and things of life is to live out more fully our Christian duty. The radical possibility of transformation covered in our last chapter is a bold vision of unlikely friendships, broad and deep solidarity and a coming together of dispossessed populations to forge an omnidirectional paradoxical unity that passes into and comes from dark spaces such as the ancient Biblical locations of Samaria and Bethany.

**A Dark City Called Home**

First Century Bethany was a city of refuge for poor, sick and condemned people. The city’s location was not far from the busy, wealthy and shining city on a hill, Jerusalem. The small distance between the two cities is not representative of how far away the two worlds existed from
one another in terms of wealth, population and prosperity. Jesus spent his most precious and restorative moments in Bethany. Friends of Jesus Mary and Martha also lived in Bethany with their brother Lazarus. Jesus began the Palm Sunday march in Bethany, ate with Simon the leper and stayed in the city occasionally living as part of the community. When Jesus was alerted to Lazarus’ death, he waited four days to travel to Bethany to the dismay of Martha who thought Jesus would come swiftly and save Lazarus’ life.8

When Jesus arrived into the city and called Lazarus out of the tomb of darkness and death into life, he was still bound and claimed by death when he came forward. A community of witnesses gathered around and saw him exit the catacombs wrapped in burial cloth. Jesus commanded the witnesses to each take part in unbinding Lazarus from his burial rags. As the community untied Lazarus, who was dead for four days, the love and power in his darkness became a community story. This story began when hope died and faith was rejected, scolding Jesus, Martha said, “If you had been here Jesus, Lazarus would not have died” (Jn 11:21), the people were living in a dark time and Jesus, by entering into their darkness and remaining was able to reveal something they did not know about the power of God.

This same Dark theology is present in the story of Mike Brown, whose body remained in the middle of the street after his killing, bleeding out for four hours. The theology of remaining, accounts for this type of public violence as a communal trauma or deep wound to the collective conscious and psychological development of a community. In the wound caused by white supremacy and indifference to Black life, I find traces of dark faith. The physical body of Mike Brown was not brought back into life. By calling his name, “Mike Brown”, a power to cause

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resistance and humanistic love into being was revealed. This is how life is called out of darkness, the so-called, “dead and dry bones” are filled with the spirit of God and find their place.

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.

(Ezek. 37: 13-14)
Chapter 2:

Dark Faith: Finding God in the Dark

“What I got to say to the policeman who murdered my son,” I said, looking directly into the camera. “You’re not God! You don’t get to decide when you get to take somebody from here!” I could feel a powerful force rising up in me.” – Lezley Mcspadden (183)

The family memoir penned by Lezley McSpadden, mother of Mike Brown Jr., who was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson police department August 9, 2014 is a truth telling text. Her world— which is the Black world of the United States—is in many ways a defeated world that survives its defeats and refuses its grave. The Christian Gospel hinges on a similar truth in the life, witness, death and resurrection of Jesus, a poor and rejected Son of God violently hung to a cross by the Roman empire in the Ancient world.

The theological proposition of theodicy is a question that pulls the tether between human suffering and Godly care. The exploration of dark faith inevitably comes at the end of a previous held belief or confession of faith. In that consideration of dark faith, I assert the resources left to communities in defeat and sometimes death, become what is necessary for being born again and renewing a sense of God’s communion and daily ongoingness with the oppressed.

A Darkened Theodicy

Here is where our journey into a theological investigation of dark faith starts; a black body, a dark body, a body with all its wisdom and that I was born into this world with, one that is tracked by the evils of white supremacy for social, political and physical death. William R. Jones, author of Is God a white Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology locates his theodicy in the historical evidence and present reality of a divine God who responds to the suffering of Ms.
McSpadden and the Black world like a white racist, violently using silence in response to our human pains and indiscriminate violations of our human dignity. In this chapter, I will argue for a dark faith that emerges from the failure of hope into a generative power, born in the fracture of culturally Western, European and white epistemological conclusions.

In Jones’ assessment, the future as defined by white enslavers’ usurped “the more realistic world view of our African ancestors” that believed in the life here, now and past as most significant. With this belief, God is not afforded the opportunity of redemptive power apart from time-past and time-present, “it is therefore, what has taken place or will occur shortly that matters much more than what is yet to be.”

Death for these African ancestors, existed in no-time, therefore it holds no power or jurisdiction over the province of life.

Though conquered and facing death all day long, Black people have managed to cultivate a dark faith, which survives the elimination of faith by Jones’ theodicy. At this stage in the argument, we are still faced with the question of sorting out the nature of this dark faith and the God that works against the multi-evidential suffering and violence enacted on Black people that Jones defines as a particularity of “divine racism”.

The absurdity of this culturally justified hatred of Black people is the un-remedied locus of evil in the United States. Jones places the responsibility for this suffering and the lack of intervening power to stop it on the universal God. Dr. James Cone, by difference, systematically frames a God whose works are formed in liberation and found honest, only in the defense of suffering people, “The liberation of the oppressed is part of the innermost activity of God. This

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means that liberation is not an afterthought, but the essence of divine activity”.\(^{10}\) Dr. Cone presses this point even further, by making a theological claim to Jesus that rebukes any reality of God as racist and not on the side of the oppressed, “Any starting point that ignores God in Christ as Liberator of the oppressed or that makes salvation as liberation secondary is ipso facto invalid and thus heretical”.\(^{11}\)

If it is the primary objective of the culturally white racist God to dominate, exploit and eventually exterminate the life of Black people and other marginalized groups, then it is the movement of a dark faith that frees Black people by any and all means necessary dismembering the white idol gods that oppress them. Taking seriously the statement “resistance causes hope”\(^{12}\), as stated by Dr. Cone, Jesus’ resistance at all points against Roman authority, conducted through the poor and outcast members of Jesus’ society, is our model for being.

The fracture in a presumed epistemological superiority of one group over another becomes a cloud of darkness that could be felt. Lezley McSpadden’s authority to look into a camera, speaking to a national audience and say “You’re not God!” to the police officers responsible for her son’s death is a subversive theological act. Her voice spoken in resistance to the institution responsible for her son’s death and the powerful force she feels raising through her body affirms a presence of God beyond her hope’s failure. This presence of God and dark faith that accompanies it is in every place on earth where people are oppressed. Naming the challenges faced by mothers that have raised children born into the struggle of oppression under the rule of


\(^{11}\) James H Cone, *God Of The Oppressed*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 75.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 77.
empire, Ms. McSpadden adds,

“You took my son away from me,” she cried into the television cameras. “You know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many black men graduate? Not many. Because you bring them down to this type of level, because they feel like they don’t have much to live for anyway … ‘They are going to try to take me out anyway.’”

- Ms. Lezley McSpadden

A Darkness You Can Feel

In every city of the U.S. there is embodied resistance where Blackness in all of its beautiful struggles, remains a survival against all odds. Together they constitute the experience of growing up in the ghetto. These sites if not transformed, leave few options for those wishing to survive. Ms. McSpadden bears witness to her eighteen-year-old son’s efforts to name his newly found spiritual struggle recording his final facebook post from the day before he was killed, “The devil still after me as well but he hatin cause im back and im turning hell into a true fairy tale”. Michael Brown Jr. wrote the hopes of many young Black people, a hope that would eventually fail him the next day.

Mike Brown’s words are the transformative possibility meant by the term dark faith, the ability to make a way out of no way. Without theological training at a seminary or the instruction of a trained theologian, Mike Brown met God in his own way, at his own time. Like many of his peers, Mike was finding the road of life difficult, but something was drawing his


15 Phrase used most definitively by womanist thinkers and writers
mind to a purpose for living to an idea larger than himself. Michael Brown Jr.’s search for meaning in his life is prevalent among young Black youth of today who seek out meaning in dance, cultures of language and music as a means to express their truth.

**Spirituals & Hip Hop**

In religion, music has facilitated the spirit and transfer of purpose, value and meaning in Black culture. From the beat of drums, voices’ singing in harmony or rounds, chanting words of magic, moaning the blues, Blackness has found ways to speak and be felt. In *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Gayraud Wilmore speaks about the retention of African culture in and amongst enslaved populations in the Americas and the importance of reaching into African traditional religions for a theological ground of being.¹⁶

This way of surviving cultivates tools for reshaping the reality of domination. The demands of dark faith are such that courage is not patient unto death, but if death comes, it will not have the final word over a dark faith. Radical patience is the fierce urgency of “now”, tempered by a mindfulness concerning the health of the individual and community. This kind of patience working with courage lasts beyond its moment and passes through death without dying.

The spirit and effort of those who create music live beyond the limits of their own lives and become universal. Much like writers, musicians are a conveyor of a reality – a world, literal or figurative that opens the imagination of their audience. At our best, we move in these curated worlds for the experience of being affirmed, healed, relaxed or inspired by them. Ultimately, like darkness, our expectations before going in are not always received coming out.

The art form of hip-hop is a reminder of the unpredictability likened to the unknowable

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content and context of darkness. While the lives and emotions of artists fill our radio stations, bounce off the walls of our homes and settle in the minds of our youth, they become the transmission of story from giver to receiver. As a fan of the genre of Hip Hop, I know the comfort felt by hearing an artist speak directly to my lived reality, especially in a world that devalues your worth and takes advantage of your stories for profit in an exploitative capitalist market. Even so, artists have been able to make a generational impact that extends past their audience and moving those that were not born while they were alive.

The prophetic pioneer Tupac Amaru Shakur was such a person, a young black man and hip-hop artist whose voice remains one of the most relevant in the communities of oppressed people is a self-described, “Rose that grew from concrete”. Although his life was cut short by the violence of gunfire at the young age of twenty-five, in many ways the principle of everlasting life lifted by Jesus is evidenced by Tupac’s story.

His music and legacy have managed to survive the finality of the grave. In his interviews, movie appearances and music, Tupac promoted the idea of a Black Jesus, who lived in the paradoxical unity of risk and reward, revolution and riches, circumstantial power and humility that his audience experienced. At all points, Jesus and Tupac struggled through the concrete conditions of poverty, systemic racism and anti-Black assumptions in the United States and the ancient world and still surface as scarred roses that pushed through concrete into the world ongoing.

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17 Tupac Shakur, Rose That Grew From Concrete, MTV Books, 2009, 3.
In an interview with Black Entertainment Television journalist Ed Gordon, Tupac comments on Black youth who shared the same contextual reality of Mike Brown Jr. and states an authoritative perspective on their behalf, “I’m doing God’s work, (you think) these ghetto kids ain’t God’s children? I don’t see no missionaries coming through there, I’m doing God’s work… I’m up in the hood doing my work with my folk and just because I don’t live there don’t mean I don’t go there, I got to go there because I can’t hang nowhere else”18 Seeing God’s promise on the people that live at the consequence of the broken promises made by their home country and the disdain of privileged neighbors is where we meet God as followers of Christ. Tupac describes the desperate search for Black Jesus who knows the struggle of the ghetto in its particularity.

“It’s like a Saint, that we pray to in the ghetto, to get us through
   Somebody that understand our pain
You know maybe not too perfect, you know
   Somebody that hurt like we hurt
Somebody that smoke like we smoke
   Drink like we drink
That understand where we coming from
That's who we pray to we need help y'all”19
– Tupac Shakur

By way of those experiences, a commitment to go into the darkness of what this society has deemed unredeemable, becomes the calling a follower of Jesus must follow. To be open to what these voices, wounds and humanity of another have to say, scripture instructs us to “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight”. (Prov. 3:5-6)

Ministry of Darkness

I will now speak to the role of a person following a prophetic call to ministry. Dr. Martin

18 Tupac Shakur, God Has Cursed Me To See What Life Should Be Like, YouTube, 2017.

19 Tupac Shakur, 2Pac Black Jesus With Lyrics, YouTube, 2017.
Luther King Jr., writing from a Birmingham Jail\(^20\) is a prime example of this will to live in and through dark circumstances. Dr. King faced many challenges and at times while preaching the good news offered his personal struggles to his audience, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will”.\(^21\) In these passing moments of transparency, Dr. King as a minister gave himself over to a dark faith that brought him many sorrows. He experienced the heaviness of depression, exhaustion and weariness of mission hovering over the last few years of his life.

The desire to do God’s will meant another self-interested will had to die, and in that death of former beliefs about his home country, Dr. King touched a dark faith and began to stir the imagination of oppressed people towards action and organizing, “The memory of oppressed people is one thing that cannot be taken away, and for such people, with such memories, revolt is always an inch below the surface.”\(^22\) With revolt comes the inherent danger of backlash. In the 1960’s and 70’s a number of national and internationally known leaders were murdered, assassinated or imprisoned by the wave of counter-revolutionary forces sweeping the U.S. One inch below the surface of these causal violent acts is a reserve full of corresponding effects.

In the defeat of his physical body, the resources from Dr. King’s life have carved a way for many others to follow. This is true of other voices and people such as American Civil Rights leader Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray, an Episcopal priest who challenged fields of study in law,

\(^{20}\) Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “A Letter From Birmingham Jail”

\(^{21}\) Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”,

theology and denomination by living her life committed to a radical freedom. Her strength, no
doubt garnered in the struggle to be loved, to love God and love humanity, broke down walls
blocking the progress of women, queer people across the gender spectrum and other
marginalized persons.

These leaders as individuals and communities took up the important causes within the
U.S. and responded with their lives as a critique of a hypocritical nation that on one hand
professed freedom, liberty and justice for all and on the other hand denies the opportunity to
enjoy these high ideals to those most in need. Tupac Shakur and Mike Brown both died and were
killed by gunfire, yet the words of Jesus recorded in the gospel of John are affirmed by the work
of those who remain and continue to say their names, “Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my
word will never see death”. (Jn 8:51) Their lives provide a sense of healing and presence from
within death and resonate with throughout time-present with word, work and ongoing spirit.

Continuing the meditation on the vocation of prophetic pastoral leadership and the life
of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I propose a deeper look into the difficulty of wrestling creativity
and comfort from the grips of oppressive conditions. Through the example of the Christian
gospel; ministers are entrusted to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives, sight to
those who cannot see and freedom to the oppressed. (Luke 4:18) Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,
Peering over the pulpit recalling the names of the four little girls’ who died on September 15,
1963, Addie Mae Collins (age 14), Carol Denise McNair (age 11), Carole Robertson (age 14),
and Cynthia Wesley (age 14) is laboring in the call of his ministry. Dr. King preached the eulogy
to all that were in attendance at their funeral. These four young victims of a church bombing died
because white people inspired by racism, organized, wired bombs and executed their plans of hate.

Dr. King calling on the power in the God of his faith, structures the evil acts of these perpetrators in the democracy of death that fell on God’s precious children that Sunday morning. Seeking relief from the rippling waves of pain for himself and his audience, King preached, “God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.” There is a middle ground to be acknowledged, a Holy Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday that asks the question, where is faith when a ruined hope has not yet been redeemed?

I submit here, the dark night of young lives taken by racial hatred is where Dr. King had to grapple with his own role as an organizer and minister leading a mass movement. As a leader bearing the cross of nonviolence in a violent world, Dr. King found himself standing precisely in the place and on the grounds where God exists and is most deeply known and felt, a place where the eternal order is drawn to its finite end in life. Dr. King as an individual is an example of the broader experience of the dark; King called this moment in the dark a “Knock at Midnight”. The prophet Moses of the Hebrew Bible touched the ineffable God in the darkness of a cloud away from the multitude of people, “And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was” (Exod. 20:21)

As a response to this calling to meet God, dark faith is cleansing anger, immovable

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indignation and at times a refining fury. Whether the deaths of young children because of racial hatred in 1963 or other forms of violence against the oppressed today, Dr. King assigns victims a place in the eternal; in that timeless place he claims that death is not the end and they will find the rest of angels that they were denied on earth. The theodicy of Jones and my own vision of dark faith choose a different measure of eschatology.

My suggestion of dark faith is mired in the suffering of Black and poor people equal to Dr. King’s vision of a Beloved Community, but we are now a people whose fairy tales have no more pages and whose patience has grown ever thin. The accumulation of racial violence and punishment of the poor witnessed by Dr. King in 39 years of life is accented by his own assassination. The cumulative effect of knowing the history of unconscionable killings in this country based on racial hatred could very well kill the human motivation for faith, power and love. When these ideals are killed, we are left again with the resources of our defeat.

In that place where lament and deep sadness aim to consume souls is a choice where communities can choose to disbelieve in future possibilities, relinquishing the duty to unjust law and religious regulation. The refusal to leave death without a struggle for life by communities is a theological exploration of a democracy of freedom. This search is conducted by any and all means found necessary by people who are waging revolutionary love in times of hate driven war. The working out of one’s faith in suffering is a response to the normative western theological Christian claim that closely binds salvation to a world to come. Dark theology ties salvation closely to the freedom of the world that is here.

I Am Free
On the point of suffering, I agree with William Jones. Suffering has no a priori relation to salvation and to make it so, is a malformation of God’s will. The conclusions of culturally white and western produced epistemologies, no matter how well they are worded, researched and planned, are unable to overcome their original sin, the social, political and economic system of whiteness. Educator and professor of American Studies, Calvin Warren retells his meeting of an older black woman waiting for a train in Washington D.C. at Dupont Circle. She tells him about her frustrations with the government shutdown of 2013 and discloses her decision not to vote.

“We elect these people into office, we vote for them, and they watch black people suffer and have no intentions of doing anything about it… We elect these people into office, we vote for them, and they watch black people suffer and have no intentions of doing anything about it.”

Mr. Warren agrees and continues to listen to his elder, “You know, people think you’re crazy when you say things like this… But I am a free woman… and I won’t go back.” As the enlightened world of Western thinking vacillates between the supposed moral complexities of decision-making, darkness is the grounds for new creation and is accountable to a different moral order than empire; its morality is responsive to the needs of those living in various contexts of darkness and suffering. In addition to its moral courage, it is my prayer that a dark faith will hold our hand and usher us into a dark love, when we find ourselves most in need of a power greater than our moment.

Mike Brown’s Facebook status

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25 Ibid., 245.
“August 8, 2014, at 3:22 a.m.” I could use a hug right now FR (for real)”\textsuperscript{26}

Chapter 3

Dark Power and Dark Love

“If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own – which it is – and render impassable with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber. For, if they come for you in the morning, they will surely come for us that night. Therefore: Peace” 27 – A letter from James Baldwin to Angela Davis

Togetherness is a theme in my thesis and a condition that causes systems of oppression to be frustrated. For example, it is a kind gift to receive fortifying and assuring words from friends while enduring undue political persecution. In an open letter from James Baldwin addressed to Angela Davis, who was waiting to stand trial in 1970, you can feel the currents of deep love, power and faith in each word. Facing considerable odds against her survival and raw acts of state sanctioned violence at each moment, the two friends are engaged in the practice of keeping each other alive. Angela Davis, by way of her endurance and Mr. Baldwin by his writing, supported one another. If not moved to a sense of power by this witness, in the least, it should stir our anger. How can terror surround the beauty of this dark love? If we are to linger in this darkness, where simple hope is endangered by the world around it, we are best served to adjust our vision for the dark night of the soul and seek God’s power.

I emphasize that a mature vision of love must include outrage in an unjust world. In this chapter, I will argue for belief in a dark power, which is the revolutionary force that rises from the dignity of oppressed people that have been violated. With purpose, my words are concerned about the nation that feminist writer Alexis Gumbs says we can, “Hear the dreams of our mother

fall to the floor and never get raised up after” documenting the violence of patriarchy and domestic abuse Gumbs writes with precision. This impression of violence should cause our ear to bend towards those persons who find themselves most on the margins. The mounting concern about the world that frames Black life and the lives of oppressed people at large in the absurdity of white racism is a point of departure for Black liberation theology and Dark theology alike.

I consider the earth to be my home and the U.S. my country. Dark faith as I have experienced it, abides in the fatal falling to the floor of our Mother’s dreams and in the persistent cries from the ancient city of Ramah that can still be heard in the U.S. today. It is hidden in the reoccurring failures of hope, steadily conjuring raw resistance to its own non-existence and non-being, dark power is dark faith put into practice by rectifying and healing the harm committed from within and through the wound.

In dark power there is spiritually grounded space and allowance for both love and anger. A word of caution is important here as healing through dark power must not fall subject to the paradigm of over and against, rather calling forward the power of togetherness and cooperation; dark power asserts that time-past is redemptive by our efforts in time-present. Time is the redemptive element in dark power; the suffering due to trauma is not bound by time and often remains with its own silent and immeasurable effects.

Dorothee Soelle writes with a piercing tone of anger that purifies the common Christian love, urging it to be honest with its central symbol, the cross. In her seminal text, Suffering, she

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29 Matthew 2:18 - A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more
recollects a story of the 1907 Chilean massacre and presents it as a “dangerous memory”.

It is retold through a protest song that rises in the wake of three thousand six hundred Chileans being killed for their revolutionary politics. Dark power requires us to sing our songs of suffering and to remember our fallen friends. The inner activity of dark power in the Christian life constitutes the ground for which Black power is able to build community, in the midst of tragedy.

Michael Brown 18 years old

Fundamental to any explication of a theological concept is again, a human story. My theological foundations shake whenever I read the memoir of Michael Brown’s mother, Ms. Lezley McSpadden. From the moment I learned about her son, her dream child being shot and killed by Ferguson police officer, Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014, I carried a “dangerous memory” in my mind. This memory would concretize in the months following his killing.

Community members, organizers and activists made a nationwide call for all justice seeking people to come to St. Louis, MO activating a week full of mass actions. Union Theological Seminary students, myself included, planned a bus trip and we made our way to the epicenter of police brutality protests in Ferguson, MO. The mourning of amassed grief was thick in the air and emotional spheres so permeable I was unsure which experiences of sorrow were my own or from someone else.

After a week of participation in various actions, risking arrest, marching, dancing, lamenting and witnessing, we made a decision to visit the community where Michael Brown lived. Standing over the reef laid memorial on the street and over the spot “Mike-Mike” was killed, was like a time portal, transporting us into a dark unknowing of any good that comes from

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living in a white racist society. We were standing still and feeling the burning emotions of a real-life tragedy. Our hearts and minds were with his family particularly his mother and father.

It was on this street, Canfield Dr., that Ms. McSpadden became a member of the community of mothers whose children met such an inexplicable and evil death. The respective communities impacted by these killings organized to hold each other’s hurts and knew each other’s pain with specificity. Soelle describes the enduring power that comes from grassroots convening’s of people that have suffered, “The hard fist of the people breaks through shadow and silence and voices summon to singing. Come, comrade, fall in”.31 To properly discuss the breaking through of shadows and silence it would benefit us to name the problems of white American theology and its lack of relevance to the Black population in America.

The first point of clarity is to make clear the distinction between people and their religion. Ruby Sales speaks with authority on this issue, “Well, first of all, it’s very obvious when I say black folk religion; I’m talking about a religion that came out of ordinary folk. And I’m also talking about a religion that began during enslavement in the fields of America”.32 There is a genealogy of resistance that flows from oppressed people’s experiences that on occasion, finds religion as its host. Dr. Cone provides insight into the failings of liberal theology, and how their authors have remained unconscious of their lacking perspective, “secure in their assumption that important theological issues emerge, primarily if not exclusively, out of the white experience.


Despite the sit-ins and pray-ins, the civil rights movement and black power, Martin Luther King and Stokely Carmichael, white theologians still continue their business as usual”.\textsuperscript{33}

We are contending with a God-talk that excludes the experiences of people living lives of innumerably excessive forms of suffering in the United States. Dr. Cone calls these theologians out as profoundly ignorant on the missed connection between the cross of Jesus Christ and the American lynching tree. He reminds us of their absence of meaningful collective resistance as whites actively justified unjust actions and only a few spoke out against it. The ineffectiveness of historically white theological conclusions is a parallel and intersecting history to dark power and its contextually relevant “Black Power”.

It is imperative for my research that I disturb the settled division of the world, state and church. Tupac Shakur, during the same impassioned interview cited earlier, questions the notion that God’s love is limited to middle and upper class people. “God has cursed me to see what life should be like, if God wanted me to be this person and be happy here, he wouldn’t let me feel so oppressed he wouldn’t let me feel so trampled on”\textsuperscript{34} A God of so-called unconditional love and goodness must be troubled by the disparate conditions that some of God’s children are subjected to endure.

This statement of God’s unconditional love and preferential option for the poor made by Tupac, lands squarely on the U.S. fault lines of race, class and gender. St. Louis as described by Ms. Mcspadden is a prime example of these divides, “Truth be told, St. Louis is really two cities in one town: one black, one white. Over here is the black side, and what they refer to as South


\textsuperscript{34} Tupac Shakur, ‘\textit{God Has Cursed Me To See What Life Should Be Like’ - YouTube.}, 2017.
Side or South city is the white part”\textsuperscript{35} Not only is this fracture rooted in the racist redlined history of this country, but it is alive and a causal reminder of the violence inherent in the practices of gentrification, voter suppression and environmental racism that plagues communities of color at disproportionate rates. As ministers of the gospel we are called to think clearly and be with the oppressed and ourselves more aware and attentive.

This lived reality of separation is common to any city in the U.S., the divide is historical, present and has future implications. Dr. Cone writes, “Participation in divine liberation places the church squarely in the context of the world. Its existence is inseparable from worldly involvement. Black theology cannot say that the “church is the world” or the “world is the church”, but it does affirm that the church cannot be the church in isolation from the concrete realities of human suffering.”\textsuperscript{36} Dark power aims to restore dignity and respect to the oppressed, moving beyond the politics of reform into full revolution accountable to the freedom of the oppressed.

Prisoners of Politics

It is a foolish beginning for people desiring change to believe in an “existing democratic order” ruled by empire. To rationalize the economic system of “capitalism” in the U.S. one becomes complicit in the destruction of many and much, for the benefit of a few. Both systems and orders in the U.S. have proven themselves insufficient in meeting the needs of “the least of these” among us. One is an illusion and the latter is the mechanism that made this nation’s

\textsuperscript{35} Lezley McSpadden and Lyah Beth LeFlore \textit{Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil: The Life, Legacy, and Love of My Son Michael Brown}, New York, Regan Arts, 42.

\textsuperscript{36} James H Cone, \textit{Black Theology of Liberation}, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 140.
original sin of racism, a full-fledged economic system based firmly on the enslavement of an entire race of people that was codified by law generation after generation.

Any people or person that resists the politics of imprisonment both within the walls of prisons and in the open air of colonialism, risks their lives. With increased surveillance technology and weaponry, the military arm of the government as exampled by the institution of local policing, enhanced by empire style policies enacted of the local level of community against neighborhoods of marginalized people materializes the challenge of survival each and every day.

Protestors against this system have been met with the entire weight of the military and political complex. In cases of developing cooperative power, wealth creation, uprisings or mere existence of oppressed groups, the backlash by the state has been conducted with brute force. The oppressed in these conditions are treated as the problem by key rulers in high places, rather than the solution to a broken society. Dark power looks at the lessons that have been gained by living, “full of the faith that the dark past has taught us” and is activated by its remembrance. State violence has decimated communities that have worked out a process of liberation.

Black communities and entire cities have been forced to rebuild, places such as Rosewood - FLA, Tulsa - OK, Philadelphia - PA, Wilmington - NC, and most recently, Ferguson, OH. Each of these cities represents historical reference points of militarized response to Black people’s pain and success that resonate with many sites inspiration and its antithesis of injustice today.


38 Cities that have experienced mass acts of racial violence Rosewood (1923), Tulsa (1921), Philadelphia (1985), Wilmington (1898), Ferguson (2014)
By extension of this pain, political prisoners are at once singular and collective. The bodies of the oppressed, the voices - moving, spirited, in silence or expression continues to be treated as property by empire. In one sense of the definition, we are all prisoners of politics. Dr. Angela Davis makes it plain, “The offense of the political prisoner is his political boldness, his persistent challenging – legally or extra legally- of fundamental social wrongs fostered and reinforced by the state”. This is the state of our world, and thusly the church that exists in it. Whether we are objectified or objectifying we are prisoners of politics.

Coincidently, being the oft quoted, “product of my environment” is more than a hip cliché used by young adults to describe the powerlessness of living under the rule of empire, it is the indictment of an entire generation that has been reshaped by forces outside their reach. Wherever oppressed people are, suffering is also present and the particular suffering of the, “least of these” is all the more violent. Soelle says, “A person cannot tell you anything about God as long as he rules over you”. As a function of the enslaver-slave relationship, there is no sameness in the God of those that rule and the God of people that are ruled over. The conditions and circumstances that separate the light from the dark similarly separate people according to class, race and gender.

Speaking about the lives of Black people in particular and oppressed people in general, Ruby Sales explains,

“When you really want to understand black folk theology, let me give you an example. Black prayers that our ancestors forged, “I want to thank you for waking me up in the morning,” which contested the power of the slave master, acknowledging the power of someone greater,


that the slave master — I don’t like the word “master” — that the enslaver was not the alpha and omega of black life.”41 — Ruby Sales

This is dark power, the articulation of redefining the theology that has treated Black people and other groups so unjustly. Because our lives and accordingly our hopes are located in zip codes and neighborhoods, a few reasons emerge for the necessity of the church. Churches are locally oriented and present to the concerns of everyday life in the community. As an institution it has been an organized center of everyday life for its membership.

During the difficult aftermath of the tragedy in Ferguson, everyday life for Lezley McSpadden was experienced as an “unending chain of mothers suffering the loss of their children to violence.”42 This is imprisonment without walls. Within the walls, mass incarceration is a different evil that stems from the same source of white supremacy. It is clear; the United States is committed to maintaining a system of hyper-mass incarceration. It is sickening and breaking chains is imperative because the violence continues to get worse. With such a problematic force in this country, one must ask, where is the power?

A unique and specific power is found in articulating the pains and longsuffering of oppressed communities with language. Expressing our suffering offers the greatest possibility to do something or anything about it, inviting others to share their stories and reveal another point of access to dark power. The coming power of language in suffering is and must be as contextual as the lives it describes. Ministers, writers and artists that become aware of injustice have a


responsibility to refine their efforts and talents to address the newly realized reality, thus inviting the circumstances on their own bodies that are experienced by the whole of their audience.

**Resist**

A force – unlettered, and wholly prophetic, chooses Ms. McSpadden as its embodiment when she responded to a question about the officer that killed her son “You’re not God! You don’t get to decide when you get to take somebody from here!” The power to define God for herself and on her terms is not much different than Jesus reorienting the religious world by responding to his critic’s question, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered; you know neither me, nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also”. (John 8:19-20)

Losing a son to gun violence is not a universally understood experience in any sense. Nevertheless, the activists that chose to suffer through her son’s name revealed the moral conscience of this nation concerning Black people in the community and those looking form the outside, it continues to be a painfully bitter pill to swallow, Black Jesus who suffered under the weight of the name Jesus, knows this same pain.

In Ferguson, MO during a weekend of mass actions in solidarity with local protests, chants could be heard disrupting the status quo by shouting the name of the victim, “I am Mike Brown!” and “If we don’t get it, shut it down! We are doing this for Mike Brown!” In the U.S., mothers, fathers, friends and sometimes the state itself are burying children on the basis of the color of their skin. The resistance to these forms of suffering is again based in the acknowledgement of darkness and pressing into darkness to draw out meaning and the resources from failure.

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When the burial of a child is the consequence of the actions of police officers, the suffering is amplified by the injuriousness of the act that is sanctioned by court systems. The mourning families travel the country, protesting for repeals of “stand your ground laws” and seek to impose stricter “gun laws”. One of these groups is called the Rainbow mothers; Ms. Lezley McSpadden is one amongst the growing and present number.

They are Mother’s on the move, speaking out and sharing their stories. To start her journey with the group, Ms. McSpadden had to battle back the idea of others shaming her and the political powers dismissing her, “some hater might say I’m never going to be successful “cause I don’t have the education or background, or even the right connections, but I look back at my Granny’s life. She came up to St. Louis from Mississippi, and she didn’t have any connections or resources, but she made a way anyway. So, as I sat down to write to the powers that be, I was confident…”

Ms. McSpadden’s sense of generational pain is imbued with generational power.

The essence of mass incarceration has not changed much from its origins in the slave labor economy of the early American colonies. The early slave labor based economy has now exceeded the scale and depth of its beginnings from over four hundred years ago. The Black power period of the 1960’s produced organized campaigns to combat the historically systemic abuse and Angela Davis, a prominent leader within the Black Panther Party, communicated with clarity, a proposal for all out resistance, reconciliation and unification between a diverse range of affected people.

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Davis collects her hopes and resistance in an assemblage of literature written by political prisoners, she writes, “Finally, it is our hope that this book will contribute in some way toward the crystallization of a United Front by helping to expose the bestiality of the prison system… which has already claimed dozens of lives and imprisoned thousands of people.”

There are currently 2.2 million people that are incarcerated and half a million more in the parole system in present day U.S. Being released from this body of death would be the height of liberation and its theological twin, spiritual power.

**Dark World**

“One can’t really be a true revolutionary without being cognizant of the need to link up with forces all over the world battling with imperialism. My trips abroad, most of which were undertaken for purposes involving my university studies, contributed a great deal to my own political development.”

Letter from James Baldwin to Angela Davis

The privilege of travel is filled with the ability to experience new things, new sights, sounds and conditioning. Dark power is a truly revolutionary force and learning from the experiences of oppressed people who are resisting strengthens it. Just as in dark faith, A person would be hard pressed to find a medium of storytelling that speaks the language of darkness and provokes the nature of being a problem, more than music. Music has the ability to speak of suffering from many vantage points, joined with the rhythm of instruments and steady beats musicians and artists curate their visions of the world. Personally, I have heard my nephew recite many of the lyrics of his favorite songs as if it they were lifted from his own life. At times, this can be a terrifying reality.

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46 Ibid., 190.
**Dark Love**

The fear of losing things in this world is tied to an overarching attachment to things. This tendency often foregoes the possibility of gaining something new succumbing to the familiarity of the old. The movement from dark power to dark love is the impossible possibility of losing and gaining, being filled and emptied in the same motion, spiritual power. Believing the space between leaving and losing on one hand – gaining and being, on another –is merely a passing of time, does not honor the potential of cultivating a love that responds to evil with action and activity.

Dark love exists where the familiar elements of love have dissolved. The impulse of dark love is a crafting of possible resistance from the impossible materials of the subjugated and defeated world. Seeking the in-between spaces found most often between life and death, birth and dying, becoming and perishing, possible and impossible, the darkness of not having to “know” in order to “be” moves dark theology towards the larger field of construction, process theology.

If we act contrarily against tides of complicity, with more constancy and consistency in the interest of the oppressed, it fosters fresh love for revolt and embodies the dynamism and chaos inherently birthed in change and creation. Soelle writes “To attain the image of Christ means to live in revolt against the great Pharaoh and to remain with the oppressed and the disadvantaged”. 47 “To remain” as stated by Shelly Rambo, signals a spirit of intent and speaks to the lives of Jesus’ followers that remained after the terror of the cross. Remaining also indicates

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a capacity to hold the concerns and hopes of the disadvantaged without turning away or siding with Pharaoh.

The choice is whether or not we make our neighbor’s suffering our own, and whether or not we do this daily. Soelle continues, “It means to make their lot one’s own. It is easy to be on Pharaoh’s side if one just blinks an eye. It is easy to overlook the crosses by which we are surrounded.” In other words, it is better to struggle for salvation, which is only thinkable through the liberation of oppressed people, than to be made falsely free and actually remain in bondage. Until freedom, we are in constant struggle to attain dark love by the challenge of creating it on earth from the ashes of trying.

Dark power is a self-revealing ethic. It seeks to reappraise the world by its own meanings and definitions gained from darkness. Black people in the U.S. are denied and pressed by systemic inequities as opposed to personal slights or bias that seem to be the principal concern of liberal politicians. Frantz Fanon writes, “As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others”. Dark Power, dark faith and dark love are avenues by which Black people, who transvalue the broken promises of this culture daily, are still here and it is still the morning of this period’s coming revolution.

Topically, each period is responsible for the care of its age. The evolution of our struggles tells us we are connected to each other, all of us in a web of interconnectedness. Fanon notes, “Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray

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it.”50 The modern political warfare on display in the world feels new, old, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, it resembles darkness. Until there is an acknowledgement of the dark, we will run past ourselves, lost and looking to simulations of light for comfort.

Since, the powers of domination come in the morning and at night for the very lives and energy of oppressed people. We must think when we wake up and be ready when we go to sleep. We are collectively, this country’s problem. It would be better for our future if we acted like it.

“I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit. I am a master and I am advised to adopt the humility of the cripple. Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.”51

Frantz Fanon

In this nation the oppressed are forced to straddle between existing in a racist society and secondarily, constructing an alternative world, history proves this. Believing in a dark power is a theological movement into a world without cardinal directions. It is generative, alive, dynamic and responsive to the world in which it lives. It operates in broken and foolish people, “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong”. (I Corinthians 1:27)

The gospel life of Black Jesus is a testament of dark power. Lezley McSpadden and the rainbow mothers are testaments to dark power. The oppressed that have suffered and died carelessly in this country, on too many occasions and yet still overcome death daily are


testaments to dark power. Testimony services in the early morning hours of the Black church are calling forward a dark power. In this coming together – Black power reasons with dark power to pull greater traction for its people in service of revolutionary change.

Black Power

*I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.*

(Isaiah 45:3)
Chapter 4

Suffering & Language in Dark Theology

“The black experience and the Bible together in dialectical tension serve as my point of departure today and yesterday.”

Dr. James Cone

I consider the language of Dark theology as a branch that grows from the roots of ongoing postcolonial dialogues. For the purposes of this chapter, my research requires a few definitions and an identifiable thread throughout that maintains language as the primary tool of liberation and darkness as its source. I will use several colonial contexts in this chapter as distinct historical time periods while taking into account the current day systems of accelerated capitalism, white supremacy and the most robust war machines our world has ever known.

Each geographical context is from either the African Diaspora or the United States specifically. My definition of postcolonial thought is the cognitive investigation of the liberating demands of the oppressed in a colonial environment. This departure makes it possible to imagine or reveal language in the unknown and underappreciated sources of darkness such as defeated, embattled, colonized and subjugated people and circumstances.

Postcolonial and liberation theology projects share a pool of ideas that exists outside of the colonizers’, oppressors’, and enslavers’ imagination. This is particularly true of the language that operates with the people and groups they dominate. The term anti-colonial describes a “way of being” that counteracts and disrupts the domination of subjugated people.

My definition of suffering is shaped by the relationship to darkness that I have described as accessible to communities that have been defeated. Dr. James Cone, beginning with Black

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Theology and Black Power and a later work The Cross and the Lynching Tree identifies a meaningful connection of language by making the direct association between the symbolic cross that Black Jesus of scripture was crucified on and the American lynching tree that terrorized Black Americans and other marginalized groups in the U.S. With this connection, Dr. Cone creates a language that expresses the suffering experienced by Black people in the U.S. and renews a theological framework to resist it.

Black Theology and Black Power asks the question, “How should I respond to a world, which defines me as a nonperson?” Being labeled as a Non-person is the restriction of a person to a thing of subhuman quality. Oppressed people, who are treated as non-persons, are thusly not afforded human rights and denied the possibility of embodying a range of emotions, critical thoughts or intelligent sensory responses in the American imagination. The danger in responding in-kind to the savage inequalities is losing one’s own sense of personhood by engaging in the treatment they are bombarded with by outside forces.

Dr. Cones explains the devastation of domination in his later work the Cross and The Lynching Tree, recounting the horrors of lynching he writes, “Lynching was the white community’s way of forcibly reminding blacks of their inferiority and powerlessness. To be black meant that whites could do anything to you and your people, and that neither you nor anyone else could do anything about it”.  

The targeting of Black Americans by vigilantes and law enforcement is not limited to current day private enactments of violence, the public nature of lynch law and rape as tools of dominance are documented in photos with accompanying text in the pictorial collection, Without

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Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America. This catalog of photos illustrates the depth of white American evil as lynching photos were used as postcards and decoration in the homes of white Americans.\textsuperscript{55} The 21\textsuperscript{st} century technological advances have made instant access to videos of public police brutality more available than ever, adding to the library of language and images relating the debasement of Black existence in a white world.

\textbf{Habitus}

The term “habitus” describes the environmental paradigm wherein contextual relationships between oppressors and oppressed exist; in this case, the capitalist economy as developed in the U.S. is a catalyst to the violent forces already frustrating social relationships. As defined by Pierre Bordieu, the habitus is the arena where the socio-political demands and consequences of language come to life and the place that I argue dark languages of resistance are made possible.

The habitus is defined as the, “embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product”.\textsuperscript{56} This active past that influences the current reality makes our minding of the gap, the darkness, all the more important.

Here I stand, asserting that language is as an embodied experience shared by the speaker, writer and the audience that exists in relationship with the expressing individual in dialogue. Politically, laws and policies are continually undergoing change, yet an embodied history of trauma, survival and creativity that supersedes the enactment of laws is reproduced in our


transfer of language from generation to generation. Darkness in psychology is often used as an allusion towards the unconscious mind. The habitus and home of dark theology is a living culture that continuously creates in the darkness of our unconscious behavior, it says, “you are worthy”, “you are enough” to those who are denied those words by violence or circumstance.

Historical antagonisms between social groups are another site of language production. Each colonial and neo-colonial conflict researched is a dialogue with defeat. Bourdieu expounds more on the subject when it comes to this particularity of language; “the dialectic of the naming of the language and the ‘sayings of the tribe’ is a particular and particularly significant case of the dialectic between habitus and institutions”.57 Language in this case, although “alive” as specified by Judith Butler58, is produced within the limitations of habitus and institution.

At this juncture, two important concepts are important to define, the conditions of socio-economic class and the influence of social conditioning. I am using the colonial projects mentioned in the introduction to examine the aspect of darkness that defines people as useless, depressive, and deserving of domination or evil.

The primary colonial context I use in this discussion is the American empire and the language that has been conditioned in that particular habitus of darkness. My theological lens related to language production is shaped by three strands of investigation, socio-economic class distinctions, social conditioning and postcolonial thoughts which are the pool of ideas that exists outside of the colonizer’s, oppressor’s, and enslaver’s imagination

**Agency of Language**

Language denotes meaning and is in relationship to the people, places and things it describes.


Unhinged from its use within the habitus or home being experienced, language lacks meaning and effect. I believe along with Butler, that language is a “living thing” and by that definition, it can be killed. Black Americans in their experience of American empire during the trans-Atlantic slave trade were stripped of their known languages. This violent act of killing the languages spoken by enslaved Africans effectively killed the possibility of a communal response and resistance to subjugation. A return to the darkness of stolen and killed language is a venture of dark faith, power and love that is resident in acknowledging absolute defeat.

The freedom of the oppressed is political and its theology must attend to the universe of language manufactured by defeat. This critical connection between the death of language and defeat of existential experience makes revolutionary love fundamental for any response to loss. The loving effort to extend one’s will into defeat searching for language is creative ground for the spiritual development of themselves or others. Without language, suffering could not be named and therefore an appropriate response to suffering could not be materialized. It is my belief that a revolution of values is always alive in the dark.

Language in isolation is powerless and abstract, but in the tension of American history, accessible language to those who suffer is a source of healing and a way to keep going-on with the impossible possibility of new descriptors being found. This is similar to the relationship between love and power described by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a sermon titled, “Where Do We Go From Here” King says, “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love”\(^59\). Dark power

\(^{59}\) Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?* Delivered at the 11th Annual SCLC Convention. [http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention/) 29 Apr. 2015.
again affirms the union of justice and love as it is found and expressed in the language of people living in darkness people conjuring resistance to their end.

American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler writes, “If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence”\(^6^0\). In the Christian tradition, one connotation of language is a two-edged sword, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12) In the event of Black people’s stolen legacies and lapses in revolutionary language, the future is made worrisome. In the absence of a lively excitable word that reshapes defeat, death in the dark overcomes life in the dark. Without linear achievement of one over the other, the struggle is for language that most identifies what has happened, and what is needed.

**The Wretched Dark**

The deficiency of creative language and ideology in decolonization efforts on the African Continent were of great concern to Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. His work described the savage effects of colonialism in Algeria. He was commissioned as a doctor observing victims of torture and the plurality of violence as a result of colonization. Fanon writes, “If one listens with one ear glued to the red earth one very distinctly hears the sound of rusty chains, groans of distress, and the bruised flesh is so constantly present in his stifling noonday that one's shoulders droop with the weight of it”\(^6^1\).


Fanon deepens and expands the grave concern for the future of African liberation movements primary and other entanglements secondarily by noting the lack of ideology that support revolution, “In a short time this continent will be liberated. For my part, the deeper I enter into the cultures and the political circles the surer I am that the great danger that threatens Africa is the absence of ideology”.  

The constructive theology of darkness aims to meet that great danger by responding to the demands of the human spirit and its existential crisis.

The liberating phrase “Black Power” as defined by Dr. James Cone is “the complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary. The methods may include selective buying, boycotting, marching, or even rebellion”.  

The language and legacy of oppression attempts to instill anti-revolutionary behavior into communities of resistance. “Theologians must face the relativity of their thought processes: their ideas about God are the reflections of social conditioning”.  

This conditioning creates hard-wired biases and is affirmed by institutions that model the ideology of the empire.

It is important to underscore again, language and words as living entities with agency that are produced from conditional relationships set in time. Quoting author Toni Morrison, Judith Butler writes, “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence.” Morrison offers a parable in which language itself is figured as a “living thing”. The next section of my research aims to establish the Black religion as the source of dark faith, power and love.

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64 James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed, New York, Seabury, 1975, 41.

The larger habitus for developing language in Dark theology is Black religion. The reservoir of language available to religious liberation traditions originates in a broader context of Black religion that includes interreligious dialogue, and spirituality that grows from African roots. In *Black religion and Black Radicalism*, Gayraud Wilmore crafts an interpretation of black radical resistance movements alongside the religious worlds of Black Americans beginning in pre-conquest African history.

Wilmore begins the Christian dialogue and begins by making the familiar distinction between “White Christianity and Black Religion”. He writes, “Blacks have used Christianity not so much as it was delivered to them in the experience of suffering and struggle, to reinforce an enculturated religious orientation and to produce an indigenous faith that emphasize dignity, freedom, and human welfare”\(^6\). Wilmore describes the languages of the oppressed as a constantly evolving thread with each movement of history. Enslaver’s killed the languages of enslaved people, creating a violent genocide of languages and colonies based in the religious evil of subjugation.

Wilmore argues that Black religion is inclusive of spiritual and cultural practices that have undergone a process of hybridity due to colonialism and war. Afro-Brazilian, and Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices such as Vodun, Candomble are given expression as spiritual forms of resistance to colonization in the dark. The African Diaspora religions developed in slavery served as a path to building the language used in social change movements we see today, despite

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the ignorance, prejudice and repression of white Christians, African Spirituality could reassert itself in the great African American Churches of the twentieth century”⁶⁷.

For Wilmore, religion is much larger than a conservative, liberal or liberationist distinction within Christianity and I agree. I view Black Religion as the energies used to express the full range of human expression from an African diaspora perspective.

**Colonial Context: A Small Place**

In very explicit terms, Jamaica Kincaid describes the meeting of colonizer and colonized in her home country of Antigua. In *A Small Place*, Ms. Kincaid uses language to carve a way through the suffering under colonialism by restoring agency to her fellow Antiguans in the darkness of defeat and the frustrations that come along with it. “As to what we were before we met you, I no longer care. No periods of time over which my ancestors held sway no documentation of complex civilizations, is any comfort to me”⁶⁸.

Kincaid continues to develop the difference between her people and the colonizer. “Even if I really came from people who were living like monkeys in trees it was better to be that than what happened to me when I met you”⁶⁹. This speaks to the role of historicism and how the social habitus in colonialism is informed by choices in language that are used to define and assign the colonized the status of beast and the colonizer civilized.

Antigua is like many other Caribbean islands that rely heavily on tourist dollars to sustain their economy. Ms. Kincaid makes it clear that we are all in this together. Being in the dark

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⁶⁹ Ibid., 36.
expands the urgency of oppressed communities extended to the margins. Tourists are changed and they change the oppressed people of the country as they make their trips. The extension of darkness means a large part of island economies are heavily supported by the tourism industry, service workers are forced on many occasions to talk in pleasantries, present smiles when they would rather frown and participate in a culture of pandering to white supremacy sensibilities.

On the closing page, Ms. Kincaid acknowledging a certain unraveling as the way toward “mutuality” and molding liberation from the darkness of colonization. “Once you cease to be a master, once you throw off your master’s yoke, you are no longer human rubbish, you are just a human being, and all the things that adds up to. So, too, with the slaves. Once they are no longer slaves, once they are free, they are no longer noble and exalted; they are just human beings.”

Once the oppressed are no longer under the yoke of repressive labels of language, the opportunity to feel one’s personhood and humanity is present. The same is true of how one sees their world once made free from that yoke of bondage. The properly adjusted view of one’s self can now see through the labels of unworthiness placed on the lives and actions of others.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

(Matthew 22:37-39)

70 Jamaica Kincaid, A Small Place, New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988, 81.
Moving the Centre to the Dark

Ngugi Thiong’o’s, Moving the Centre is an active resistance to centering the English language in African writings, literature and history. In the chapter considering the, imperialism of language and the role of English, Thiong’o thoughtfully makes a connection between the survivability of languages, to the active resistance of communities in revolt to domination.

Thiong’o names the value and importance of language as the “collective memory bank of the people”71. This affirms the old African proverb, that when a man/or woman dies, a library burns down. Collective history and language is an example of the dark landscape of the unconscious mind that is latent in oppressed communities. Similar to the work of Jamaica Kincaid, Thiong’o explains how the identity of colonized people is under direct attack during slavery and colonization. “Our languages were suppressed so that we, the captives, would not have our own mirrors in which to observe ourselves and our enemies”72.

As the colonizing people of Europe met the people of Africa, the English language met the languages of Africa. Thiong’o argues that oppressor languages and dominant classes decide to kill languages when they do not serve the goals of empire. Stretching this metaphor into economies, colonial powers employed neo-colonial tactics to attack any gains of financial independence of colonized nations by using up by transnational policies and treaties that are leveraged to suppress anti-colonial practices of revolutionary change.

Thiong’o states that he has nothing against the languages of European nations, but if Kiswahili became the language of the world he argues, it would signify the dawn of a new era. If


Dark theology and its language became the language of the world, I would share his sentiments, it would signify the dawn of a new era indeed. To birth such a fundamental shift in language, proximity to the people living before the dawn of a new day is a necessity. Allowing the unknown to pervade language making is not an exercise in abstraction. It requires sincere meditation and being with the elements that compose the life of the oppressed.

Language at its best expands and enlightens the known and unknown elements around us. James Baldwin writing on the concept of God says, “From my point of view, this concept is not big enough. It has got to be made much bigger that it is because God is, after all, not anybody’s toy.” God-talk in any form is not a toy; there are social and political consequences to the wrestling of meaning. In this rupture of narratives prizing the light – has created a stigma for people and communities that have found themselves relegated to navigating the dark. Everyone is responsible for each other and accountable to each other as it is accomplished. Whether it is through active acknowledgement or the unseen interwoven fabric of life each action matters and ripples beyond reach.

Referring to this interwoven fabric of life and the U.S. Baldwin writes, “Whether you like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are apart of each other. What is happening to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you. There is no way around this.” With no way around our interconnectedness and interdependency, exploration into dark language is a repairer of the breach in relationships for similarly oppressed communities. Liberation theology has provided the moral and religious aims of faith

communities into a habitus or home specific context. It is in these spaces, the nooks and crannies of darkness that new possibilities will emerge.

When languages are killed and persecuted, it becomes imperative to transvalue the people, places and things not valued by the dominant world culture. Dark theology is such a proposition of loving what the world calls worthless, hurt, wounded, broken, fallen and dark. This kind of revolutionary love has to be felt, and brought into the common touch if it is to have any lasting value. As long as suffering is alive in this world, Darkness may be our only fruitful place to lose our religious sense of hope and gain our truest selves.

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

(Matt 10:39)
Chapter 5

A Radical Possibility

“But one truth anyone reading these pieces ought to get is the sense of movement – the struggle, in myself, to understand where and who I am, and to move with that understanding.”75 – LeRoi Jones

On February 1st 2017, I sat in the sanctuary of St. Philips Episcopal Church in Harlem and listened to stories told by Trayvon Martin’s beloved parents Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin. They talked with voices wearing nearly five years of dogged strength at the consequence of their seventeen year-old son’s killing. Trayvon’s death resurfaced a long history of anti-Black racism and centuries of systemic violence enacted on Black people in the U.S. On this February night, under the high ceilings and representative cross of Christ behind them, the parents of Trayvon Martin laid their son’s life in each attendee’s arms. Ms. Fulton spoke, “our son who was killed, is also your son”. I couldn’t help it; tears of discomfort and responsibility ran the length of my face contemplating the continuum of racial violence and theological indifference covered by Dr. James Cone’s Cross and the Lynching Tree. In this era the lynching tree has become the unmitigated violence of the state against its own residents.

In that moment, the story and reality of a broken body lying in my arms merged my discomfort with a physical pain located in my chest. Dr. James Cone speaking to those who choose to write Black theology says, “They buried themselves in the raw materials of the black experience in order to resurrect black visions of reality which transcend the obscene white limitations placed upon the lives of black people”76. Out of these raw materials and beyond the


76 James H. Cone Black Theology and Ideology - A Response to my Respondents.pdf, Union Seminary Review, Fall 1975
obscene limitations of white supremacy, a radical impossibility of freedom from the specter of death becomes available to those who still live in darkness.

Dark theology subverts the rules of social existence and western categories of being, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like our savior, for we shall see Christ as our savior is” (1 Jn 3:2) In this option of darkness, one draws closer to the power that with people, collaboratively leads and guides, builds up and tears down, makes rugged places plain. At the height of this option, darkness is creation.

God’s total saturation in the world of oppressed people is again crucial to my assertion of a Dark theology. Henry Young writes, “God’s role and function is to provide the highest possibilities to oppressed minority groups as they seek to liberate themselves. God facilitates, influences, supports, and sustains creatures toward liberation by constantly keeping the highest possibilities before them.” In this formation of highest possibilities, dark faith is the indwelling process that moves people from one state of being to the awareness of another, causing movement and a transvaluation of the ultimate concern towards people and the “least of these” around and within us.

Interrelated

The interrelatedness of our being does not take for granted the many relationships that are beyond human categories; this is a significant contribution that is in line with indigenous beliefs and theologies honoring the earth and the fullness thereof. Practicing this idea of interrelatedness communalizes the successes and failures of hope, power and love beyond the entanglement of

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self-interest. The ethics and essence of a community are irreducibly contextual and Black process theologians have made the case for greater attention to their perspectives with respect to process theology.

William R. Jones, a Black liberation theologian writes, “Looking at process theology’s compatibility claim from the vantage point of black theology, I find a singular dimension missing: the ethnic factor, i.e., the different nuanced questions that emerge from the diverse theologies of liberation.”78 This missing is extremely important when discussing the theological consequences of suffering and the persistent question of theodicy. Jones’ functional clarity about the difference between negative and positive suffering is prescient. Jones defines the negative aspect of suffering by the term “ethnic suffering” which in his words, “leads one away from, rather than towards, the highest good”.79

Hebrews 11:4-38, tells the faith journeys of key biblical figures each with particular attention to their hardships. Many of the named individuals suffered through violence, broken promises and imprisonment because of their faith. The religion that emerges from their lives is rich with a vision of God that is not bound to personal expectations or satisfaction of the ego, but an unpredictable, tested and unsure faith that often endures past its end, in essence, a dark faith. Alfred North Whitehead, writing about living for a vision larger than oneself says, “The power of God is the worship He inspires. That religion is strong which in its ritual and its modes of thought evokes an apprehension of the commanding vision”.80 I consider Whitehead’s definition


79 Ibid.,

of human nature lacking the explicit dialogue partner of race that would benefit his speculations and their development. The consequence of an implicit racial dialogue subsumed into a discussion of humanity is the assumption that God is on everybody’s side, which sidesteps the ethical and historical argument so distinctly made by Dr. William Jones and Dr. Henry Young.

**Survival By Any and All Means Necessary**

In the Black experience of the U.S., to take the Whiteheadian flight of universalism without properly securing the ground from which we are asked to leap or to not take a measure of precaution in venturing, is more than an unknowing of lived reality, it is the assurance of repeated history. Answering the question of why this difference is important, Young writes, “Because it makes a difference when metaphysical categories are appropriated in the context of persons whose backs are against the wall… They have a unique experience which needs to be attended to by process theology.”

The unwillingness of those who ascribe to culturally white mainline protestant theologies to be in any meaningful relationship to the Black American experience and history is a major wrench in a honest doing of God. A counter argument to this would be that our shared existential crisis of survival as a human race takes precedent. I struggle to reconcile this great and wide chasm on account of Young’s continued remarks on ethnic suffering; the suffering that characterizes oppression is not spread randomly and impartially over the total human race. Rather, it is concentrated in particular groups.”

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Frantz Fanon’s voice again is important to remember as he identifies violence from the oppressed as the response to the violence of empire and colonizers, “The starving peasant, outside the class system is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms; colonization and decolonization is simply a question of relative strength.”

Understanding this proposition, it is difficult to condemn the response of violence against empire without first considering the perpetrators of initial violence. Awareness of the root cause often found in the hidden hand of the white power structure is key to any honest “doing” of God and conceding that the oppressed will be made free by any and all means necessary.

**Doing God and Faith**

Catherine Keller’s *Cloud of the Impossible* makes a significant statement that entangles all angles that point towards God. Theopoiesis or “God-Making” as posited by Catherine Keller is a way of speaking into a space that was once occupied by binaries. In her perseverance of doing God, Keller acknowledged an entanglement that one cannot move out of merely because they want to.

In verses thirty-nine, through forty of Hebrews chapter eleven, the writer asserts a relational infinitude among the characters of faith past, present and future affirming that parts still make up the whole and a self-interested faith claim is not accomplished because no one is exempt from relating with others. Keller does not close the doing of God without an offering to those who consider speculative philosophy and its implications, “Doing God means acting not as

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separable agents but in differential collectives mindfully enfleshing our planetary entanglement”. The vital element to retain here is the inseparability of any singular part of creation in any way. This woven together creation is as temporal as life itself. Theodore Tilton, the author of *Even This Shall Pass Away* evokes the contentment available in darkness

“Fighting on a furious field,
Once a javelin pierced his shield;
Soldiers, with a loud lament,
Bore him bleeding to his tent.
Groaning from his tortured side,
“Pain is hard to bear,” he cried;
“But with patience, day by day,
Even this shall pass away”. – Theodore Tilton

**Conclusions**

“The language of resurrection is, in many senses, the language of the oppressor.” – Shelly Rambo

I have come to acknowledge that I have only begun to love darkness. Granted, the approach in Whitehead is full of open doors to deeper discovery, “Speculative boldness must be balanced by complete humility before logic, and before fact”, and does accomplish its aim, “The useful function of philosophy is to promote the most general systemization of civilized thought.” I am convinced that voices from the darkness speak with ringning clarity. These

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voices and people have been willfully unseen and disrespected by western theology. Dark faith in this sense becomes a cloak of familiarity with and to the soul of the oppressed across the world.

Any answer to a question that has been launched into dark spaces, is not predictable, yet that unpredictable answer is coming, inasmuch as we are going. The facts of darkness, its non-logical posture dislocates the sting of suffering as do the voices that endure, yet resist domination. Dark theology in this regard, relies on the survivability of Black culture and indeed the people and institutions that produce it. Inevitably, Rambo’s understanding of life through humans touched by trauma can be applied to the voices of Dark theology; “these texts speak to suffering in its ongoingsness”.88

The accomplishment of this project and any of its derivatives is merely to inject dark matters into the emotional field of concern of all people and the broadest world of relations conceivable. Plainly, Blackness strives and persists, as does darkness, this intersection of Blackness and darkness define Dark theology’s grounds for being, the human subject in its darkest form.

Blackness is a living and spirited cultural identifier whose most vital informers are its subjects, its people. The universe of knowledge that is consistent with moving, doing and being in the dark is slung on the shoulder of all who live in darkness. It is the generative agent within the peace of Emmanuel in our daily going on-ness that my aim is to catalyze. At this end, the dark, at its basic level is the inexhaustible going on when all signs and contradictions say you must stop. In the event that you are stopped and breath leaves your body and your spirit enters

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the cave of eternal rest, remember – it is possible that darkness can and will be felt beyond your reach. Therefore, Blackness and darkness live past and with the impulse of forever.

“Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.””
(1 Corinthians 1: 31)

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