Reclaiming the Tradition of Prophetic Proclamation in the Black Church:
The Significance of Proclaiming Life in the Face of Death

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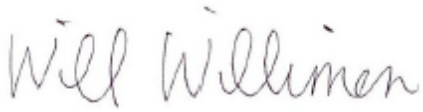

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Will Willimon, D.Min. Director

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
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ABSTRACT

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# Abstract

Out of the crucible of racism, pain, dehumanization, subjugation, marginalization, discrimination, enslavement, and death inflicted upon Black bodies, Black persons responded with a hermeneutic of freedom and prophetic proclamation in the North American context. Amidst a death-dealing system of oppression and chattel slavery, Black persons through proclamation—sermons, stories, songs, spirituals, modes of worship, words, lived experiences, and embodied acts of resistance—utilized their faith to challenge the heresy of white supremacy. Black religion and spirituality were conceived and birthed in response to existential pain, suffering and death. Black religion and the Black Church were rooted in a proclamation that not only utilized Christianity in the West, but also refashioned it in order to liberate the mind, body, and soul of Black people from the pangs of unwarranted death – prophetic proclamation.

Undoubtedly, today, in a nation that is scorched by hate, systemic oppression, and injustice, the Black Church of the 21st century is in dire need to recover its ministry of prophetic proclamation in the face of death and evil powers. Although the Black Church's conception is formed out of prophetic proclamation and resistance to perpetual crisis and death, a number of Black congregations have forgotten the history and tradition of the Black Church. Messages of prosperity have seemingly replaced prophetic proclamation. In this project, I suggest that the survival of the Black Church hangs on the tradition of prophetic proclamation. I suggest that the Black Church will only survive if its mission and ministry are rooted in addressing and responding to the pervasive reality of death inflicted upon Black bodies through varying forms of prophetic proclamation as seen through resistance in the Middle Passage to the modern-day Black Lives Matter Movement.

Given the monumental changes brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, and the continual and perpetual threat of death and oppression upon the Black body in today's society, the Black Church has been forced to explore 'church' in a different way – beyond the four walls of a church building. This new reality shows the Black Church that we must embrace the fluidity and intricacy of proclamation which moves from traditional, pulpit-centered discourse to diverse, enlivened, and embodied discourse which will ultimately transform the lives of Black peoples.

# Dedication

To my Parents, I dedicate this work to my mother, Mae Jones, and my father, Calvin Jones. My parents introduced me to the love, light, and ministry of Christ. My parents did not come from wealth; however, they utilized what they had to ensure that I was able to chase my dreams and go down a path of ministry.

To my family, and entire village, I dedicate this work to you. I would not have made it this far without your love and prayers.

To my Wife: I also dedicate this work to my wife, Alleya Jones. She has been my biggest cheerleader, my deepest confidante, my support system, my prayer partner, my best friend, my continual guide and my one and only love. When I did not think this was possible, she believed that it was. I love you, sweetie.

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# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

Fundamental to functionality of the racialized system and colonialism in America were the pathologies of hate, misconstrued interpretations of scripture and the Gospel, formation of whiteness, and white theology. The deliberate project--chattel slavery--attempted to strip and remove the humanity and identities of persons of African descent in order to fuel a thriving economic system. In Willie Jennings's *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, the author describes this phenomenon by stating that "The loss here is of a life-giving collaboration of identity between place and bodies, people and animals. The loss here is also of the possibility of new identities bound up with entering new spaces. Absent these possibilities people are invited into an ever-tightening insularity of collective identity and collective narration."[1] In other words, Jennings suggests that the formation of whiteness, the pain inflicted upon Black bodies, and the foundations of racial imaginings, deployed an altered theological vision of creation that benefited white American society. This creation and facilitation of whiteness attempted and intended to disrupt the flourishing of Black peoples through the destruction of the Black body.

Black religion and the Black Church were born in response to a horrendous past. James Baldwin describes this past in his book, *The Fire Next Time*: "This past, the Negro's past, [is one] of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape, death, and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his

[1] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 63.

protection, and whom he could not protect…"[2] Although Black persons were seemingly trapped in a world in which the seizure and sale of Black peoples were normative, Black peoples on the American soil were resilient and tenacious. In the face of white supremacy, racism, and enslavement, Black religion and the Black Church were formed—steeped in resistance to Empire—through connecting Christian theology to the pain of Black people.[3] From the folk songs in the cotton fields, to the sermons and spirituals in Praise Houses and Brush Harbors, Black peoples proclaimed their freedom. From the erection of newly established churches to movements of political justice, Black peoples represented their faith through an unwavering sense of commitment to liberation from pharaonic powers.

The Black Church today has lost its prophetic tradition of proclamation. The Black Church has become intoxicated with prosperity and individual salvation rather than prophetic justice for those whose 'faces are at the bottom of the well.'[4] In Marvin A McMickle's book *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?: Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America*, he argues, "The pulpits and the pews of America are being lured into a prosperity theology where wealth and material riches can be acquired by those who learn the formula, despite overwhelming New Testament evidence…Prosperity preaching leaves out the importance of the mission and ministry

[2] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (NY: Vintage International, 1963), 98.
[3] It is important to note that The Black Church is not a monolith. It is diverse and rich. It encompasses a great number of denominations and churches that hold different worship styles, political views, theologies, structures, traditions, and beliefs. However, in this paper, the term 'The Black Church,' does not define churches that are only predominantly Black; it refers to Black churches that are rooted in the genesis and formation of the Black Church. The Black Church, in its nature, are Black spaces and churches that are not only concerned with individual piety, but social justice and prophetic witness. It is a space where Black people reclaimed their freedom as children of God and sought-after ways to survive the racist world around them. The Black Church, at its core, is inextricably linked to its ancestral past. This past displays a Church that was built upon proclaiming love, justice, emancipation to bodies that were not included in a white-oppressive-society. Any space that is outside of this prophetic memory, may be predominantly Black, but does not, necessarily, fit my definition of 'The Black Church.' It is important to note that there is no agreement or universal definition on what the 'Black Church' means. For the sake of this paper, in this perspective, the aforementioned definition of the Black Church is my reference point.
[4] This line is borrowed from Derrick Bell's *Faces At The Bottom of the Well.* Derrick Bell, *Faces At The Bottom of the Well* (New York, NY: Perseus Books Group,1992).

of the church and that of each individual believer."[5] This argumentation does not suggest that all Black churches are not socially-conscious, it suggests that an overwhelming number of Black Churches have internalized white evangelical ideologies that focus on individual salvation rather than proclaiming the salvation of society. Luke Powery, in his book, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope*, adds to McMickle's criticism of churches today, "Prosperity preaching seems not to take any type of death seriously as a crucial component of the Christian life…Within this spiritual purview, pain is not a part of prosperity."[6] Powery's critique reveals the lack of attention to death, pain, suffering, and oppression inflicted upon Black people; those who sit in congregations every day. Eddie Glaude Jr., in an article entitled "The Black Church is Dead," wrote, "The Black Church, as we've known it or imagined it, is dead. Of course, many African Americans still go to church…But the idea of this venerable institution as central to Black life and as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation have all but disappeared."[7] Although Glaude highlights an important observation about the lack of social awareness in Black churches today, I would thus state the problem in different terms from those used by Glaude. The Black Church is not "dead"; it is asleep or, perhaps, on life support. This modern theological malfeasance can only be rectified or resolved through a reclamation of ancestral proclamation. In order for the Black Church to be healed from its silence, complicity, and willful theological malpractice, it must reclaim and possess the modes of proclamation that stood against the evil structures and powers of whiteness in the infancy of Black spirituality in the American context.

In this thesis, I suggest that leaders, congregants, and ultimately, the Black Church must revisit our ancestral past and reclaim the proclamation of Black religion and the Black Church

[5] Marvin McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?: Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland, Oho: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 104-105.
[6] Luke Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 3.
[7] Eddie Glaude Jr., "The Black Church is Dead," *Huffington Post*, February 24, 2010, www.huffingtonpost.com

which stood against systems of oppression and death, and prophetically chose an alternative vision of life, hope, liberation, and justice for Black peoples. It is important to note that I will be utilizing Rebecca Chopp's definition of 'proclamation.' In Rebecca Chopp's book, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God*, the author defines prophetic proclamation, "proclamation as discourses of emancipatory transformation for the world…The church proclaims God in the world by offering discourses of emancipatory transformation. Furthermore, the church makes such discourses persuasive, by embodying and expressing the fluidity of images, texts, voices, and figures of freedom that it creates and discovers in the words that give rise to persons' lives."[8] In this thesis, the term 'prophetic proclamation' will include the songs, sermons, bodily acts of resistance, testimonies, political movements, speeches, images, stories, artistic expressions, symbols, and discourses of Black peoples. The fullness of this definition suggests readers to rethink language, rhetoric, and proclamation. It will, hopefully, show that prophetic proclamation is not limited to the pulpit, but moves through dozens of avenues in order to bring about freedom and change. Chopp also writes, "As proclamation leaves its ecclesial prison, speaking now of Word for and with world, so it loosens its confinement in the preached word becoming now the fullness of discourses: the images, stories, voices, symbols, interpretations, and aesthetic productions that Christianity offers in solidarity with a world so desperately seeking to speak of freedom in new ways." Chopp's definition will be utilized in order to revisit and reclaim prophetic proclamation in the face of death and oppression, so rich to our tradition, in order to revive the Black Church today.

In this thesis, I will explore proclamation during historic periods of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation, suggesting that the Black Church will only survive if we

[8] Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991), 4.

reclaim these modes of proclamation, which encompass word and deed.[9] In chapter 1, I will explore proclamation around life and death in Egypt and West Africa prior to the Middle Passage and the construction of whiteness and race, and the hijacking of Black people's land, space, and body. I will highlight the untold truth that persons of African descent had a story – one that did not begin in bondage. Black peoples of Egypt and West Africa were fascinated with life, and the continuation therein. Their view of death was not seen in a negative light. It was connected to flourishing in life and in the 'afterlife.' I will view their traditions and customs around life and death before the terror of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, showing that proclamation concerning death and life have been significant to persons of African descent hundreds of years before their arrival on the shores of America. In chapter 2, I will highlight the tragedy of the middle passage and chattel slavery in the North American context. I will explore the beginnings of Black religion and spirituality in America. I will present the ways that enslaved Black people proclaimed their resistance to unwarranted death and destruction, sometimes in a nuanced way, during the slaveocracy and the "invisible institution" of the Antebellum South.[10] In chapter 3, I will explore the ways that Black persons resisted death and dehumanization through proclaimed Black affirmation during Reconstruction. I will also argue that the notion that Black people were free after the Emancipation Proclamation is inaccurate; they were yet facing segregation, violence, exclusion, and death. In this chapter, we will see the ways that Black peoples erected their own

[9] Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 8. The terminology, "orientation, disorientation, and new orientation" is borrowed from Bruggeman. He organizes the Psalms around those three themes: psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation. He argues that most humans can place their lives in one of those categories. I will utilize these areas to describe the historic periods of Black peoples America in relations to proclamation.

[10] Albert J Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004). The "Invisible Institution" is in reference to Albert J. Raboteau's work, *Slave Religion*, around slave religion. The Invisible Institution, subversive in nature, was given because enslaved Black persons resisted the certain kind of religion of the white slave masters, and in their own secret way of resistance (sometimes not secret), worshipped and proclaimed the freedom of the Gospel.

places of worship, created places of education, sang about freedom, and eventually fought for liberty in the Civil Rights Movement through art, marching, and bodily resistance. In chapter 4, I will highlight a "new" form of death—the prison industrial complex.[11] I will describe the ways this system is targeted towards Black bodies, and the ways it is killing the mind, soul, and spirit of the Black community. I will highlight the lives of persons who have proclaimed justice for those impacted by this system, and the social movements within the Black Church that we can continue to utilize in order to reform (or abolish) The New Jim Crow.[12] In chapter 5, I will explore the ways that Black people have fought against death in the Black Lives Matter Movement. I will explore the movement against police brutality and the 'stand your ground law.' I will explore the ways that Black people have protested against innocent deaths by weaponizing viral public lynchings through the use of social media. I will also discuss proclamation of life through poetry, Hip-Hop, and rap. In the conclusion, I will argue a way forward for the Black Church. I will conclude that the examples of proclamation, mentioned in the previous chapters, are the prototype and framework for leadership that we must reclaim in order to survive and thrive today. It is the DNA of the Black Church; it is the tool for our liberation and freedom.

[11] Although this term, 'prison industrial complex, is thrown around, a number of people only think of this term as a web of prisons; however, this term, for the sake of this paper, is a system wherein businesses benefit for the labor of Black bodies being imprisoned. This phenomenon and framework is similar to that of chattel slavery.

[12] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012). Thew New Jim Crow is coined by Michelle Alexander in her book, *The New Jim Crow*. Alexander states, "Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of law, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race." (p.13)

# Chapter One

# Orientation: Life & Death in Egypt and West Africa

## 1.1 The Flourishing of Life in Egypt

At first glance, tourists and onlookers would conclude that Egyptians were obsessed with death. Based upon the coffins, funeral temples, mummies, tombs, and manuscripts that ancient Egyptians curated, these questions come to mind: "Were the Egyptians obsessed with death, did they have an aversion to life? Or did they, on the contrary, merely suppress death under a mass of cultural forms and symbols?"[13] Judging by the elaborate monuments and Egyptians' funeral beliefs, it is easy to think that ancient Egyptian mortuary religion is inextricably connected to an obsession with death; however, this is not so. In Salima Ikram's work *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, Ikram argues, "The Egyptians were obsessed by life and its continuation rather than by morbid fascination with death. The tombs, mortuary temples, and mummies that they produced were a celebration of life and a complex means of continuing it for eternity."[14] In other words, even before African peoples were negatively impacted by European colonialism, kidnappings, enslavement, and the systemic genocide of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, African peoples proclaimed life in the face of death.

Egyptians did not accept death; "the Egyptians hated death and loved life."[15] The Egyptians certainly did not ignore death; they resisted it and knew that death was not the end. Their buildings, temples, and funeral preparation were a declaration of war on death. In the pharaonic

[13]Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Cornell University Press 2005, 14.
[14]Salima Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt* (New York: The American University in Cairo Press 2015),, ix.
[15] Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 17.

civilization, everything was built for eternity.[16] Everything was built for life here and after. Undoubtedly, death appears at the center of pharaonic culture and religion; however, the continuation of life was the focal point. In Jan Assmann's *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, the author writes about the unique presence of death in Egyptian culture:

> Death must have continually preoccupied the Egyptians—with the construction of pyramids for kings and huge burial monuments for high officials, with the decoration and outfitting of these tombs, cenotaphs, and commemorative chapels, with the preparation of statues, stelae, offering tables, sarcophagi, wooden coffins, and Books of the Dead, with the procurement of mortuary offerings and the conducting of mortuary rituals—and we wonder how a society that so constantly and in so many ways made death the object of all possible actions supposedly did not accept death…Here, we must be specific. The Egyptians certainly did not accept death, but they also did not repress it. It was on their minds in many ways, unlike us, who also do not accept it. In Egyptian culture, as in no other, we may observe what it means not to accept death and yet to place it at the center of every thought and deed, every plan and act, to make it, in every possible way, the theme of the culture they created…. The Egyptians hated death and, in a sense, they built their tombs as a countermeasure to it.[17]

Egyptians did not overlook the darkness of death; rather, they transformed death through life-giving activities and beliefs. They proclaimed the continuation of life in every avenue of their cultural and religious society. "Egyptian culture was one of those societies that did not accept death but rather rebelled against death as an empirical fact with all the power at their disposal."[18] The Egyptians did everything in their power to flourish in this life, and in eternity. They did not fear death; the Egyptians embraced life and hope in their civilizations – believing that hope would triumph over death.[19] In Serge Sauneron's *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, the writer states,

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[16] It is important to note that Egyptians did not leave specific and robust explanations of Egyptian mortuary religion or of their beliefs. The interpretations of this chapter come from Egyptologists who have tried their hand and minds to understand the funerary beliefs of Egypt.

[17] Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 17-18.

[18] Ibid., 19.

[19] The history of ancient Egypt is divided into dynasties and kingdoms. This chapter deals with the theology of death and Egyptian activities more broadly. In this chapter, I seek to contribute the history of death and life in Egypt in the broad sense. This chapter does not focus on the pre-Dynastic periods or the Early Dynastic period; rather, from the Pyramid Age to New Kingdom. It is important to also note that there were forty dynasties, ending in 332 BCE as a result of conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great.

"…outside earthly time, in another realm, spatial like ours but of uncertain location, deities and deceased alike triumphed over the dark forces that had preceded creation enduring forever in the joy of never-ending youth."[20] This creation of a counterworld was a form of action – it was proclamation of hope in the face of death.[21]

### 1.2 Counterimages of Death, Theology, & Burial Traditions of Egypt

Counterimages were significant to Egyptian culture as it relates to death. Assman writes, "…we encounter death in many forms, in mummies, statues, reliefs, buildings, and texts; but these were not images of death, they were counterimages, articulations of its negation, not of its affirmation."[22] Counterimages were not a form of fantasy or an incomprehension of death; rather, detailed planning and preparation for life. These counterimages produced by Egyptians were a celebration of life. They did not believe that they would be subject to death. They would flourish in this life and in the afterlife. Egyptians found happiness in their earthly life while simultaneously anticipating and preparing for life in eternity. Assman also argues, "Egyptians assumed toward this experience, an attitude based on trust in power of counterimages, or rather in the power of speech, of representation, and of ritual acts, to be able to make these counterimages real and to create a counterworld through the medium of symbols."[23] Egyptians were constantly given the task of constructing this counterworld in order to ensure that the continuation of life was in motion. Whether it was through ritual or brick and mortar, Egyptians

[20] Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Evergreen Profile Books, 1960), 1.
[21] It is important to note that there were several deities that Egyptians worshipped: Amun, Horus, Isis, Osiris, Nut, Seth, Thoth, Ra, Neith, Hathor, Anubis, and a plethora of other deities. In this chapter, any reference to God or deity, is a general reference to their belief in a higher power, not specific deities.
[22] Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 18.
[23] Ibid.

formed a countermeasure to death and all negative connotations associated with death. They proclaimed life and life more abundantly.

The construction and erection of tombs, also called 'House for Eternity,' was a counterimage to death. According to Salima Ikram in his book, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, the author writes, "Building a tomb was almost as important as constructing a house or having a family, as the "house of death is for life," according to Prince Hardjedef (Dynasty IV, the son of King Khufu, the builder of the Great Pyramid)."[24] Tombs were built in order to serve life, not death. The construction of a tomb was a goal in life that Egyptians worked tirelessly in order to achieve. Assman states that "[the tomb] afforded the certainty of not slipping, at death, out of the context of the life of the land as a social, geographical, and cultural space, but rather of having a place where one remained present after death, integrated into the community of the living."[25] In other words, the tomb allowed the person to be able to live on as a part of the village and community. In the earliest Egyptian wisdom text, the *Instruction of Djedefhor*, as it pertains to tomb-building, was:

> Build your house for your son;
> Then a place will be created for you, in which you will be.
> Richly equip your house in the realm of the dead,
> And effectively outfit your place in the West.
> Heed: death counts little for us;
> Heed: life counts much for us.
> The house of death counts for life.[26]

This truth was written on the hearts of Egyptians from near and far. These words informed the lives of all persons who were a part of the pharaonic civilization. These words were sacred and

[24] Salima Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*. 139.
[25] Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 13.
[26] Translator: Jan Assman. Wolfgang. Helk, *Die Lehre des Djedefhor und die Lehre eines Vaters an seinen Sohn* (Wiesbaden, 1984), pp. 6-7.; Hellmut. Brunner, *Altagyptische Weisheit (*Zurich, 1988), pp. 102-103.

holy for all Egyptians. In addition to the words of Djedefhor, the words of Ani, from the Ramesside Period, adds to holy instruction of preparing your tomb:

> Do not leave your house
> Without knowing where you can rest.[27]
> Let one know the place you have chosen,
> So that you will be remembered for as long as you are known.
> Place it before you as the path to take,
> While you are mentioned in what you have found.
> Furnish your place in the valley of the dead
> And the "netherworld" (i.e., sarcophagus chamber) that will shelter your corpse.
>
> Place this before you as one of your concerns.
> Also, as concerns great old age:
> May you rest in your tomb chamber.
> No reproach befalls the one who acts thus;
> It is well with the one who is thus prepared.
> When your envoy (of death) comes to fetch you,
> Let him find you ready.
> Truly, he waits not for you.
> Say, "Here comes one who has prepared himself for you,"
> And do not say, "I am too young for you to take me."
> Indeed, you do not know your death!
> Death comes, it steals the child from the arms of its mother,
> Just like the one who has reached old age.[28]

The tomb was very important for Egyptians because it was not a place that housed the dead; it was a place where the dead continued to live. The tomb is where Egyptians dwelled in the afterlife. The tomb was the bridge to life in the other world. The tomb, in and of itself, was a counterimage, and an act of proclamation that Egyptians did not allow death to take its course; they prepared for the continuation of life.

The structure of tombs was very detailed and robust. Salima Ikram writes, "Tombs were divided into two portions: the offering place or decorated tomb-chapel, where the cult for the

[27] Translator: Jan Assman. Joachim Friedrich Quack, *Die Lehren des Ani: Ein neuagyptischer Weisheitstext in seinem kulturellen Umfeld*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 141 (Freiburg and Gottingen, 1995), p. 97. It is important to note that in this translation man is not to wait death peacefully, but to prepare for it actively by building a tomb.
[28] Translator: Jan Assman. *Ani* 17, 11-18, 4; Quack, *Ani*, pp. 96-99; Brunner, *Weisheit*, p. 202.

deceased was celebrated, located above ground, and the burial chamber, where the body was interred, located below ground."[29] The structure of the tombs was built with religious meaning. The deceased was in the lower level of the tomb which represented the underworld, the realm of Osiris. The chapel, which was above ground, was a place where people could celebrate the life of the deceased with offerings and prayers. The upper level allowed the cult of the deceased to decorate the walls with scenes of the deceased's daily life. "Tomb-chapels were enlivened with scenes of leisure moments that the tomb-owner might have enjoyed in life, including hunting, fishing, feasting, as well as the production of objects necessary in this life and the next, such as furniture, clothing, and jewelry."[30] It is important to note that the decorum that the cult placed on the walls were real and magical to Egyptians. In other words, these drawing and paintings were connected to the afterlife of the deceased. As these images were painted on the walls, they were transferred into the next life. Although every Egyptian was instructed to build their tombs, financing the tombs could be incredibly expensive. Persons who were a part of the royal families usually had larger and more elaborate tombs. The ordinary people had moderate tombs. Embalming and mummification were also counterimages to death. It was very important for Egyptians' bodies to be unified as it arrived in eternity. There were priests who ensured that bodies of the deceased were preserved as much as possible. Although the techniques of mummification vary across different time periods, the concept of preservation and unity remain the same. This concept of connectivity was very significant to Egyptian priests during the process of embalming and mummification. Some priests utilized cloths and fabrics to wrap deceased persons while others utilized honey and other natural concoctions to keep the body intact. Egyptians believed that the bodies of the deceased would continue to live and would be

[29] Salima Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, 139.
[30] Salima Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, 171.

restored in eternity; hence, Egyptian priests preserved the bodies. In Egyptian mortuary religion, every part of the human body held the spirit of a deity:

> Your head is Re,
> your face is Wepwawet,
> your nose is the jackal (= Anubis),
> your lips are the two children (Shu and Tefnut).
> Your two ears are Isis and Nephthys.
> Your two eyes are the children of Re-Atum (Shu and Tefnut),
> your tongue is Thoth,
> your throat is Nut,
> your neck is Geb,
> your shoulders are Horus,
> your breast is He-who-gladdens-the-ka-of-Re-the-great-god-who-is-in-you.
> Your rib cage is Hu and Kheperi,
> your navel is the jackal and the two Ruty,
> Your back is Anubis
> And your belly is Ruty.
> Your two arms are the two sons of Horus
> Happy and Imset,
> your fingers and your fingernails are the children of Horus.
> Your back is Spreader-of-sunlight,
> your leg is Anubis,
> Your breasts are Isis and Nephthys.
> Your legs are Duamutef and Qebehsenuf.
> There is no limn of yours that is free of a god.
> Raise yourself, O this Osiris N.![31]

The deceased can thus say of himself:

> My limbs are gods,
> I am entirely a god,
> no limb of mine is without a god.
> I walk as a god.
> I come out as a god.
> The gods have transformed themselves into my body,
> I am one whose form changes, lord of transfiguration.
>
> My limbs led me,
> my flesh clears the way for me.
> Those which arose from me protect me,
> they are pleased with that they formed.
> I am indeed the one who formed them,
> I am indeed the one who engendered them,

[31] Spell 761 = de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts*, vol. 6, pp. 391a-392f and spell 762 = ibid., p. 392g-p.

I am indeed the one who caused them to arise.[32]

The process of embalming and mummification were deeply rooted in restoration of corporal unity. The need for the body to remain connected and preserved was a reflection of the belief that the Egyptian person and body will arise in eternity as it was in the earthly realm. This action transforms the usual view of death and dismemberment into harmony and life.

Social connectivity was also significant for Egyptian culture. Assman writes, "While still alive, he knew he was embedded in constellations that constituted him as self and person, son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother, citizen, subject, government official, soldier, scribe, priest, songstress, and so forth, relationships in which he developed and learned, relationships that sustained him, even beyond the threshold of death, just as deceased persons were linked to him during lifetime."[33] It was very important that the deceased maintained social status and social connection in eternity. In tombs, special items, belongings, medals, were there. Tombs also had the names and work titles of the deceased in order to maintain this status in the next life. The deceased could be found buried in garments that represented their work, career, and social ranking.

Religious mortuary texts were also counterimages to death. There are a number of funeral books that were curated by Egyptians in order to protect the dead. These books are maps and guidelines to help the deceased enter and navigate eternity. Salima Ikram states that "these [funeral texts] supply spells that negate the threats and overcome the obstacles that riddled the route to the Afterlife."[34] The earliest forms of funeral texts were Pyramid Texts, utilized by

[32] Translator: Jan Assman. Erik. Hornung, *Das Buch der Anbetung des Re im Westen* (*Sonnenlitanei*), vol. 2, Aegyptiaca Helvetica 3 (Geneva, 1976), pp. 88-89; J. Assmann, *Liturgische Lieder an den Sonnengott: Untersuchungen zur altagytischen Hymnik,* Munchner agyptologische Studien 19 (munich, 1969), p. 348.
[33] Jan Assmann*, Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 408.
[34] Salima Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, 38.

royalty only. These spells helped to resurrect the bodies and senses of mummies; they also provided the instructions and words to help the King make it safely into eternity. As Egyptians continued to advance, the Pyramid texts evolved into Coffin Texts, which became available to non-royal Egyptians.[35] Coffin texts contained a number of spells that protected any deceased person from danger, pain, destruction, or anything that would prevent the person from crossing into the other side. One primary example of Coffin Texts and funeral books is *The Book of the Dead*, compiled of about 200 spells.[36] Ikram writes about the *The Book of the Dead*, saying, "These spells were inscribed (generally in hieratic) on papyri, mummy cloths, amulets, shabtis, coffins and sometimes tomb walls."[37] These spells could be spoken by the cult of the deceased, but more importantly, by the deceased who enters into the new world. There were a number of other funeral texts: the Book of the Amduat, Book of Gates, the Books of Sky, the Book of Nut, the Book of Night, Book of the Day, and the Book of Heavenly Cow.[38] The general belief of ancient Egyptians is that the deceased need instructions and spells to make the journey from the west to the east. These mortuary texts were, indeed, materials that rebelled against death, and spoke of life.

Although the construction of tombs, mummification, and funeral texts were important, funerals were of key importance. Funerals were countermeasures to death through celebration and ritual. Funeral celebrations embodied the concept and belief that death is not the end for Egyptian persons. Assman sheds light on the power of this concept, "With the act of being placed in the coffin and buried, the deceased enters the womb of the Great Mother, the sky

[35] Ibid., 39. Coffin Texts were developed during the Middle Kingdom of Egypt.
[36] The Book of the Dead can be traced back to the early Seventeenth Dynasty. The Book of the Dead also contained about 200 spells.
[37] Salima Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, 43.
[38] Ibid., 45.

goddess: all life comes from her, and in her body, the deceased is rejuvenated in the eternal cycle of life, on the model of the sun. In this way, death is integrated into a superordinate concept of life that finds renewal, not an end, in death."[39] This belief and maxim were exemplified and embodied during funeral celebrations of deceased persons.

As it relates to funerals, processions, feasts, and rituals were key art forms of funeral activities. Egyptian processions had dozens of persons, sometimes hundreds. It was a large, dramatic, and elaborate affair that acknowledged the brief interruption of the deceased—death—but ultimately, celebrated the life of the deceased. Salima Ikram writes, "These large processions must have been quite dramatic…they consisted of offering-bearers carrying the various goods, followed by priests, chanting and waving burners. The coffin, lying on a sled, was pulled by a pair of oxen, and milk was poured in front of it to make it easier for the sled to move smoothly."[40] These processions were elaborate and celebratory in nature because Egyptians believed that death did not have the final say, and that the deceased would be resurrected to live on in eternity. During the processions there was room for grief and sorrow. Professional mourners were hired to surround the coffin of the deceased. These images and depictions can be found on coffins and walls of tombs and temples in Egypt. Professional mourners, during the procession of the deceased, tore their clothing, cried uncontrollably, and covered their heads with dust and ash.[41] In addition to professional mourners, there were special sacred dances that were a part of the procession and funeral. Professional dancers would wear certain attire and dance for hours in order to maintain the deceased's soul in the afterlife.[42] At the end of the procession, family members of members of the cult of the deceased would bring food and other offerings to

[39] Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 408.
[40] Salima Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, 183.
[41] Ibid., 184.
[42] Ibid., 185.

the tomb. After the food was placed in the tomb, the Egyptian priests, usually wearing leopard skin, would perform the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony, *wepet-r* in Egyptian. Ikram describes this ceremony:

> The ritual was generally carried out by a *sem* priest, wearing a leopard skin. The priest was often a member of the clergy, but could also be the son and heir of the deceased. During the course of the ceremony, in which the different senses were restored to the corpse, implements that recalled those used at birth were used. A key item was the *presh-kef-set*. It consisted of a flint blade that broadened to a fork at the end, and two sets of small vessels. Models of these are known from Old Kingdom tombs and continue to occur occasionally until the Eighteenth Dynasty. The knife was probably based on one that was used to cut the umbilical cord of the baby. Severing the umbilical cord meant that the child had to use its own senses to survive on earth, just as the reanimation ritual meant that the deceased had to function as an independent being in the Afterlife…The other key props in this ritual are the adze and the foreleg of an ox. The latter came from a sacrificial animal that no doubt provided the funerary meal. The lector priest would recite magical spells and prayers, while touching the mummy's nose, mouth, eyes, ears, and chest, thereby restoring its five senses. Once the mummy was reanimated it joined the mourners for one last time in a funerary feast, equivalent to a wake. No doubt many of the fresh food-offerings of the deceased were consumed during the course of this meal, with a share being set aside for the enjoyment of the deceased. Once the feast was over and the food consumed, the corpse was placed reverentially in the tomb with appropriate rituals and prayers. Well-wishers would place garlands and flowers on the mummy, and many of these have been found lying on the bodies or coffin lids when the tombs were opened. Once the tomb was sealed, the spiritual aspects of the deceased started the journey to the Afterworld. Symbolically, however, the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, and the transfer of the deceased through the tomb, down the shaft and into the burial chamber, was an assertion that he had achieved the kingdom of Osiris and would flourish in Amentet.[43]

After reading and learning about the beliefs and rituals of Egyptian mortuary religion, one may yet posit the questions, "Why would an Egyptian who did not accept death invest so much time and energy, during life, into death? Why did the Egyptians create spells, rituals, writings, texts, exercises, buildings, and an entire culture around death if they did not accept death?" Here, I must be specific. The Egyptians did not ignore the reality of death; they acknowledged it,

[43] Ibid., 185-187.

without accepting its fate, but rather challenged the darkness of death through life-giving cultural forms, materials, and symbols. The Egyptians proclaimed life in the face of death.

### 1.3 Burial Ceremonies, and Theology of Death in West Africa

West African spirituality generally rejected the idea that death is the end and believed that the departed ones live on as ancestors in eternity.[44] Senegalese poet, Birago Diop, describes this belief of an afterlife for ancestors in West African religion:

> Those who are dead are never gone:
> they are there in the thickening shadow.
> The dead are not under the earth:
> they are in the tree that rustles,
> they are in the wood that groans,
> they are in the water that runs,
> they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,
> the dead are not dead.
>
> Those who are dead are never gone:
> they are in the breast of the woman
> they are in the child who is wailing
> and in the firebrand that flames.
>
> The dead are not under the earth:
> they are in the fire that is dying,
> they are in the grasses that weep
> they are in the whimpering rocks,
> they are in the forest, they are in the house,
> the dead are not dead.[45]

[44] The concept of life after death is universal in West African religions. However, it is important to note that there are distinctive features of African religions around the topic of death and afterlife. The ways through which African peoples proclaim life and eternity are unique. It is important to note that West Africa is not a monolith and is very diverse and rich. This chapter names a few West African religions but speaks more in the general sense. Please note that there are varying West African faiths such as Yoruba religion, Mende religion, Kpelle religion, Galla religion, Acholi religion, etc. This chapter highlights their different feature while focusing on the common thread: proclamation of life in the face of death.

[45] Quoted from Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*, Faber and Faber, London, 1961, p. 108.

According to Kofi Asare Opoku's book, *West African Traditional Religion*, Opoku writes, "The dead are believed to be everywhere, at any time; they continue to live but in another kind of existence."[46] In other words, the reality of ancestors is a significant theme in West African spirituality in that ancestors permeate every fiber of life in West African society. West Africans believe that the departed continue to live and are connected to the living as ancestors. To West Africans, after God, ancestors are revered and honored. Ancestors are held in high esteem and respected because they are elders who have lived and gone down the journey and road of life which the living must travel. According to Opoku, ancestors in West African religion are connected to the world of the living and the world of spirits.[47] It is important to note that the ancestors did not sever their bond with their family; they remain connected to the living. The ancestors are believed to be in the presence of God, and also active in the world of the living. Hence, a number of West African peoples communicate with their ancestors through libation. This form of communication is usually done through the pouring of water onto the group or dropping of food onto the group. Some believe that this offering will allow the ancestors to hear the prayers of the living, while other West African peoples believe that water and food will nourish the spirits of the ancestors when they visit the world of the living. Ultimately, this belief in ancestors speak to the faith of West African peoples: a faith, similar to the Egyptians, that believes that life triumphs over death. Kofi Asare Opoku notes the fundamental ancestral beliefs of West African spirituality:

a) They indicate a strong belief in the continuation of life after death and that the dead continue to live and remain members of their families, clans, and societies. Thus, human relationships cannot be broken, for not even death can cut-off relations with one's relatives.

[46] Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Jurong, Singapore: FEP International, 1978), 36.
[47] Ibid.

b) They also show that obligation, the basis of African society, is unending; for it continues after death throughout time. The dead are expected to protect and guard the living, and, as it is believed that death increases one's powers, the dead are able to offer more help or assistance.
c) The ancestral beliefs also give concrete expression to the African idea of community. For them, to be a human being is to belong to a community; and in doing so, one participates in the rituals, ceremonies, and other activities of the community. The ancestors form the supernatural part of the community in the world. Hence, this unseen part of the community is never left out in any communal activity and their participation is always sought.[48]

Ceremonies are very important to this concept of afterlife and ancestors. One example of this importance is the *Adae* festival by the Akan people of Ghana.[49] According to Akan tradition, the *Adae* festival is dedicated to remembering chiefs who once occupied stools—stool ancestors. A stool ancestor must have died on the stool, meaning must have died in good standing. A stool ancestor must have been a chief that made society better. In this ceremony, according to Kofi Opoku, "When the chief dies, he is placed upon his stool and bathed before he is laid in state. The stool is then kept in a safe place util the time comes for blackening it."[50] The ceremony of blackening the stool is performed by the chief stool-bearer through a wash, and ultimately, through smearing it with a soot mixed with egg wash.[51] Usually this part of the ceremony is held at night and is not open to the public. The festival is the day in which others witness the chief offer food to the stool of the ancestor. This ceremony is an example of the West African religious belief that death is swallowed-up as a result of life. This ceremony is where a community comes together to proclaim life through the recognition of ancestors. The Mende People of Sierra Leone also proclaim the continuation of life. In their culture, the dead play a

[48] Ibid., 38.
[49] *Adae* is an Akan term that means "resting place."
[50] Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39.
[51] Ibid., 40.

significant role as intermediaries.[52] Mende peoples believe that ancestors are mediators between the people and God. For example, during the harvest festival (which is held at the beginning and end of harvest season), a *hemoi,* praying man "goes to the hillside to tell the ancestors, calling each by name, about the offering to be made the following day, and to ask them to remain till he returned. The next day, he returns…with an offering of rice-flour…and says:… 'Look after the rice on our farms. Let not the birds and the animals eat up our rice'."[53] In other words, the Mende peoples believed that the ancestors could protect their lives, their communities, their health, and their crops. They even performed rituals by the river, where they worshipped the ancestors asking them to provide rain and to protect children and families.

In the Yoruba and Ibo cultures (usually located in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo), like that of Egyptian culture, they believe that the dead continue to live as they did in the living world. They believe that the ancestors yet hold their names, titles, and social relationships. Hence, they are yet able to communicate with the living and have an active role in society. In this culture, the people invoke the presence of Egungun (representing the spirit of the dead), asking for blessings and protection against evil.[54] In other words, West African cultures believed that the dead were present everywhere to protect and to aid them. The dead continued to live. Life, to these cultures, never ceased to exist. The reality of death was not ignored; rather, West African peoples confronted death through their faith in their ancestors—elders who lived full lives in the world of the living and who continue to live watching over their families and friends.

Before the disorientation of the Middle Passage and trans-Atlantic slave trade, African peoples, as seen in the lives of Egyptians and West African peoples, through their religious

[52] Ibid., 43.
[53] Ibid., 44.
[54] Ibid.

ideals and spirituality, proclaimed life in the face of death. Whether it was through counterimages of spells and symbols on coffins and tomb walls or through libation and food offerings to ancestors, African peoples refused to allow death to win. They proclaimed a counterworld and a counternarrative; one that was steeped in hope, liberation, and continuity. In the remaining chapters of this project, in the face of unbearable acts of violence and death, it is clear that Black peoples in the North American context, and peoples of the Black Church, possess the blood of these people in their veins. It is clear that the Black Church is rooted in Egypt and West Africa. Undoubtedly, the theology of life and death, and the strength of African peoples, made its way through the Middle Passage, onto the soil of America, almost in anticipation, if not preparation, of what was to come.

# Chapter Two

# Historical Disorientation: From the Middle Passage to the Slaveocracy

## 2.1 Resistance and Proclamation in the Middle Passage

Water's presence is in the historical DNA of persons of African descent. The terror of the Middle Passage is engrained in the collective memory of African peoples.[55] On the shores of Africa, a new form of oppression was invented – one that was different from older models of slavery in antiquity – this model was steeped in the formation and creation of race. There have been several debates to which commentators attempt to deflect European involvement and supervision of the slave trade by the weak argumentation that Africans sold their own and that slavery had always been around. However, this line of augmentation is weak and lacks reason. Whether persons of West Africa participated in an economic stimulus for society, or whether some citizens of Africa had to pay off debt through servitude, the transformation of indentured servitude into carceral torment was not what any African person or leader imagined. The congenital defect and disease that fueled this transformation of servitude into chattel slavery and racism was white supremacy. This unique form of dehumanization and race-based chattel ideology, invented in the Middle Passage by European colonists, would create long-lasting trauma in the collective consciousness of persons of African descent. Through the middle passage, Africans were taken on ships as cargo, viewed as inhuman, and inferior to white persons. Across the waters, enslaved Africans would for the first time, have to challenge physical

[55] The term Middle Passage refers to the voyage that enslaved Africans undertook, forcibly, by the hands of European colonialists, across the Atlantic Ocean in order to make it to Americas.

death and social death. They would have to learn to proclaim their worth and freedom in the face of insurmountable danger.

The Middle Passage was a bridge between life and death for millions of enslaved Africans. According to the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, an estimated 12.5 million Africans were transported from their homeland and dispersed to areas of the Caribbean and the Americas.[56] Undoubtedly, European captors did not value the lives of enslaved Africans aboard ships; however, they did not necessarily want enslaved Africans to physically die because Black bodies were seen as property and would fuel the economy of the American slaveocracy. Instead of physical death, the agenda of European captors in the Middle Passage was 'social death.'[57] The Middle Passage was the historic site through which enslaved Africans were no longer seen through the lens of diversity and uniqueness. The Middle Passage is where enslaved Africans were seen as Black by their white captors through the creation and production of whiteness and the myth of Black inferiority. European captors attempted to crush and exterminate the soul and spirit of enslaved Africans.[58] In Tara T. Green's *Reimagining the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song*, Green writes, "To be Black and no longer African required submission to white supremacy ("exalted" White Christians) and to see the self, through the eyes of the oppressor, as valueless "barbarians," except when the Black body was exploited

[56] The Slave Voyages Consortium. *Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Slavevoyages.org. (2021) <https://www.slavevoyages.org/#:~:text=Search%20these%20records%20to%20learn,were%20trafficked%20within%20the%20Americas>

[57] The term 'social death', in this paper, is defined as the ways in which Black people have been dehumanized, mistreated, casted out, and relegated to the margins of society. It speaks to the influence of whiteness, that attempts to silence the voices of Black people, to hold them back from life and liberty. It speaks to the systemic ways that Black people are treated unfairly and deemed "lest than."

[58] It is important to note that in this paper, I hardly use the term "slave." I replace this with the term "enslaved." Language is very powerful, and it is important to distinguish one's identity from their condition and circumstance. Africans and Black persons were human, and were enslaved into a system by European colonialists. Africans' plight was imposed and not chosen.

to make money."[59] In other words, the Middle Passage is where Europeans attempted to dehumanize enslaved Africans in order to convince them of the lie: Black persons are beneath white people, deserve mistreatment, and are inherently savages. In Anthony B. Pinn's book, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion*, Pinn writes about this horrific experiment:

> In preparation for the journey, captured Africans would have their heads shaved and their flesh branded with the owner's initials or coat of arms. Either shortly before reaching the slave ship or upon arrival, their clothing was removed to make it easier to keep their bodies clean. Once transported by smaller vessels to the ship, males were chained to prevent rebellions activities and escape attempts. They were held below deck and confined to a small space that limited movement. On some ships, women and children were left on deck because it was assumed they posed little threat of violence. But in other cases, they woo where held below. In the darkness of the hold, ventilation was limited and sanitation difficult to maintain. But to keep them in somewhat good health, captains would bring the slaves on deck to allow the hold to be cleaned and disinfected as well as to provide space for feeding…In addition, exercise was considered important in order to maintain the slaves' health and muscle tone and to bring a good price once in the colonies…Hence, slave traders forced them to dance under the threat of punishment…Similar punishment was also threatened for those who refused to eat or otherwise maintain their well-being. Finally, great care had to be exercised to prevent slaves from committing suicide by jumping overboard or, more commonly, starving themselves. For example, a slave refusing to eat might have his or her mouth forced open with a mechanism designed for the task or burned for stronger cases of resistance. Such feedings often resulted in broken teeth and choking. In addition to the hardships endured by all, women on these ships were often victims of rape by the crew and captain.[60]

Having no previous sense of this experience and pathology, enslaved Africans, for the first time, were experiencing the most crucial forms of dehumanization. Regardless of social status or political affiliations, all enslaved Africans, aboard the ships were treated as inferior. Kings, princes, governors, tribal leaders, spiritual healers, elders, children, women, and men were faced

[59] Tara T. Green, *Reimagining the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song* (Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 3.
[60] Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 31-32.

with the unnerving reality: that their Black life and humanity did not matter to European captains and crew members. This death, through the creation of whiteness, was to taint and extinguish the soul of enslaved Africans. This mistreatment and form of racial stereotyping was intended to transform enslaved Africans' identity into an inferior set of people in order to perpetuate white supremacy and justify the Atlantic Slave Trade. Although, white captors attempted to reconstruct the identity of enslaved Africans and to exterminate their souls, enslaved Africans proclaimed life and Black affirmation in the face of death. Tara Green states, "Within the Middle Passage, water acts as a symbolic medium or conduit between the captive who is deemed as socially dead and the captives' attempt to reconstruct the self…to see their lives differently, to embrace what they knew as truth—that they were human and wanted to be treated as such…To be sure, it was there [The Middle Passage]—that forms of Black resistance to social death were born."[61] In the face of social death, primarily psychologically, enslaved Africans proclaim life.

Moaning, wailing, and tears were a form of proclamation aboard slave ships. Black folks rebelled physical death and social death through the shrills and cries of their souls. In every moan and groan, Black persons resisted the pain and subjugation of their European captors on the slave ships. It was a penetratingly piercing sound; it was an act of resistance to the humiliation that white captains attempted to inflict upon the bodies and minds of Black folk. Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa as he was also referred to, was captured into slavery, and published his autobiography, which speaks to the conditions on ships as well as the sounds from the souls of Black people:

> The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brough on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident, avarice, as I may

[61] Tara T. Green, *Reimagining the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song*, 4.

> call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.[62]

Enslaved Africans, aboard ships, did not stand or lie in silence; they wailed for freedom. They wailed for emancipation. They moaned for their homeland. Mothers wailed for their aching children. Men grunted from the agony of chains. Black folks proclaimed their humanity and worth through their cries. They resisted physical death and social death through their prophetic moans and wails. Although some scholars believe that Middle Passage was not a consciously constructed tool to create a unique existential reality for enslaved Africans because European crew members and captains experienced unpleasant amenities and danger during their voyages to the Americas, the abuse and maltreatment, inflicted upon Black bodies, by the hands of white captains, was unparalleled and incomparable. It was in the Middle Passage, where chattel enslavement began. It was here, where the myth of white supremacy inflicted trauma upon Black bodies. It was on the waters of the Atlantic, where Black people entered into a foreign cultural context that attempted to reconstruct Black people's identity—through discriminatory ideologies. In Charles Johnson's novel, *Middle Passage*, Johnson highlights the mindset of white captains, in his nineteenth-century fictional slave ship, through the character, Falcon. In Johnson's novel, Falcon, the white captain, labeled Black persons as dangerous and inferior in order to justify his large-scale enslaving, beating, and kidnapping of Black people aboard the ships.[63] Some white captains went as far as to argue that enslaved Africans were cursed by God. Although white

[62] Gustavus Vassa, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, vol. 1 (London: n.p., 1789; repr., London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), 79.
[63] Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1990), 74.

slave owners forbid enslaved Black persons to read or write, Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved woman, wrote a poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," that vividly alluded to the ways that white captains in the Middle Passage, utilized the story of Cain and Abel (often misinterpreted and taken out of context) in order to justify the subjugation of Black persons.[64] Although these misconceptions were perpetuated by white captains and crew members during the Middle Passage, Black people resisted through moaning and wailing. In Donyelle C McCray's article, "On Shrieking the Truth: Mary and Proclamatory Wailing," McCray makes the argument that wailing and tears are mode of preaching and proclamation. She argues that the wailing and tears are prophetic speech that has meaning in the face of opposition. McCray utilizes Mary, the mother of Christ, at the crucifixion of Jesus, in order to depict wailing as proclamatory, "Wailing is distinct from mere tearing up or soft whimpering. Wailing involves tears, deep sighs, and loud screams that make a visceral announcement: All is not well…the Virgin's wailing reflects the grief of all humans who mourn but is also uniquely rooted in the passion and in Christ's identity."[65] Like Mary who wailed, rejecting the injustice and imminent death of Christ, Black women, men, and children wailed on the slave ships, by also making an announcement: we do not deserve this and we will not allow our white captains to extinguish our dignity and soul. The communal moans, wails, groans, and tears that could be heard and seen in the lower parts of the slave ships – this was embodied proclamation. McCray also writes, "Rather than being hindrances to communication, tears [and wailing and moaning] exceed the

[64] See Phillis Wheatly's poem "On Being Brought from Africa," in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773). The seventh line of the poem, "Remember, *Christians, Negros,* back as *Cain*," connects the sin of Cain to the dark skin of Black people. Cain, in Genesis, is seen as the first murderer, and is cursed by God. This belief that Black people are cursed and are descendants of Cain, is perpetuated by white captains and enslavers. This false interpretation and theology also implies that Black people are inherently evil and criminal, deserving of mistreatment.

[65] Donyelle C McCray, "On Shrieking the Truth: Mary and Proclamatory Wailing." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, Volume *75*(Issue 2) 2021, 104-105. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964320982726

power of speech and are capable of carrying meaning internally between mind and heart, between humans, and between God…spiritual experience often pushes the frontier of language…Words fail to convey the depth and contours of mystical experience and become a source of frustration."[66] Enslaved Africans, through wailing, called attention to the mistreatment of all Black people aboard slave ships; they wailed for relief from social death and dehumanization.

The struggle for freedom and resistance to death began on the waters. Rebellions and insurrections were prevalent on slave ships on the coast of West Africa and in the Middle Passage. The myth that enslaved Africans were nonchalant as it pertains to slavery is not historically accurate. Eugene D. Genovese coins this misconception as "the myth of slave docility and quiescence."[67] Although insurrections were generally unsuccessful and Black persons found it difficult to take full control of the ships, Black persons continuously resisted the harmful mistreatment and abuse aboard slave ships. The point that one needs to acknowledge is the courage that enslaved Africans had to stand up against their captors on slave ships. Junius P. Rodriguez, in *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion: Volume 2: O-Z and Primary Documents*, writes:

> Historians estimate that insurrections took place on about one of every ten slave ships voyages in the transatlantic slave trade. More than half took place when the vessel was at or near the African coast, but nearly one-third took place during the middle passage. A recent study identified 485 acts of violence by African against slave ships in the transatlantic trade in period from 1698 to 1807 in which 93 were attacks on ships from local people on the African coast and 392 were cases of shipboard revolt. The likelihood of slave insurrection in the Atlantic varied over time. There were few reported incidents before 1700, but the number of uprisings accelerated over the course of the eighteenth century as the scale shipments grew and ships tapped new areas for slaves and spent longer periods on the African coast. Fewer rebellions occurred in the nineteenth century, possibly because voyages were usually quicker and a greater

[66] Ibid., 107.
[67] Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, 1979), xxiii, 2.

> number of children were among the human cargo…The most famous was the 1839 mutiny led by Joseph Cinque aboard the *Amistad.*[68]

Enslaved Africans resisted social death – even if that meant dying from suicide. Black folks would rather jump into the sea than to be treated as property and inhuman. There is a dual type of courage that was displayed by Black folks aboard slave ships. They were not afraid of jumping overboard because they knew that there was life after death. They also jumped into the sea because they knew that their Black life mattered and they resisted the social mistreatment by the hands of European captains. In Tara T. Green's *Reimagining the Middle Passage*, the author writes, "If embracing physical death is the gateway to freedom, the path home, then there is no space or consideration of social death"[69] Some may argue that this is absurd; however, I argue and highlight, not violence or physical death per say; rather, the intention behind their acts of resistance. Enslaved Africans were so desperate for life and freedom, that they did whatever it took to resist the pain of the Middle Passage. Although slave ships were, at times, called "floating coffins" because of the extreme confinement, the disregard of human dignity, and deplorable conditions, enslaved Africans were determined to not allow their captors to kill their spirits.[70] The construction and mechanization of such a death-dealing machine did not destroy the souls of Black folk.

Although enslaved Africans resisted social death by attempts to overthrow white crew members, by starvation, physical death, and other activities, they also resisted their circumstances through religious devices and spirituality. In Antonio T Bly's journal, *Crossing*

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[68] Junius P. Rodriguez, *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion: Volume 2: O-Z and Primary Documents* (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 552.
[69] Tara T. Green, *Reimagining the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song*, 38.
[70] The term "floating coffins" can be found in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*. This term encompasses the lives of Black folks who died as a result of disease and brutal mistreatment. It also speaks to the notion of social death as well.

*the Lake of Fire: Slave Resistance during the Middle Passage 1720-1842*, Bly writes about this form of religious warfare and resistance:

> Perhaps the most profound form of subtle resistance, though unrecognized and disregarded by most scholars, is that of a religious resistance. When the slave was initially brought aboard the slave ship, his first struggle against his physical situation, often started on the battlefield of a vast spiritual plateau. Using prayers, chants, and a number of fetishes, charms, and other such spiritual icons, that he incidentally managed to keep, most slaves (either individually or collectively) tried to injure their enslavers by way of religious warfare.[71]

Subtle resistance to the discrimination and dehumanization aboard slave ships was a form of proclamation. Those who were enslaved knew that resistance to cruelty was better than bondage and social death. Another act of religious resistance was the power of dance. White slave captains would enforce enslaved Africans, typically men, to exercise to stay "fit." A number of Black men would dance accompanied with drumming. While some white captains believed that this was only exercise, "captives had returned [to their homeland] becoming one with each other, and joined fellow captives in calling on the spirits."[72] Enslaved Africans did not avoid death, pain, and subjugation; rather, they faced it through resistance - whether subtle or overt.

### 2.2 Proclamation Through Slave Conversions, Baptism, & Slave Preachers

Undoubtedly, in the words of Albert J Raboteau, in his book *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in Antebellum South*, "From the beginning of Atlantic slave trade, conversion of the slaves to Christianity was viewed by the emerging nations of Western Christendom as

[71] Antonio T Bly, "Crossing the Lake of Fire: Slave Resistance during the Middle Passage 1720-1842" in *The Journal of Negro History*, Summer, 1998, Vol. 83, No. 3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Association on behalf of the Study of African American Life and History, 1998), 178-186. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2649014>
[72] Tara T. Green, *Reimagining the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song*, 38.

justification for enslavement of Africans."[73] Not only did slave owners perpetuate the lie and myth that Black persons were inhuman and in need of supervision, white colonialists misinterpreted scriptures where Paul says, "slaves obey your Masters," as some form of holy jurisprudence for the slave trade.[74] Although white slave owners utilized Christianity and certain biblical texts to justify the enslavement of Black persons, they feared that the concept of Christian baptism would emancipate enslaved Africans, which would impact the economic profit of "Christian" slave owners.[75] The task of Christianizing enslaved Africans was given from British government to colonial officials in the Americas to "facilitate and encourage the Conversation of Negroes and Indians" to Christianity – or might I say, European Christianity.[76] Slave owners were very aware that according to the laws of the Britain, and the beliefs of the church, baptism implied a sense of freedom for enslaved Africans.[77] This grey area or vagueness in British law concerning baptism and the status of freedom for Black persons was rectified, to a certain degree, in 1706 when a number of colonies passed laws and acts that noted that baptism does not alter the condition of an enslaved person "as to his bondage or freedom."[78] Although

[73] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 96.
[74] These words can be found in Ephesians 6:5-9, and Colossians 3:22. Readers must not ignore the problematic language here of Paul that does, in fact, urge slaves to obey their rules or masters. However, one must read this in context. Although scholars differ on their interpretation of this passage, one piece of information that most scholars can agree upon is that Paul was not referring to chattel slavery, that is found in the Americas. There are also texts in the bible that speak of freedom and emancipation from slavery and things that hold people in bondage. It is important to note that this form of slavery, mentioned in the bible, was more associated with indentured servitude that resulted in wage labor, war labor, or labor because of debt. It is also important to note that the biblical texts do not present a singular view on this form of slavery, but we can conclude that the form of slavery in the Americas is beyond what occurred in biblical times.
[75] "Christian" slave owners. I place quotes around the word Christian in order to make a point that slave owners did not display the love of Jesus through their mistreatment of enslaved Africans. Christian is not in word only, but also in deed.
[76] Cited in Marcus W. Jernegan, "Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies," American Historical Review, Vol. 21, No.3 (April 1916), p. 508. These instructions were sent to colonial governor Culpeper of Virginia in 1682, and Dongan of New York in 1686. There were a number of other political leaders who also received these instructions from the Crown.
[77] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 98.
[78] Ibid., 99.

these laws were passed, white masters and enslavers feared the "egalitarianism implicit in Christianity."[79] White slave owners objected and challenged the propagation of the gospel by missionaries with the fear that enslaved Africans would see their humanity, and revolt against white masters.[80] Missionaries reiterated constantly to white slave owners that baptism and Christian catechesis and conversions would help enslaved Africans be more submissive due to the teachings of "love" and "duty."[81] Eventually, a number of colonies, and slave owners allowed missionaries to give religious instruction. At the onset, enslaved Africans remembered their homeland and spirituality, and rejected religious instruction by white missionaries. A number of enslaved persons rejected a faith because of the hypocrisy that they saw from white colonialists.[82] It was revival and spiritual conversion experiences that would ignite a fire in enslaved Africans to adapt their faith into that of Western Christianity. It would be conversion experiences that would ignite a fire within enslaved Africans to reject social death of the evil system called chattel slavery.

The Great Awakening sparked inward freedom as well as outward freedom for enslaved Africans. According to Raboteau, "the revivalism of the Great Awakening…by evangelical preachers…created the conditions for large scale conversions of the slaves…by heavily emphasizing the inward conversion experience, the Awakening tended to de-emphasize the outward status of men, and to cause black and white alike to feel personally that Christ had died for them as individuals."[83] There were a number of enslaved Africans who had mystical

[79] Ibid., 102.
[80] "Master" is the terminology that white slave owners used in order to keep the master-slave hierarchy. This language does not reflect any ontological truth that white slave owners were masters over slaves, or innately better than enslaved Africans. This was a construction and a pathology of hate.
[81] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*), 103.
[82] Ibid., 122.
[83] Ibid., 148. It is also important to note that the Plantation Mission was an organization and movement that intentionally created religious instruction and propaganda to Christianize slaves. Also, the Great Awakening refers to religious revivals that swept across the Americas between 18th century and 20th century.

experiences, from meeting Jesus in the flesh to levitation.[84] Although white colonialists and missionaries believed that there was a clear demarcation between inward and bodily freedom, enslaved Black persons challenged this delusion. It is important to note that I use the word "conversion" with caution. Jean and John Comaroff state, "the very use of 'conversion' as a noun leads, unwittingly to the reification of religious 'belief." They also further elaborate, "this abstraction makes spiritual commitment into a choice among competing faiths, and 'belief systems' into doctrines torn free of all cultural embeddedness."[85] This concept of conversion was seen in antebellum South in that it implied that enslaved Africans not only were "pagans" in need of "salvation," they also turned away from any cultural or religious connection. Etymologically, conversion is a full or complete movement from one thing to another. It is important to note that enslaved Africans did not simply turn away from their heritage and spirituality of Africa to Western Christendom. Enslaved Africans did not lose their religious traditions and culture; rather they formed a certain kind of syncretism and hybridity. Enslaved Africans simply did not "convert" away or to a faith that only freed them inwardly and not outwardly. In their Christianization and "conversion," they reconstructed and reimagined what it was to be a Christian. They challenged the white colonialists and missionaries' interpretation of Christ and found liberation. They challenged the social death that their form of faith intended to do to their humanity and esteem. They embraced a body hermeneutic that encompassed individual and social emancipation. Through personal experiences and encounters with God, enslaved Africans had a "new" encounter, somewhat epiphany; however, it was not only internal, but they also wanted to be free from slavery.

[84] Levitation is an out of body experience that enslaved Africans experienced where body lifted from the ground, according to accounts of some enslaved persons.
[85] Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa,* vol.1 ) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 251.

Not only were slave conversions and experiences a form of proclamation to physical and social death, but the subversiveness of slave preachers also resisted the evil powers of slavery. Although some criticized the slave preacher as a puppet of the master, I argue that slave preachers resisted social death in a nuanced way. According to Nancy Bullock Woolridge's article, "The Slave Preacher—Portrait of a Leader," the author writes, "Although he [the slave preacher] possessed no formal education and little knowledge of procedures involving church ritual, the old type of slave exhorter was called upon to officiate in all the capacities of the regular pastor of the church."[86] These preachers, in nuanced ways, delivered sermons that were focused on Old Testament stories such as the Exodus Narrative, David and Goliath, the Hebrew Boys, Daniel in the Lion's Den, and Moses in order to show that God can free those who are enslaved. The slave preacher did not ignore the conditions of slavery – there was eschatological hope as well as resistance. His repetition, parallelism, dramatize voiced, charisma, and black oratorical skills proclaimed life in the face of death.[87]

### 2.3 Proclamation Through Worship, Song, and Spirituals

Enslaved Black people worshipped and sang of freedom with weary throats. They proclaimed life and betterment. Black people's cry for freedom amid torture, oppression, rape, beating, dehumanization, and control were felt in their spirituals. Eileen Guenther, in her article "Music of Soil and the Soul," the author writes about the formation of the spirituals:

> Spirituals began with the chants and moans of the field, becoming more subtle and complex over time. Their creation parallel the hold Christianity took on the slave population, with the real explosion coming after the Second Great Awakening began in 1800. In addition to using rhythms and melodies the slaves had brought from Africa, the creators heard hymns of Isaac

[86] Nancy Bullock Woolridge, "The Slave Preacher—Portrait of a Leader" in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Winter, 1945, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Journal of Negro Education, 1945), 29. <https:// www.jstor.org/stable/2292771>
[87] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*), 236.

> Watts and John Wesley in white services and at camp meetings and appropriated the characteristics of those hymns into the Spirituals. The Spirituals were not composed in the traditional sense of that word but created, with one person beginning a song and others adding to it, resulting in a song that was "owned" by the community…
>
> Let each reader put himself in the slave's place to whatever extent he can. If you are like most of your colleagues in slavery, you are not only distressed by but indignant over your slavery. On your arrival in the colonies you are sometimes exposed naked, without distinction as to sexes, to brutal examination by your purchasers. You are driven against your will to work from dark to dark. You are forced to work without any clothes…
>
> Your food and lodging are subminimal. You hear cloth and shoes referred to as Negro cloth or Negro shoes because of their sleaziness. Your stated name is rarely used; you are generally called upon in burlesque terms or in curse words. You see your closet relatives and friends sold in an instant forever. You can be hold without being made aware of the fact until your new master comes to pick you up. You are compelled to watch the murderous beatings of your fellow slaves. One of your number was whipped because he cried when he saw his fellow slave and friend beaten to death.
>
> You would have to shut your eyes to the legal aspects of your situation, for how could you ever reconcile yourself to the fact that some man or woman owned you, help papers showing that you belonged to him for life and were forced to obey him in every respect, at the expense of being beaten or sold. You are held to strictest account, but no promise ever made to you in binding, legally or otherwise.[88]

It is important to note the worship and spirituals of Enslaved Africans was rooted in the death-dealing environment of slavery. James Cone writes, "No theological interpretation of the Black spirituals [and worship] can be valid that ignores the cultural environment that created them. The Black experience in America is a history of servitude and resistance, of survival in the land of death. It is the story of Black life in chains and of that that meant for the souls and bodies of Black people."[89] Enslaved Africans, without doubt, rejected the horrible conditions of slavery and oppression. This rejection was seen throughout every line, verse, and stanza of spirituals.

[88] Eileen Guenther, "Music of the Soil and the Soul," found in *The Choral Journal*, February 2017, Vol. 57, No.7 (The American Choral Association, 2017), pp.64-76. <https://www,.jstor.org/stable/26355480>
[89] James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 20.

When the people gather, the slave preacher engaged in a form of proclamation that was musical—folk music and folk art. The slave preacher through his musical tones and spirituals, spoke of Christ, the Gospel, and social issues, alongside the community. The slave preacher would invite and lead, and the community (or congregation of enslaved Africans) would respond. Luke Powery states, "This soul-full music, this spiritual preaching, like typical sermons is focused on the survival of a people, thus they pay close attention to the needs of the community. The soul that is voiced is communal, which suggests another key trait of the spirituals as musical sermons."[90] As Nora Tisdale notes, the spirituals are "folk art" and the [slave] preacher is a "folk artist" who participates and engages in "folk work."[91] In other words, spirituals belonged to the "folk" and community of people. As a result of this communal music or what Evans Crawford calls "participant proclamation," they refused to lose their humanity and sang of freedom.[92] They would sing, "Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom all over me, an' before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, and 'go home to ma Lawd an' be free."[93]

Through their voices, they sang of life and liberation. Black folks made a way out of no way by gathering together to sing and proclaim freedom. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, worship and song gave enslaved Black people dignity. In a system that legally defined Black peoples as inhuman and as a commodity, Black folks resisted that through song. As former slave Alice Sewell remarks, "We used to slip off in the woods in de old days on Sunday evening was down in de swamps to sing and pray to our own liking. We prayed for dis day of freedom. We come from four and five miles away to pray together to God dat if we don't live to see it, do

[90] Powery, Luke. *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope (*Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 28.
[91] Nora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 124-25.
[92] Evans Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 25.
[93] For complete lyrics of spiritual, see "Oh, Freedom," at https://hymnary.org/hymn/SOZ1981/102.

please let our chillum live to see a better day and be free, so dat dey can give honest and fair service to de Lord and all mankind everywhere."[94] Whether it was by the swamp, in the brush harbor, or in praise houses, enslaved Africans resisted the unjust system of slavery through spirituals. Through spirituals, enslaved Africans expressed their overwhelming sorrow and grief due to existential suffering. Luke Powery, in his book *Dem Dry Bones*, writes, "Oppression seeks to destroy one's humanity, yet these musical sermons were proclaimed by those whose humanity was under attack. A context of death could not mute this life-giving music, even a death perpetuated by fellow Christians who practiced Christianity in a cruel manner."[95] Enslaved Africans did not celebrate suffering, slavery, and death nor did they intend for people to see it as redemptive – they rejected it and sang of life. Some enslaved Africans sang of life "over yonda" and some sang of life "some day here on earth." Powery also writes, "They [enslaved Africans] brought sweet melodies to a land that attempted to kill their song because their soul was a singer. They endured great suffering but not without a song…Those who were deemed subhuman were teachers of humanity through the spirituals as they sang in response to their harsh situation…All is well because the spirituals were not just songs of the soul; they were life itself."[96]

Through the spirituals, enslaved Africans had subtle ways that they resisted death. In songs like, "Walk Together Children Don't Get Weary, "There's a Great Camp Meeting," "Don't You Wanna Go to Heaven to See My Lord, "Wade in the Water," "Steal Away," and O Canaan, Sweet Canaan land," Black folk sang of emancipation. These songs often had a double meaning that went beyond other-worldly eschatology. The lyrics may have had the words, "Canaan Land," "Jordan," "Promise Land," "Heaven," "River," and "Camp Meeting," which may have

[94] Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds., *Remembering Slavery: African American Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation (*New York: New York Press, 1998), 205.
[95] Luke Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 30.
[96] Ibid., 32.

been read as mere spiritual places to white slave owners, but these words often implied freedom in the north. John Blassingame argues, "As other-worldly as they often appear, the spirituals served as much more than opiates and escapist fantasies. They affirmed the slave's personal autonomy and recognized the reality of his earthly suffering. While looking beyond the dismal present to a brighter future, the spiritual enabled blacks to transcend degradation and to find the emotional security to endure pain."[97] Although some spirituals were subtle, enslaved Africans, at times, expressed explicit resistance to slavery:

> No more auction blocks for me, No more, No more, No more auction block for me, many thousand gone. No more peck o'corn for me, No more, no more, No more peck o'corn for me, any thousand gone. No more driver's lash for me…No more pint o'salt for me…No more hundred lash for me…No more mistress' call for me…[98]

The outright cry against slavery is seen in the lines of spirituals. Enslaved Africans were lined up on auction blocks like property and commodities. They were disregarded as human and sold as human labor. This type of social degradation was rejected when Black folks hummed and sang, "no more auction blocks for me." They cried out for freedom from the beatings, mutilations, and rapings. Their "no more" in the aforementioned spiritual was prophetic proclamation. Often, enslaved Africans sang these spirituals with their bruised, battered, and beaten bodies. They would sway their bodies, clap their hands, rock their bodies, and tap their feet. The spirituals were also embodied. Powery writes, "Their sway as they sang was a counterswing to the swaying of death in their environment."[99] Their swaying also was a counterswing to the pain

[97] John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in The Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 145
[98] See negrospirituals.com for the full lyrics.
<https://www.negrospirituals.com/songs/no_more_auction_block_for_me.htm>
[99] Luke Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 38.

inflicted upon Black bodies. Enslaved Africans would sway and proclaim hope in the presence of death:

> Steal away, steal away to Jesus,
> Steal away, steal away home,
> I ain't got long to stay here.
> My lord calls me. He calls me by thunder.
> The trumpet sounds within my soul.
> I ain't got long to stay here.[100]

The hope of Christ was at the center of slave spirituals. They would utilize motifs and themes from biblical texts in order to reimagine hope and freedom. They would borrow from themes of "thunder" and "trumpet" in order to show God's divine presence and forthcoming deliverance. They believed that they did not have long to stay in such a deplorable and evil regime. Enslaved Africans also saw themselves in biblical narratives and stories. They connected with the Israelites, believing that God would send a "Black Moses" to deliver them out of slavery [Egypt]:

> When Israel was in Egypt's land
> Let my people go.
> Oppressed so hard they could not stand
> Let my people go.
> Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land.
> Tell old Pharaoh,
> Let my people go[101]

Black folks in the antebellum South were under the constant threat of death. Masters could become enraged for no reason at all, and beat, torture, and murder them. They embraced death, to a degree. They knew that this was a part of their existential reality. In other words, Black

[100] Lerone Bennett Jr., *The Shaping of Black America* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1975), 164.
[101] Ibid.

persons did not ignore the possibility of death and devastation; hence they prepared for it, believing that there was life on the other side:

> Death went to the sinner's house
> (said) Come and go with me.
> Sinner cried out, I'm not ready to go
> I ain't got no travelin shoes.
> Got no travelin' shoes, got no travelin' shoes
> Sinner cried out, I'm not ready to go
> I ain't got no travelin shoes[102]

Black people, through spirituals, resisted the system of oppression through language of battle and destruction. In other words, they believed that God would overthrow slavery, like God liberated His people in the battle of Jericho:

> Joshua fit the battle of Jericho
> Jericho, Jericho
> Joshua fir the battle of Jericho
> And the walls came tumbling down[103]

At the crux of spirituals was the story of God - the life, blood, death, and resurrection of Christ. Enslaved Africans could not whitewash Jesus. They related to the pain of Christ's crucifixion in their everyday life; death was all around them. Spirituals confronted the real pain and destruction of Black bodies and souls while holding on to hope in Christ. Spirituals were a form of proclamation that acknowledge the trouble of the world, while also pointing to hope and life. The spirituals were rooted in crucifixion and life. James Cone asserts, "The basic idea of the spirituals is that slavery contradicts God; it is a denial of God's will. To be enslaved is to be declared *nobody*, and that form of existence contradicts God's creation of people to be God's

[102] Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, USA* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 70.
[103] Lerone Bennett Jr., *The Shaping of Black America* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1975), 164.

children. Because Black people believed that they were God's children, they affirmed their *somebodiness,* refusing to reconcile their servitude with divine revelation…the message of liberation in the spirituals is based on the biblical contention that God's righteousness is revealed in deliverance of the oppressed from the shackles of human bondage."[104] In other words, in spirituals, God identifies with the oppressed, and will, ultimately, deliver them from death and humiliation.

### 2.4 Proclamation Through Insurrection, Protest, and the Abolitionist Imagination

Although several insurrections were violent, the spirit behind insurrections was a spirit of resistance to white violence inflicted upon Black bodies. Insurrectionists wanted to overthrow and abolish the death-dealing system of slavery. Most insurrections, from the smallest to the largest, were held in Virginia, Louisiana, and South Carolina. Slave plots ranged from mass enslaved Africans escapes to total destruction of plantations, along with white masters. Throughout the slaveocracy, enslaved Africans were not mere docile persons; they challenged a system that did not value their humanity and livelihood. This fever and passion ignited hope in the hearts of many enslaved Africans that they could be free from bondage. The spirit of insurrections was not to fix a system that was never intended to work for Black people; insurrectionists intended to abolish slavery. News had made its way to North America about the Haitian revolt and revolution, and Denmark Vesey wanted to overthrow the racial order of Charleston, South Carolina. Through thoughtful and skillful planning, Vesey, and 131 Black persons mobilized and planned to overthrow the white slave owners of Charleston; however, it was useful because of informants. In 1822, Denmark Vesey, and thirty-four enslaved Black

[104] James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972,) 33.

persons were lynched as a result of their insurrectionist spirit. Along with Denmark Vesey, were persons like Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, Sebastian, Jemmy, and a host of other enslaved Africans who attempted to revolt against white colonialists. I reiterate that, I do not promote the violence of insurrections, but the spirit and courage in which Black persons had to response to white violence. Their proclamation and declaration were that they put their bodies on the line in order to challenge an unjust order.

Alongside the spirit of insurrection and the musical power of spirituals, was the imagination of abolition–through their autobiographies. Enslaved Africans began to write their stories through narrative form. Enslaved Black people wrote autobiographies from the early days of slavery in the Americas. However, in the 1830s, this form of writing rose significantly and began to spread across the United States like wildfire. According to Michael Roy in his book, *Fugitive Texts: Narratives in Antebellum Print Culture*, "…It was also a consequence of the involvement of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) in publishing and disseminating their accounts. In just a few years, the AASS became a powerful organization" spreading the antislavery message across the north and the south.[105] In other words, proclamation, for Black people, was through the context of Black literary activism as with the narratives of persons such as James Williams. Although there is debate around William's involvement in the publishing of the autobiography, this allowed the lived experiences and voices of Black persons to be heard throughout the nation. Later there would be stories by Olaudah Equiano, Maria Stewart, Chloe Spear, and other writers in William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*.[106] Other enslaved Africans who spread the message of antislavery that could not have their narratives published by the AASS or the *Liberator,*

[105] Michael Roy, *Fugitive Texts: Salve Narratives in Antebellum Print Culture* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 11.
[106] Ibid., 12. *The Liberator* was the most widely circulate and read newspaper in the antebellum period that promoted antislavery messages. Published and edited, and lead by a white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.

published their own copies and distributed copies as widely as possible, believing that emancipation would come.

Amid autobiographies and literacy activism that rejected death-dealing system of slavery, was the power of speeches. Although Black abolitionist voices were heard, those voices were consistently Black male voices. In the face of patriarchy and slavery, there was Sojourner Truth. Neil A. Patten writes, "Sojourner Truth could not read, and it was this distinction that determined her uniqueness…Truth functioned in a purely rhetorical fashion, her memorable addresses forming an oral history of the black female experience at mid-century."[107] Truth was so well-known for her resistance to sexism and slavery that throngs of people would gather at roadside services, revivals, camp meetings, conventions, and other forums.[108] Although Truth was not formally trained, through the Holy Spirit, she taught herself to proclaim life and liberty through word. In her speech, entitled "Ain't I a Woman?" delivered at the 1851 Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, Truth says:

> Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out kilter. I think that 'twixt the Negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?
>
> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?
>
> Then they walk about this thing in the head; what this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or

[107] Neil A. Patten, "The Nineteenth Century Black Woman As Social Reformer: The "New Speeches of Sojourner Truth," in *Negro History Bulletin*, January, February, March, 1986, Vol. 49, No. 1 (January, February, March, 1986), pp. 2-5. Published by Association for the Study of African American Life and History. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44176646>
[108] Ibid.

> Negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours hold a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?
>
> Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.
>
> If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it. The men better let them.
>
> Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.[109]

The words of Sojourner Truth are profound in that she not only challenges the system of slavery for Black people; she also confronts the dual disadvantages of Black enslaved women. As Bell Hooks states in, "Although Black women and men had struggle equally for liberation during slavery…, Black male political leaders upheld patriarchal values." In her prophetic speech, Truth proclaims freedom from slavery while also pointing to the depths of Black women subjugation. Truth speaks to the way Black women are enslaved as Black men, but also have to feed and nurse their kids, and cook for their families. She also alludes to the reality that a great number of Black enslaved women had to tend, care, and nurse the babies of white mistresses. Sojourner Truth proclaims liberation from slavery, and also speaks of liberation for all Black women. Truth also affirms Black women's strength and dignity. Truth utilized her speeches to speak against slavery but also patriarchy.[110] It would be this fervor that would challenge the political powers to abolish the institution of slavery.

[109] Dictated by Sojourner Truth, and edited by Olive Gilbert, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* 1850 (USA: Snowball Classics Publishing, 2015).
[110] Bell Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2015) 4.

## 2.5 Reimagining the Middle Passage and Black Resistance of Slavery Today in the Black Church

When we examine the brief overview of enslaved Africans ways of proclamation in the face of death and subjugation, the Black Church has a framework of resistance that will enable us to continue to address the pain that is yet being inflicted in Black communities, and to fight for the value and humanity of Black life. Stemming from the Middle Passage throughout the slaveocracy, there are traditions of proclamation that will help the Black Church to yet be relevant, to be an innovative force for today's needs, and the epicenter of liberation, justice, and life. The Black Church must continue to expand our view of proclamation and allow word and deed to be a part of our work of justice.

The Black Church must continue to fight, like our ancestors in the Middle Passage, to overturn systems of oppression. We must utilize our voice, whether through sermon or songs, to challenge racism, hatred, death, and discrimination against Black bodies. We must learn to use our baptism in Christ, to affirm Black persons whose voices have been silenced. The Black Church must reclaim the ways through which our ancestors proclaimed freedom from oppressive regimes through speeches, sermons, and personal testimonies and narratives. We must forever look to the constructive tools of proclamation that our ancestors used to resist death.

# Chapter Three

## Historical Disorientation: From Black Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement

The enslavement and curtailment of Black people's humanity were the tools through which white colonialists supported a thriving economic system in America. Any encroachment of this arrangement resulted in violence, and ultimately, war. Slavery, unquestionably, and the preservation of the Southern planter aristocracy, was the primary cause of the Civil War. Historians, economists, and political scientists have debated the cause of this war for decades: geographic conflict, conflict around sectionalism and nationalism, tariffs, states' rights, the abstract principle of secession, and a number of other reasons.[111] Although there are varying views on the causation of the Civil War, the leading view is that "the struggle between the Southern slave-based labor system and the Northern 'free soil' movement produced bitter and violent conflict throughout the 1850s, which culminated in 1861 with Southern secession and four years of civil war."[112] The issue around the preservation of slavery in the South and the continuation of Black subjugation would lead to one of the most destructive and fatal wars in U.S. history. The North and South would fight, relentlessly, over the future of slavery, Black labor, and ideologies of white supremacy and Black inferiority. Union soldiers would battle Confederate soldiers, hoping that the war would end with the South's acquiescence and the total abolition of slavery.

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[111] Michael Woods, "What Twenty-First-Century Historians Have Said about the Causes of Disunion: A Civil War Sesquicentennial Review of the Recent Literature," in *The Journal of American History* (New York: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Organization of American Historians, 2012), 415. Downloaded from: < https://academic.oup.com/jah/article/99/2/415/860501>

[112] Charles W. Calomiris, & Jonathan Pritchett, "Betting on Secession: Quantifying Political Events Surrounding Slavery and the Civil War in *American Economic Review* (Nashville, TN: American Economic Association, 2016), 1. < https://pubs-aeaweb-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/aer.20131483>

"The war is over," were the words of General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, Virginia, on April 9, 1865; "the rebels are our countrymen again."[113] After one of the deadliest and bloodiest wars in America history between the North and the South, the Confederacy's collapse indicated a brighter and harmonious future. The defeat of the Confederate government had seemingly marked a convenient end to the Civil War. As William Fitzhugh Brundage writes, "[This was] a transcendent moment in human history. The injustice of slavery was lifted and now African Americans, to the full extent of their native abilities and in accordance with God's design, stood poised to participate fully and equally in modern civilization."[114] Although President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, the Civil War ended in the spring of 1865, and the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified in the winter of 1865; the war was far from over. Racist pathologies and actions of white southerners did not die at the end of the Civil War. The fight for freedom did not end with the defeat of the Confederacy because the "ghost" of the antebellum South would linger, and free Black people would have to take their freedom into their own hands. The belief that slavery ended, and that Black people were truly free at the end of the Civil War, is a misconception. White southerners mourned the loss of slavery; they mourned their military defeat. In the words of John Hope Franklin, "Nothing had happened at Appomattox to change this fundamental conviction. The attachment of white southerners to their way of life was as strong as ever, and they were determined to preserve it."[115] White confederates were bitter and did not want to lose their power over and control of Black people in America. The labor and subjugation of Black people were profitable for white southerners. In George Rable's

[113] Horace Porter, "The Surrender at Appomattox Court House," *Battles and Leaders*, ed. Ned Bradford (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts,1956), 615.
[114] Book Edited by Carole Emberton and Bruce E. Baker, and Intro by William Fitzhugh Brundage, *Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles Over The Meaning of America's Most Turbulent Era* (Louisiana: Louisiana University Press, 2017), 1.
[115] John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,1994), 4.

*But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction,* the author writes, "Even more than the war, this cultural struggle would forge a "national" unity in the South that had eluded the Confederates."[116] Although Black people were, on paper, a 'free' people, white persons and political leaders would systemically try to keep Black people inferior. "No [real change], no revision of comparable impact would occur until the 1950s and 1960s."[117] White political leaders and racists of the South would do whatever they could to stop Black progression; hence, Black free people proclaimed their freedom through 'Black Reconstruction.'[118] Black people resisted the hurdles, challenges, and violence of white southerners and also rejected the more subtle racism of Northerners. Black people proclaimed their worth as citizens of America through Black affirmation.

White southerners and former confederates were in a vulnerable state after the Civil War and wanted to return to the status quo—white superiority and Black subjugation. They wanted to return to a death-dealing environment that terrorized Black persons and trapped them in a perpetual state of perceived inferiority. The fall of the Confederacy sparked intense fear in the hearts of white southerners. As a result of a devastating war, southerners found their world upside down. The South was no longer the exemplary face of victory.[119] Rable writes, "The repressive experience of suffering military conquest and occupation and the obsession with lost

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[116] George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), 1.
[117] Book Edited by Carole Emberton and Bruce E. Baker, and Intro by William Fitzhugh Brundage, *Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles Over The Meaning of America's Most Turbulent Era,* p. 1.
[118] The terminology, 'Black Reconstruction' is borrowed from W.E.B. Du Bois' revisionist work *Black Reconstruction in America.* In his 1935 publication Du Bois tells a truth of Black History in how Black people fought for their freedom and fought to advance the American society. De Bois writes how Black people called America to truly be a nation where life, liberty, and happiness were achievable. He debunks white historians who wrote Reconstruction has an era where republicans allowed uncontrolled black people to devastate and destroy the South. Du Bois highlights the real struggles of Black people during this period to be able to live, and thrive, in a white, racist, capitalistic society. Reconstruction, is truly Black, in that Black freemen attempted to walk into freedom while white political leaders attempted to continue to discriminate against Black people through racism. White people in the South attempted to uphold the Confederate by keeping Black people as working low class.
[119] Rable, *But There Was No Peace,* 3.

causes and shattered dreams would shape southern attitudes and actions for many years."[120] White southerners were faced with the bitter reality that the social order of the antebellum South had "ended." Their way of life would change irrecoverably, and their seats of power and control were under profound threat. The once proud confederates were faced with the reality that the North had won, and that Black people were now emancipated. White southerners were fearful, and "more terrified that the shrouded future was the present powerlessness of the South. Unable to control the course of events, southerners awaited their fate at the hands of a 'hostile' president and a Republic Congress."[121] This sense of powerlessness and Black emancipation frustrated white southerners. White southerners resented the fact that Black people were no longer enslaved, specifically Black troops. Rable writes about this resentment to Black troops who occupied southern states:

> The inclusion of Black troops in the list of southern bogeymen was no afterthought. Whites resented the Negro soldiers more than any other group of "aliens" and condemned them in unmeasured terms…The stationing of Black troops in the South, Carl Schurz argued, would have the salutary effect of driving home to the whites the realization that their former slaves [enslaved persons] were their communities as deliberate and premeditated insult…To see their former slaves marching about armed, lording it over white people, was more than the calmest white man could stomach. The ubiquitous Negro troops became a painful reminder of the South's humiliation.[122]

White southerners despised the elevation of enslaved Africans to freepersons. They despised, even more, the fact that Black troops were in their communities to keep order and to ensure that white persons continued to adhere to the policies of the Union. This anger and frustration were steeped, in prejudice and in a fear that Black people would secure the same privileges as white

[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid., 4. It also important to note that at the beginning of the Black Reconstruction period, President Lincoln was assassinated on April 15, 1865. President Andrew Johnson became 17th President, following Lincoln's assassination.
[122] Ibid., 24.

people had enjoyed. It became only a matter of time before racial tension and violence erupted in the South. There were riots in Virginia, Tennessee, and Louisiana. White southerners wanted Black troops to leave and were eager to preserve the Confederacy. As time progressed, the Black troops were removed from the South, and white southerners took this opportunity to revive the Confederacy. As Rable writes, "A substantial number of southerners mistakenly imagined they could both rejoin the nation and enjoy the former status [of enslaving Black people for labor and money]."[123] However, this was not the case, the system of chattel slavery having been abolished by federal mandate. The master-and-slave dynamic of the antebellum South ended. In December 1865, Congress refused to admit members of the former Confederate states and would not allow readmission to the Union without their complete surrender and compliance with all terms of Union adherence. As a result of this reality, white southerners and white political leaders of the South, in a subtle way, reentered into the Union, with an agenda to maintain white superiority and Black subjugation, that would later be executed. Confederate generals and prominent political leaders, such as former senators and governors of Southern states, requested pardons from the President of the United States in order to be readmitted into the Union. Indeed, "more than six hundred prominent North Carolinians were pardoned [just before major elections].[124]

White southerners and pollical leaders of the South disingenuously entered the Union in order to maintain the former order of white supremacy. The violence and destruction inflicted upon Black bodies, perpetuated by white-Southern political leaders and former Confederates, was had been officially forbidden by the President of the United States, President Johnson; however, he seemingly turned a blind eye to ongoing actions of racialized hate in the South. In

[123] Ibid., 5.
[124] John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,1994), 33.

fact, his own racism and prejudice seemed to support the racial proclivities of the South. As Franklin recounts the words of the President, "News carried on its masthead the equivocal statement, "This is a white man's country—President Johnson.""[125] Blacks were targeted at alarming rates by groups like the Regulators, Jaywalkers, and the Black Horse Calvary.[126] State and town ordinances and laws were constructed in order to keep Black people submissive to racist political orders. White-southern political leaders formed a culture of fear, control, and death in order to maintain white supremacy and Black "inferiority." The governmental officials of the South enacted Black codes to reverse Black freedom and progression. In John Hope Franklin 's *Reconstruction After the Civil War,* Franklin recounts this:

> Other state laws [in the South] and town ordinances were designed to maintain what the legislators considered due subordination of freedmen. They were to handle no firearms or other weapons, and they were to possess no alcoholic beverages. In Opelousas, Louisiana, no Black person was allowed to come within the limits of town without special permission of his employer. Many communities required Blacks to be off the streets by a specified hour, while others had laws against Blacks using "insulting gestures" or "exercising the function of a minister of the Gospel" without a license. Most of the laws employed terms as "master" and "servant" and clearly implied a distinction that consigned Blacks to a hopelessly inferior status…The enactment of these Black codes confirmed the North's worst fears. Reformers believed that the former Confederates were attempting to re-establish slavery…To an increasing number of Northerners, reconstruction in the South by the former Confederates was the undoing of Appomattox.[127]

Although some leaders of the North, and even congressional members challenged the Black Codes through proposed bills, President Andrew Johnson vetoed it, strengthening state laws of the South. Despite the efforts during Reconstruction of some white educators and other allies to support Black literacy and enfranchisement, it was clear that many powerful white political

[125] Ibid., 50-51.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid., 48-49.

leaders wanted to keep Black people in a place of subjugation. In Douglas A. Blackmon's *Slavery By Another Name*, the author writes, "Beginning in the late 1860's and accelerating after the return of white political control in 1877, every southern state enacted an array of interlocking laws essentially intended to criminalize Black life."[128] White southern leaders and white southerners did whatever they could to take away the freedom of Blacks, to perpetuate a system that would attempt to enslave Black people - physically, socially, and psychologically. Amid this backlash to the freedom of Black people from the bondage of chattel slavery, Black people proclaimed their worth through Black Reconstruction. Black people would curate spaces of freedom, religious expression, and education. Black people would expose an unjust system of oppression and fight to reconstruct the nation in a more harmonious fashion, a task that white Southern leaders refused to do because of racism, power, control, and hatred.

### 3.1 The Rise of Black Political Leaders

From essentially no Black political participation in the United States before the Civil War, Black people rose to proclaim their humanity and rightful citizenship through political involvement. Amid white domestic terrorism which intended to turn back the clocks of progression to antebellum enslavement, Black people made their entrance into the political sphere of America. The role of Black leadership in politics during Reconstruction has been neglected in scholarship as a result of white historians who attempted to erase the impact of Black leadership during this era. In Trevon D. Logan's article, "Do Black Politicians Matter? Evidence from Reconstruction," the author argues that "Part of this neglect may reflect the

[128] Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name*: *The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans From The Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 53.

shifting historiography of Reconstruction, most recently described by Foner (2014). The earliest histories of Reconstruction were heavily influenced by the Dunning School, which held that Reconstruction was a failure, that Black political participation led to incompetent leadership, and that federal influence in the former Confederacy was unwarranted and ultimately unsuccessful (Dunning 1907)."[129] In addition, the white politicians and historians in the South, following the Civil War, wanted to return to the white racial order. They viewed Black political participation as incompetent because Black leaders were actually attempting to reconstruct the nation into a "true" democratic nation where *all* citizens were included. Although white politicians and historians deemed this period as stagnant due to Black involvement, Black people proclaimed their worth through the political processes of America and worked tirelessly for social and judicial change. In fact, this was the period where the nation was on the cusp of actually becoming a nation where Black and white people existed in community. It was Black people who truly led this period called Reconstruction. They fought for their humanity and proclaimed their rights in politics.

Black freepersons, from 1866 to 1880, fought for social, political, educational, and economic freedom for Black people. Black persons led more than 1,3000 political offices and stood up to white political leaders who wanted to keep the masses of Black persons oppressed and outside of American freedom.[130] These offices ranged from the Senate to House of Representatives, to governor, to school boards, and dozens of other political offices on the state and local level.[131] Reconstruction is often taught as a dark and destructive period of American

[129] Trevon D. Logan "Do Black Politicians Matter? Evidence from Reconstruction," in the *Journal of Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 20 January 2020), 2-3. < https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-economic-history/article/abs/do-black-politicians-matter-evidence-from-reconstruction/06745434C8FAE4E9289A4F6FF01EA02C>
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.

history; however, this was a period where Black people attempted to reconstruct the nation into a just democracy, where equality and justice would be given to *all* persons. Undoubtedly, there was ample room for more Black political leadership and representation; however, the movement of Black political participation was unprecedented. Logan writes, "Though Black officeholding was extensive, in proportion to the population, it still marked underrepresentation for Blacks. More than 30 percent of the Southern population was Black at the time. Nevertheless, the widespread election of Southern Blacks was a striking revolution in both American and global political history."[132]

Black political leaders, specifically those in Congress and on state levels, played an instrumental role in implementing the new reconstruction program.[133] By the end of the war, thousands of Black people were free, and were eager to enter the electoral process. Amid white-backlash and possible restrictions, this program was maintained by Black politicians. This program was geared to attract the 'Black vote' to the Republican party, which at that time, was committed to the best interest of the Black population. Franklin writes, "The realistic radicals hoped for the best from the local whites; but they began to realize the Black persons…were the best hope for building and maintaining a strong political organization that would keep the Radicals in power."[134] Through Black leadership, in the new reconstruction program, the Union League and Freedmen's Bureau was formed in order to give Black people the opportunity to vote. Through voter registration drives, and educational training, Black people were able to cast their ballots in elections of the South. There was strong and polemical criticism of the new

[132] Ibid., 5.
[133] John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, 123.
[134] Ibid. It is also important to note that during the reconstruction period, the Democratic Party was the more conservative party. The Republican Party, during the time of Reconstruction, with its flaws and prejudices, was more committed to the rights of Black people. The Republic Party in the South consisted of mainly Black voters.

reconstruction program and the other organizations throughout the South. White southern leaders in the South "accused [Black political leaders and the Union League] of urging Blacks, through inflammatory speeches and elaborate oath-taking, to support their friends and oppose their enemies. Their enemies were, of course, their former masters who sought, through the Democratic party, to deliver then back into slavery."[135]

Black political leaders on the state and local levels, through informative sessions and educational training of the electoral process, enabled thousands of Black persons to have the opportunity to vote in the democracy. Black leaders helped form organizations and amend constitutional laws that allowed Black people to be involved in the elections. In Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the Frist Years*, the author states, "African Americans were voting and sending representatives to the conventions that drafted the new state constitutions. Though they held a majority in South Carolina only, their contributions to all the states were an everlasting credit to African Americans, their churches, and their clergy, many of whom were the best leaders and legislative representatives available for taking part in these constituting conventions."[136] Black political leaders, many of whom were clergypersons, proclaimed the Black voice in the political square. Historian John Hope Franklin highlights the political proclamation of Black political involvement:

> The state constitutions drawn up in 1867 and 1868 were the most progressive the South had ever known. Most of them abolished property qualifications for voting and holding office; some of them abolished imprisonment for debt. All of them abolished slavery, and several sought to eliminate race distinction in the possession or inheritance of property…The conservative element of the South almost unanimously denounced the

[135] Ibid., 125.
[136] Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the Frist Years* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 169.

> new constitutions and fought to defeat their ratification. When they gained power…they seemed anxious to rewrite only those clauses which enfranchised Negroes.[137]

The involvement of Black political leadership impacted freedmen's ability to participate in politics. Black leaders proclaimed not only their voice in governmental spaces or assemblies; they amplified the voices of their Black sisters and brothers through the new Reconstruction program. This time in history, unlike any other republic, was an example of interracial democracy. This form of Black progression and proclamation would soon call for "countermeasures to destroy the political power that was being put into the hands of Blacks."[138]

### 3.2 The Rise of Black Churches & Denominations

Historically, people of African descent have created their own spaces of freedom – unique to their own Black, religious, and cultural expressions. Black religion and spiritualty, as discussed in chapter two, can be traced back to the shores of Africa, and to the slave quarters and brush harbors of the slaveocracy. In spite of the fact that there was an intentional white agenda to strip enslaved Africans of their culture and spirituality, African traditional religion and culture yet survived. Unquestionably, African-American religion, in the North American context, and also in the diaspora, is a deep faith, with its unmovable connection to the motherland of Africa, that refuses to bend to death, pain, violence, discrimination, dehumanization, and destruction. In addition to Africanized spirituality and Christianity during the antebellum period, Black people began to build their own physical institutions and churches during Reconstruction following the civil war. After the spiritual revivals called the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening swept through the South, throngs of Black people worshipped in white

[137] John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom, 3rd ed.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 316-317.
[138] ---, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, 126.

denominations. There, white congregants were frustrated around a number of issues: race, culture, class, and control.[139] In Henry Mitchell's *Black Church Beginnings*, Mitchell writes about these issues:

> The class factor evolved as the white Baptists and Methodists, both North and South engaged in social and economic upward mobility. As members of newer, less respectable religious movements, these believers needed and welcomed Black members. Once the hard labor and frugal lifestyles of the whites had paid off in an elevation of their class status, these whites became uncomfortable with their Black members…The issue of culture of worship was illustrated above concerning First African Baptist Church in Richmond. As white Baptists became more affluent and socially respectable, they were embarrassed by the emotional freedom they once cherished. What for Blacks had been a worship affirmation of their ancient culture became for white Baptists and Methodists a brief interlude in a longer Western history of a culture of formality in worship…Still more important was the refusal of whites to share organizational power or control with African Americans, whether slave or free. The power issue is illustrated by the white Baptists at Portsmouth…Pastor Bishop's pulpit gifts transcended white culture, under the uniting influence of the new worship of the First Great Awakening. Yet their "union" dissolved as soon as Black "members" sought the right to vote in true Baptist equality. The African Americans of this strong congregation later withdrew their request when they saw that simply asking to vote was causing their outright exclusion from membership."[140]

Mitchell argues that culture, class, and control were significant factors in the Black exodus from white congregations and denominations. White congregants were bothered by the Africanized ways of worship of Black members and wanted to uphold a more "quiet" and "respectable" form of worship, a more Eurocentric type of devotion. White members wanted to uphold their socio-economic status, and the presence of Black persons seemingly impacted their status in a negative way. White congregants were not only accustomed to having control in their public lives; they were used to having power in their religious lives – they wanted to keep the power and position in their churches, which ultimately, excluded Black parishioners. In addition to Mitchell's argumentation, it is important to note that racism was the root cause and primary factor. White

[139] Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 51.
[140] Ibid., 52.

supremacy and racism informed white congregants' frustration around culture, class, and control. White supremacy was yet alive in white congregations. The racism and hatred toward Black people that some thought died with the Civil War in fact still permeated white churches and fueled their frustration with Black participation and worship. Whether white congregants were bothered by the ways in which Black persons worshipped, disliked the economic gap between Black parishioners and white congregants, or mourned their loss of control during church elections, the underlying motivation was racism and white supremacy.

The Black exodus from white churches and denominations took place before the Civil War; however, there was an influx of Black congregations and denominations following the war. There is no exact date of when Black congregations gained independence from white denominations and it is also difficult to verify the first few Black congregations; however, historians have been able to trace the period where Black churches and denominations began to grow exponentially.[141] Black congregations were sprouting all over the North, and especially in the South, despite the "rigid resistance and legal restrictions."[142] Historically, a number of Black denominations and churches were founded prior to Reconstruction. For example, the African Episcopal Church was founded in 1816, in Philadelphia, when Richard Allen and other Black Methodists decided that they would no longer accept racism and oppression in the Methodist church. Although a number of Black denominations were founded prior to the Reconstruction period, Black denominations and churches spread during Reconstruction. Black ministers planted a number of Black churches and founded denominations: Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church, and a number of other independent Black churches. Black persons attempted to worship in white

[141] Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 53.
[142] Ibid., 92.

spaces and churches, following the Civil War; however, the oppression and discrimination they experienced within the sacred walls of religion led them to curate their own spaces of freedom and life. This religious space, the Black Church, would fortify Black people with not only a belief in a loving and all-powerful deity; it would enable them to fight for freedom and proclaim life in all avenues of their lives.

### 3.3 The Emancipation of the Mind: The Black Education Movement

The system of chattel slavery, in the North American context, not only enslaved the Black body; it enslaved the Black mind. White slaveholders and political leaders viewed literacy of enslaved Black persons as a threat to the economy of slavery. If enslaved Black persons possessed the literacy of that land, they would possess the information needed and epically the skills needed to decode anti-Black legislation, signage, and legal documents, as well as write to one another as part of organizing efforts. White supremacists did not want Black persons to learn to read, but the skill of writing was possibly the most dangerous tool of freedom, from the abhorrent standpoint of White supremacy. The power of information and the skill of writing would give Black persons the power and ability to potentially overturn an unjust system. Anti-literacy laws had been created in order to keep Black people mentally enslaved. For example, the South Carolina General Assembly in 1740 amended the existing slave codes with the following words:

> …And *whereas*, the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; *Be it therefore* enacted by the authority aforesaid, That all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereinafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught, to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to

> write, every such person and persons, shall, for every such offence forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.[143]

For over 200 years, anti-literacy laws were enacted in order to restrict enslaved Africans' opportunities to read and write. By the end of the Civil War, most Black freepersons were illiterate, and were not prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship. Franklin writes, "Indeed, when they came out of slavery many of them did not know their own names; many did not even have family names…None of this is surprising… [Black persons were in] a system that for more than two centuries had denied [Black people] most rights as human beings."[144] Although this was a harsh reality, the hunger and thirst for education was great among Black people. Black people longed to emancipate and decolonize their minds.

Although a few Black persons were privileged to education, most Black people taught themselves. There was a revolution that happened, one where Black people were self-educated and entered into political offices and organizations in order to promote education for Black people. Hope Franklin writes about Black leaders who were avid learners and entered into politics in order to promote education:

> Among South Carolina's African American leaders was state treasurer Francis L. Cardozo, educated at Glasgow and London, who had been a minister in New Haven and after the war, was principal of a school for Blacks in Charleston. Robert B Elliott, born in Massachusetts, trained at Eton College in England, and elected to congress in 1870, was urbane and articulate. J.J. Wright, a state supreme court justice, had studied at the University of Pennsylvania and had been a respected member of the Pennsylvania bar before moving to South Carolina after the war…Hiram Revels, United States senator from Mississippi, and Richard H. Gleaves, member of Congress from South Carolina, had much more than the rudiments of a formal education when they entered upon their official duties…Significant among African American leaders were those who were almost wholly self-educated. Robert Smalls of South Carolina pursued his studies

[143] 1740 South Carolina Slave Code. Acts of the South Carolina General Assembly, 1740, No. 670. "An Act For Better Ordering And Governing Negroes And Other Slaves In This Province." Excerpt is from Article XLV. (South Carolina Department of Archives and History in Columbia, South Carolina).
[144] John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, 88.

> diligently until he had mastered the rudiments. Later he went to the United States House of Representatives. In Mississippi, John Ray Lynch regularly took time off from his duties in a photographer's studio to gaze across the alley into a white schoolroom, where he kept up with the class until he had mastered the courses taught there. When he became speaker of the Mississippi house and later member of Congress, he relied on this earlier training. Before Jefferson Long went to Congress from Georgie, he had educated himself and had become a merchant tailor in Macon. There were numerous other self-educated African American leaders, including John Carraway and Peyton Finley of Alabama, James O'Hara and A.H. Galloway of North Carolina, and James W. Bland and Lewis Lindsay of Virginia. From this educated element came the articulate, responsible Blacks who contributed substantially to the writing of the new constitutions and the establishment of the new governments in the former slave states.[145]

During Reconstruction, a number of these Black political leaders were ministers and were deeply a part of Black congregations and churches. A major accomplishment of these Black political leaders was the establishment of free public education and school systems for Black persons to attend. Although public education was segregated, this was the first time that Black people were allowed to be educated. This was the first time that Black people proclaimed their worth through education. Black political leaders, in association with organizations like the Freedmen's Bureau, pushed for a system of universal public education that not only benefited white people, but Black people, as well. As a result of Black leadership, "each state provided in its new constitution for free education of all persons of school age, usually five to twenty-one years." There were a number of debates in Southern states because white politicians feared that the new constitutions would lead to racially mixed schools; they also feared the cost of educating Black persons. Amid heated debates around segregated schools, masses of Black people were being educated – something that had never happened before in this country.

In addition to the creation of public education, Black institutions of higher learning were formed primarily by church leaders and denominations. Organizations and denominations such

[145] Ibid., 89-90.

as the American Baptist Home Mission Society, the American Missionary Association, and Baptist, AME, Methodist, and other Black denominations and churches formed schools of higher learning such as: Spelman College, Shaw University, Morehouse College, Hampton University, Florida Memorial College, Benedict College, Virginia Union University, and a number of other institutions of higher learning that serve Black freepersons.[146] The role of the Black Church is inextricably tied to Black education during this period. Black congregations challenged mental enslavement by building spaces for Black people to learn and grow. In the basement of Springfield Baptist Church, two years after the Civil War, the Augusta Institute (which would become Morehouse College), was founded. This is the epitome of Black determination wherein a people did not give up, but prophetically proclaimed a better life through liberal arts, religious education, science, history, medicine, and other areas of learning. In the words of Henry Mitchell, "The Black Church of the Reconstruction era was incredibly committed to achievement in the life and welfare of its people and communities. No phase of need or challenge to action was overlooked. If the Black Church of the twenty-first century were to be half as energetic, sacrificial, and visionary, with all its unprecedented advantages, the condition of African Americans would be immeasurably improved."[147] Although this movement of Black progress swept throughout the nation, it would soon be challenged with "Counter-Reconstruction" and "white-lash," which would demand a greater level of prophetic proclamation and imagination from Black persons.[148]

[146] Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 143.
[147] Ibid., 74.
[148] I define "Counter-Reconstruction" and "white-lash" as the respond of white racists in the nation, especially in the South. This was a time when white political leaders and white people in the South reversed the political freedom and progression of Black people during Reconstruction with unfair laws that would allow the mistreatment of, and discrimination against, Black people. This response would be characterized by brutal violence and murder of Black people throughout the South.

### 3.4 Proclamation in the Civil Rights Movement

Although white Confederate soldiers were defeated in the Civil War, the Confederacy was "reborn" at the end of Black Reconstruction. Franklin stated that "immediately upon the readmission of their states, the Conservatives, calling themselves variously the Democratic party, Conversative Union party, or the Democratic and Conservative party, began their running attack on the new administrations. Overthrow would come soon, they felt, if they worked hard enough at it."[149] White political leaders challenged the eligibility of Black political leaders. The senate in August 1868 passed a vote of 83 to 23 to expel twenty-nine Black members in the house. Franklin also writes that, "Only four remained [in the senate], and this was because their fair complexion made it impossible to prove that they were African Americans."[150] This "white-lash" was white people's way of "taking back" the South. White political leaders wanted to return to the status quo, which before the Civil War, Black people were treated as property and subhuman. Throughout the South, legislation was passed formally declaring that Black members could no longer sit in political offices. White people in the South began to do whatever necessary to transform the South back into a white-superior-regime. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan was Black people's greatest fear. Rable states that "The Ku Klux Klan had an overriding purpose—the destruction of the Republican party in the South…Klan raids sought to achieve a particular goal—the restoration of home rule in the southern states."[151] The night raids and acts of terrorism were very ruthless and bloody, and very few white leaders denounced the actions of the Klan. Franklin highlighted this violence: "One of them told how he was whipped because he had not lifted his hat when he met a white man on the road. Another related how a Black man was killed

[149] Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, 130.
[150] Ibid.
[151] George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction*, 95-96.

by a mob after an altercation with a white man. A Black woman told how the Klan dragged her husband from their home and lynched him…"[152] White persons, whose aim was to restore the South to the former days, removed Black political leaders, intimidated Black communities, and fought to hold most political offices in the South. White conservatives of the South, once again, attempted to crush the soul and humanity of Black people to a level of inferiority; however, Black people would not bend.

Between 1873 and 1883, the Supreme Court handed down decisions that nullified and overturned the work of Congress, led primarily by Black people during Reconstruction. The Democratic governments in the South, through their racist "justifications," instituted state laws that made it legal to separate Black and white people. Black people did not sit idly by; they proclaimed their humanity and stood up to the unfair state laws in the South. Some historians trace the Civil Rights movement to the 1950's and 1960s; however, I argue that the Civil Rights movement began during and after Reconstruction. In 1892, Homer Plessy, an African American man, refused to sit in the segregated area for Black people on a train. This social action sent a shockwave through the South and the North, leading up to the Supreme Court. The racist state laws of segregation were validated in the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson, which held that separate but equal facilities and racial segregation did not violate the US Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment. This ruling gave Southern racists and lawmakers further consent to wreak havoc upon Black bodies. Through racist laws—Jim Crow laws—white people in the South reclaimed their control of Black people. Black and white people existed separately in a number of areas: public accommodations, recreational facilities, schools, transportation

[152] John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, 166.

services, armed forces, and even in prisons. In Jerrold M. Packard's *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*, the author describes the racist South:

> …Blacks were barred from setting foot in any of the city's white restaurants or white cafes or white soda fountains or white cafeterias—anyplace, in fact, that served white people food or drink. No Black [person] could enter bar or a white nightclub or a white dancehall or a white bowling alley or a white skating rink or a white public park or a white auditorium or a white golf course or a white swimming beach or a white public lending library or—God forbid most of all—a white church. Of the city's downtown movie theaters, only two allowed access to Blacks—and in both of these Blacks were permitted only in the balcony, what whites called the buzzard roosts,… and to which entry was gained through a side door, or an alley door, followed by a steep climb by way of open steel steps to the top of the theater.[153]

The Confederacy had risen again through segregation, discrimination, and white domestic terrorism. Jim Crow Laws were the epitome of white supremacy and white domination.[154] White rage and violence were seen throughout Black communities in the South, religiously. In addition to segregation, white mobs tortured and killed thousands of Black people across the South. Black people were raped, brutally beaten, physically assaulted, and murdered – sometimes for walking while Black. Any form of oppression during this period was cruel; however, the spectacle known as lynching was abominably distinct. Amy Louise Wood writes, "African Americans were more likely than whites to be arrested and incarcerated, or legally executed, with little cause and with few due processes rights, but lynching stood out for many African Americans in a way other

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[153] Jerrold M. Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* (New York: St. Martins Griffin Press, 2002), 12-13.

[154] Ibid., 14. Packard explains the origin of the term Jim Crow: "The origin of the term *Jim Crow* lies in the early-nineteenth-century minstrel show…minstrelsy consisted of white song-and-dance performers crudely mimicking African-Americans dance steps and rhythms, generally for the enjoyment it gave to white audiences while demeaning the Blacks whom the white entertainers tried to resemble by covering their faces with burnt cork. One of the earlier and most famous minstrels was Thomas "Daddy" Rice, who devised a strutting dance character supposedly suggesting a prancing crow, and the character thus came to be called Jim Crow…How the vaudeville character called Jim Crow came to be the general term for American racial segregation and discrimination is not known. But at some point in the nineteenth century, the term ceased to have anything to do with minstrelsy (whose popularity had by the end of the nineteenth century greatly waned), instead signifying what it meant throughout the twentieth century, namely the legal, quasi-legal, or customary practice of disfranchising, physically segregating, barring, and discriminating against Black Americans, virtually the sole practitioners of such practices being white Americans."

kinds of oppression did not."[155] The act of hanging Black people, by a rope, on a tree was cruel and humiliating; it was painful and violent. Lynchings very often included torture and mutilation of Black victims. Lynchings sent a message to Black people: Black life does not matter and if any Black person attempts to resist the system in place, they would be murdered. Lynchings, usually performed before the gaze of white audiences, also reinforced and maintained white supremacy. Wood also states, "Yet, lynchings were not performed only to terrorize African Americans. After all, the primary witnesses to lynchings were not Blacks, but whites. Rituals of violence and their representation in news reports, photographs, and film imparted to whites powerful images of white dominance and Black subordination, of white unity and Black criminality, that reinforced the ideological infrastructure of Jim Crow-white supremacy. The cultural power of lynching to sustain white supremacy thus depended on its public manifestations—spectacle."[156] White Southerners, through lynchings, carried messages of Black bestiality and white dominance, and attempted to destroy Black bodies and communities.

Black people curated a space of liberation and responded to attack on Black bodies through the formation of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in 1909. This organization, rooted in the church, inspired Black people across the nation. The NAACP challenged the heresy of white supremacy and affirmed the humanity and dignity of Black people. While the world around them deemed Black people as inferior and the "other," the NAACP proclaimed life in the face of death by advocating for racial justice. Stephen Collins and Katherine Scott Sturdevant state, "The first meetings included representatives from, among others, the progressive movement, the settlement house movement, the women's suffrage

[155] Amy Louise Wood, "The Spectacle of Lynching: Rituals of White Supremacy in the Jim Crow South" in *American Journal of Economic and Sociology*, Vol 77, Nos 3-4 (May-September, 2018), p.758 . < https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/ajes.12249>
[156] Ibid., 759.

movement, the Niagara Movement, the African-American churches, the abolitionist movement's descendants, and the anti-lynching crusade personified in Ida B. Wells-Barnett."[157] The NAACP, contrary to popular belief, was formed by not only Black men but powerful Black women who helped to advance Black people during this time. The NAACP was a movement that strived to "ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination."[158] Members and legal persons of the NAACP were rooted in the Black community and attempted to take cases of racial violence and discrimination to court. The first case was one of Zach Walker who was lynched in 1911. Although this case did not make it to court, the NAACP would continue to confront the murders and violence inflicted upon Black bodies. The NAACP would challenge Congress, on a continual basis, to pass anti-lynching legislature. Although Congress, on a number of occasions, did not rule in Black people's favor, the NAACP did not give up, and continued to advocate for the rights of Black people.

Racist propaganda was utilized to "justify" the lynchings of Black people by white mobs. Depictions of Blacks as "criminal," "bestial," and "brutes," could be seen all over the South, and even in the North. Woods describes this phenomenon:

> In this respect, lynchings did not arise out of spontaneous outburst of emotion. They were orchestrated rituals that functioned as political theater, or to be more exact, collective melodramas in which white heroes vanquished Black demonic forces. This defense of lynching is most infamously represented in D.W. Griffith's 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, but it was a defense commonly on display in pro-lynching news reports, speeches, and pamphlets. White viewers would have then interpreted lynching photographs and even earlier cinematic representations of lynching through this pro-lynching discourse. As noted, these spectacles reenacted white supremacist ideology and, in doing so, helped construct and reinforce it for the white public.[159]

[157] Stephen Collins and Katherine Scott Sturdevant, "The History and Rhetoric of the NAACP: The Origins" in Black History Bulletin Vol. 71. NO. 2 (Summer 2008), p.12.
[158] Ibid., 12.
[159] Amy Louise Wood, "The Spectacle of Lynching: Rituals of White Supremacy in the Jim Crow South," p. 773.

The pro-lynching agenda would lead to the murder of thousands of Black people by white mobs and the Ku Klux Klan. The film, *The Birth of a Nation*, could be the ammunition for white racists to attack Black people across the nation. Black people had no protection from state legislation, nor did it have protection from the President of the United States – President Woodrow Wilson – who had a private viewing of D.W. Griffith's film. This film would influence federal, state, and local politics. Black people would have to come together in order to resist this war. Black people would have to proclaim life through song, marches, prayers, sermons, faith, political pressure, and non-violent protest, strategic mobilization, and unwavering courage.

By the 1950s, Jim Crow and the "ghost" of the antebellum South was yet prevalent in the South, and Black people were yet dealing with the white-lash of Black progress during Reconstruction. Black political leaders of the South would organize masses of Black people to utilize their bodies to overturn a system of hate and discrimination. During the 1950s, and 1960s, through organizations such as the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Black people successfully boycotted segregated bus systems, peacefully sat in segregated restaurants, marched for equal voting rights and a number of other issues. A number of these boycotts were able to be successful through church meetings across the South. Black congregations held rallies where they raised money in order to support the movement. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the faces of the movement, along with a number of other Black persons, led one of the largest marches in American history wherein 250,000 people gathered in Washington D.C., advocating for the civil rights of Black people. As people marched and made their way to D.C., Black people proclaimed their freedom

through spirituals and protest songs: “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” “Oh, Freedom,” “We Shall Overcome,” “Roll, Jordan Roll,” All God’s Children Got Shoes,” “Joshua Fought The Battle of Jericho,” and a host of other songs. It is also important to note the power of Black women during the Civil Rights Movement. Martha Lott in her article, “The Relationship Between the “Invisibility” of African American Women in the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and Their Portrayal in Modern Film,” writes, “When students learn about the civil rights movement, they are usually taught about Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Occasionally, Rosa Parks is mentioned and rarely Coretta Scott too, with a great emphasis placed on the fact that they are women. No such remarks are made about the gender of Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X. However, the likes of African American women activists such as Ella Baker, Diane Nash, Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Lee Copper, Angela Davis, [Septima Clark, and Dorothy Heights] still are never mentioned when students learn about the civil rights movement.”[160] It was a movement of not only Black men, but strong and powerful Black women who worked tirelessly for social justice. The social movement of Black men and women during this period led to the decision of Brown v. Board of Education (which led to integration of schools), the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which outlawed any form of discrimination based upon race, religion, gender, and national origin), the Voting Act of 1965 (which outlawed racial discrimination in voting processes), and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (which was passed to protect Black people from discrimination when renting or buying). Although racism reared its “painful and ugly head,” Black people faced death and white supremacy head on. Black people

[160] Martha Lott, “The Relationship Between the “Invisibility” of African American Women in the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and Their Portrayal in Modern Film,” in *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 48 (2017), 335. <sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

proclaimed their humanity and put their bodies on the line in order to overturn an unjust, oppressive system.

Although modern day representations offer sanitized versions of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it is important to note that King did not only give poetic "I Have a Dream" speeches; King knew that civil rights legislation alone would not completely free Black people. He knew Black people needed an economic revolution in order to vanquish poverty; he also knew that the country needed to overturn its criminal justice system which targeted Black people. King's demands and calls to action were a threat to the nation and the system of whiteness, which resulted in his assassination on April 4th, 1968. Although there was much progress during the Civil Rights movement, Jim Crow would evolve into the unhinged war on drugs, police brutality, criminalization of the Black body, and the neo-slave-labor and death of Black persons in the American prison-industrial complex—all of which would demand a heightened strength of social action and proclamation.

# Chapter Four

# Historical Disorientation: From the New Jim Crow to the Black Lives Matter Movement

## 4.1 The "Haunting" of Slavery and Jim Crow

The ghosts of slavery and Jim Crow continue to haunt the fabric of American culture and society. The peculiarity of memory and history that many white contemporaries desire to erase, somehow, continues to surface through lingering systemic oppressions inflicted upon Black bodies. This theme of "haunting" is found in Toni Morrison's fictional piece, *Beloved*. In her novel, Morrison rewrites the life and experiences of the historical figure, Margaret Garner, who made one of the most challenging decisions to take the life of her daughter in order to prevent her daughter from becoming kidnapped, raped, and enslaved.[161] Morrison highlights the life of Margaret Garner through the fictional character, Sethe, and displays the theme of "haunting" through the fictional daughter, Beloved. The fictional character, Sethe, is constantly "haunted" by the memory of slavery and its destructive forces. Morrison, through the existential reality of Sethe, highlights the trauma of slavery, pervasiveness of racism, and the imagination of freedom and resistance. Richard Perez, in his article, "The Debt of Memory: Reparations, Imagination, and History in Toni Morrison's "Beloved,"" sheds light on Morrison's theme of "haunting":

> In killing her daughter, Garner [Sethe] carries out an enormously complex decision whose consequences affect, all at once, the life of her child, the law that opposes them, and the historical conditions of her time. Paradoxically, this extraordinary gesture—personal, social, and historical—demonstrates a level of ethical depth, displays Garner's [Seth's] substantive humanity, and serves as an incriminating comment on a society that would require such a decision in the first place. *Beloved* aims in this sense, to redress

[161] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987). See this novel in order to learn more about the fictional characters, Sethe and Beloved.

> the traumatic debt accrued by Garner's [Seth's] dispossessed humanity. Significantly, the traumatic remainder of her decision does not annihilate Sethe (Garner); instead, it sets off a process of traumatic self-discovery. By reaching into the archive and reconstructing Garner's story, then, Morrison recuperates her personhood and imbues her, via fiction, with a narrative afterlife for her extraordinary deed…In order for Sethe [Garner] to move forward she must recounter Beloved, both as her daughter and an as emblem of the past. Through the encounter, Sethe [Garner] faces the trauma of her personal and historical past to regain a personhood depleted by the violence of her life. It is not that Morrison creates a factual history that rivals the archives in what it gathers and remembers, but that she opens an alternative space where the "personhood" of the slave can speak and reemerge. If debt speaks to a lack in economic terms, in the imagination it designates a reparative potentiality through which history may be reached and refigured.[162]

In Toni Morrison's novel, the author reconceptualizes American history through the ghost, Beloved. The author speaks to the racist past of America that continues to "haunt" and show up today. Morrison speaks of a memory of the past—slavery and oppression—that continue to wreak violence and pain. This theme of "haunting" implies that slavery and Jim Crow are not over but have evolved into other oppressive structures. The scars of slavery and the memory of Black oppression and death continue to haunt Black people. This theme not only sheds light on the memory and present oppression of racism, it challenges Black people to resist. "Haunting challenges people who find themselves most disturbed by oppression's long history to participate actively with past and present disenfranchised groups in the project of amplifying their voices and [fighting for change]."[163] In his *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon further explores the concept of haunting:

> Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance)… What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated

[162] Richard Perez, "The Debt of Memory: Reparations, Imagination, and History in Ton Morrison's "Beloved," in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Spring/Summer 2014, Vol. 42, No. 1/2 (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2014), p. 193 & 197. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24364922>

[163] Patrick Elliot Alexander, *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018,), 78.

> state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I [am using] the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instance when…the over-and-done-with comes alive, when that's been in your blind spot comes in view. Haunting raises specters and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future.[164]

The denial of Black people's mistreatment and pain of the past, by those who "believed" that racism and Black death are over, was proven to be inaccurate through the reemergence of discrimination and white supremacy. The ghosts of slavery and Jim Crow reemerged and haunted Black communities of America after the Civil Rights movement and the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In order to preserve white supremacy and the myth of white superiority, the proponents of white supremacy—politicians, police officers, leaders, educators, lawgivers, journalists, news reporters, and others—conceptualized the Black body as dangerous and criminal in order to justify the "newer" forms of slavery and Jim Crow that would severely impact Black communities, and which Black people would resist through varying forms of proclamation.

**4.2 War on Drugs: Heroin, Marijuana, Crack Cocaine**

The dream of Dr. King was overturned by neo-slavery—poverty and economic inequities in Black communities. Black farmers, sharecroppers, domestic workers, and agricultural workers in South were replaced by machines and left jobless. After the emancipation from chattel slavery, Black Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement, Black people were left with practically no wealth nor did they have a monetary safety net. For over four hundred years, Black people were treated as a commodity and as property in order to make white Americans wealthy. Black people

[164] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvi.

had no reparations, no inheritance, and no economic justice. The Great Migration of the early twentieth century brought an influx of Black people from the South into Northern cities, at the end of the 1960s and early '70s, Black people had migrated in huge numbers to the North. Black migrants were seeking to find work and to find a better life in the North. Instead of equity and justice, Black persons found themselves pushed into slums and ghettos and were stricken with poverty and violence. Banks would not give affordable and equitable home loans to Black people – most were predatory mortgages. Realtors, rooted in racism, would not accept Black people's applications. Black people were not hired for decent jobs. The educational system was horrendous because of the lack of state support. Crime was at an all-time high. This unrelenting economic and societal oppression was a primary symptom of a congenital defect—white supremacy and systemic racism, which continues to haunt Black communities. The victim-blaming pathology stood as an affront to the reality of systemic segregation through ghettos, rooted in the societal dysfunction of whiteness. E. Lâle Demirtürk, in her article, "Writing in the Urban Discourse into the Black Ghetto Imaginary," writes:

> The poor housing conditions, crime and violence, sexual harassment, unemployment, and welfare dependency construct that Harlem ghetto as a place that leaves the characters who no real role models. The sense of physical and social isolation from the white city invites a forceful critique of American sociopolitical institutions because all the businesses, including running, are controlled by white officials whose exploitative business invades Black ghetto and continues to the decline of the inner city.[165]

The neo-racist strategy of isolating Black communities caused Black people to be placed in abominable environments and conditions. Black people lived in conditions in which there was no running water nor electricity. Children lived in homes with mold and harmful toxic chemicals.

[165] E. Lâle Demirtürk, "Writing in the Urban Discourse into the Black Ghetto Imaginary: Louise Meriwether's "Daddy Was a Number Runner"" in The Southern Literary Journal, Fall, 2006, Vol. 39, No. 1 (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 73. <https:// www.jstor.org/stable/20077863>

Women encountered sexual violence; Black people were unemployed, and crime skyrocketed. Black people were targeted; however, they would have to proclaim life in the face of white political structures that attempted to ostracize them from a quality life.

Amid intentional political construction of ghettos in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was the heroin crisis and epidemic. Black people were already suffering enough and did not need America's brand of a war on drugs. Most people are aware of the crack epidemic that destroyed Black communities, but are unaware of the heroin crisis that made its way into Black communities, initially. In James Forman Jr.'s *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*, the author writes, "heroin was to the 60s what crack was to the late 80s…. By the late 1960s, what had been a problem became an epidemic. Heroin began to devour the city's poor Black neighborhoods."[166] White police officers and politicians seemed to turn their heads to the ways that heroin entered into the Black communities; they utilized this as a way for Black communities to be destroyed and as a way to arrest thousands of Black persons. The Black body, once again, was being enslaved. According to Washington, D.C. Central Detention Facility studies, by June 1969, 45 percent of the men admitted to jail were heroin addicts.[167] The response from political leaders was not to transform the lives of those who were addicted to heroin, but to immediately arrest, and send them to prison. The resistance to this death-dealing system came from local Black leaders. Black nationalist Hassan Jeru-Ahmed founded the Blackman's Development Center (BDC) in May 1969. Through this organization, Ahmed and his colleagues helped hundreds of Black persons take their lives back. Ahmed challenged the biased ways in which police officers treated white persons who were addicts in comparison to

[166] James Forman Jr., *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 25.
[167] Robert L. DuPont and Richard N. Katon, "Development of a Heroin-Addiction Treatment Program: Effect on Urban Crime," *Journal of American Medical Association* 216 (May 24, 1971), 1320-1321.

the treatment of Black persons. James Forman writes, "[Hassan] called for root-cause solutions to the heroin epidemic (improving schools, fighting racism and an ethic of Black responsibility that valued hard work, education and self-discipline."[168] Hassan, along with other activists (dozens who were from the church), challenged white police officers and politicians to reverse the drug war on Black communities; they also challenged members of the Black community to utilize their humanity and worth by resisting.

The crack epidemic wreaked havoc on the Black community. The targeted policing and criminalization of Black bodies through the possession and utilization of crack destroyed Black families at alarming rates. The belief that Black people were hoodlums, predators, and gang members who deserved extreme and unfair criminal punishment was pervasive in white communities. This had been the perspective of mainstream America in order to justify the mass incarceration and neo-enslavement of Black bodies, supported by the highest political office of the land – the Office of the President. In the words of Kelly Brown Douglas, "President Ronald Reagan's declaration of a War on Drugs was a continuation of President Nixon's 'law and order' agenda, an agenda that actually got underway with the emergence of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s. It was a part of the 'white backlash' to put Black people back into the place most befitting their 'nature.'"[169] President Reagan and the Republican PRepublican arty attempted to bring "law and order" to the Black community. This concept of "law and order" was masqueraded as "bringing order," but in reality, it was an attempt to entrap the Black body through criminalization of Black people who utilized or possessed crack cocaine. Douglas also writes "…the Reagan administration targeted crack cocaine…It was notable that the

[168] Forman, *Locking Up Our Own,* 29.
[169] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice God* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 125.

administration did not target the powder form of crack cocaine, which was more likely to be used by white drug users."[170] It is important to note that powder cocaine, which was expensive, was utilized years before the crack epidemic by elite white people, and arrests and policing of white drug users was very minimal. However, when powder cocaine evolved into crack cocaine (cheapened version of powder cocaine), Black people were arrested and incarcerated at alarming numbers, and many received longer sentences than white offenders. Crack cocaine was a cheaper and more addictive version of powder cocaine. This drug became easily accessible in the Black community by the truckloads. Forman writes, "Crack is created by mixing cocaine with water and baking soda over heat. But unlike powder cocaine, which is typically sniffed, a rock of crack is easily smoked, which allows the fumes to enter the blood stream more quickly and deliver a more intense high."[171] The influx of crack into Black communities and its intense "high" destroyed the lives of many thousands of Black people. The rate of social and physical death maintained by the white racist political order was astonishing and would demand from Black communities both resiliency and strategies of proclamatory resistance.

The crack epidemic significantly impacted Black families. Reagan targeted Black communities with a War on Drugs and restricted social assistance and economic aid. James Forman, Jr. writes: "Prospects for disadvantaged communities became even bleaker in 1980, when Ronald Reagan won the presidency. One of Reagan's signature achievements as California's governor had been kicking "cheaters" off the welfare rolls; now, as President, he was determined to reduce federal spending on social programs."[172] The fabric of the Black family was under attack – socially, economically, physically, spiritually, emotionally,

[170] Ibid., 128.
[171] Forman, *Locking Up Our Own*, 158.
[172] Ibid., 157.

structurally, and physiologically. Forman writes about the attempted social destruction of Black families:

> In the magnitude of the threat it posed to Black America, the crack epidemic exceeded even the heroin crisis of the 1960s. This drug was seen as so damaging because it created: not just the addict, but his or her children, family, friends, and neighbors went down as well. Crack also spawned violent drug markets the likes which American cities had never seen. In their fight for territory, heavily armed gangs turned urban neighborhoods into killing fields.[173]

Crack was so destructive that children were losing their mothers and fathers. Mothers and fathers were losing their children. Grandchildren were losing their grandmothers and grandfathers. Grandmothers and grandfathers were losing their children and grandchildren. Crack was so addictive that some Black people did whatever they could in order to get another "high." The system did what it was designed to do – destroy the Black body at any cost. Families were being slammed by radical policing. Any day, and at any time, the police could arrest mothers and fathers, leaving children with their grandparent or aunt and uncle. The cries and shrills from children as police officers took their parents away could be heard and felt in the ghettos of Black communities. These cries possibly resembled the tears and wails of the auction blocks during slavery when children were ripped away from their mothers. This disease and infection even had Black people dealing and selling this drug to their own people. A new form of slavery had emerged, and its horrors permeated the ghettos of Black American life.

Abusive, discriminatory, and targeted policing reemerged during the late 1980s through the drug—crack cocaine. James Forman, Jr. calls it "warrior policing."[174] Police officers were given the permission to target Black communities and criminalize Black bodies. Religiously, officers would raid schools, homes, stores, restaurants, businesses, and even churches, hoping to arrest Black people in order to add to the number of Black incarcerated bodies. Forman writes:

[173] Ibid., 156.
[174] Ibid.

> The menace crack presented in turn provoked a set of responses that have helped produce the harsh and bloated criminal justice system we have today. Most of all, the fight against crack helped to enshrine the notion that police must be warriors, aggressive and armored, working ghetto corners as an army might patrol enemy territory. At the same time, aggressive policing was part of a larger set of legal and policy changes that included mandatory minimums, longer prisons sentences, and the seizing of assets of drug dealers, and users. In addition, elected officials, police chiefs, journalists, and everyday citizens increasingly heaped shame and scorn upon lawbreakers.[175]

Warrior policing was aggressive, and its aim was to arrest Black people and entrap the Black body back, again, into a place of bondage – prison. In addition to crack cocaine, guns, somehow made their way into Black communities. Not only did guns lead to more arrests and convictions, they led to Black physical death and murder. According to Forman, "In 1989, D.C. was 30 percent white, but nine out of every ten homicide victims were Black."[176] Black ghettos were war zones. Violence, death, warrior policing, extreme and unfair arrests, crack infection, and also unfair sentencing for marijuana possession prevailed – all results of a white supremacist system. Racially biased mandatory rules, laws, and attitudes were afflicting Black bodies.

Although the War on Drugs, policing, and unfair sentencing seemingly destroyed the Black body, Black people proclaimed their dignity and humanity. In particular, the role of grandmothers in Black communities during the crack crisis was crucial. Black grandmothers reared and raised their grandchildren after crack consumed the lives of their own children. Grandmothers, with the little that they had, gave love and wisdom to their grandchildren as their parents were taken to prisons all over the nation. The faith, tenacity, and strength of Black grandmothers saved Black families, and saved the lives of Black youth. It was the Black women and Black sages that poured faith, strength, and love into the community. Black grandmothers took their grandchildren to church on Sunday morning and fought to protect their grandchildren–

[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid., 161.

both from the dangers of street life and from a racist system that was intended to entrap their bodies. Some Black grandmothers seemingly did not have a choice; their children were either addicted to crack or incarcerated which resulted in grandparents who had to sacrifice their latter years to raise grandchildren. Black grandmothers very often struggled financially, emotionally, and physically in order to protect their grandchildren from the streets, and to keep them connected to family, church, school, and community. In "Raising Grandchildren From Crack-Cocaine Households: Effects on Family and Friendship Ties of African American Women," the authors write: "Although caregiving by grandparents cuts across ethnic and social-class lines, it is particularly prevalent in African-American communities… The crack-cocaine epidemic had a pronounced effect on the nature and dynamic of this experience. [Black] Grandmothers raising grandchildren as a result of the drug involvement of the children's parents, for example, frequently reported strong feelings of anger, although they were also relieved and happy to be able to provide a safe haven for children who may have suffered substantial abuse and neglect."[177] Grandmothers were mentally fatigued and exhausted as a result of the task of raising grandchildren. They worried about how they would feed their grandchildren. They also were concerned about how they would care for their grandchildren amid their own failing health. Black grandmothers were angry and resented the influence of crack on their Black children in their community. Although Black grandmothers expressed mixed feelings of becoming caretakers during the crack epidemic, they were the bedrock of the Black community during the crack crisis. Black grandmothers covered and protected generations of Black grandchildren. In

[177] Meredith Minkler, Kathleen M. Roe, Relda J. Robertson-Beckley. "Raising Grandchildren From Crack-Cocaine Households: Effects on Family and Friendship Ties of African American Women" in *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. United Kingdom: US: American Orthopsychiatric Association, Inc (January 1, 1994), *p. 20-21.* <http://dx.doi.org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1037/h0079493>

addition to the loving and nurturing power of Black grnadmothers, NAACP leaders, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, other ministers, local officials, and Black Congresspersons forged campaigns to protect Black people from drugs and unfair sentencing.[178] Black people, amid an epidemic, refused to quit. Black people resisted the harsh conditions of the ghetto, and the systemic criminalization of Black bodies. Black people challenged these forms of social and physical death, and proclaimed life through new forms of music, particularly, stylized rhythmic music and beats known as Hip-Hop and rap.

### 4.3 Reformed Proclamation and Sermons: Hip-Hop & Rap

Out of the crucible of social despair of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the ghettos of Harlem and the Bronx, New York, young, Black artists magnified the harsh conditions that Black people endured and proclaimed the need for social justice—through hip-hop. Although modern contemporaries perpetuate stereotypes of rappers as thugs who talked only about smoking, sex, violence, guns, murder, and degradation of women, the origins of hip-hop counter that. The origin of hip-hop was a social-justice movement. Amid a crack epidemic, police brutality, unemployment, housing discrimination, poor educational system, economic despair, unfair arrests and sentencing, Black imprisonment, young, Black persons were utilizing rap, and words on beats to bring an awareness to these social conundrums. These young Black rappers were preaching through their freestyles and raps. In Erin Trapp's "The Push and Pull of Hip-Hop," the author writes, "…[young Black rappers gave] social commentary and critique—giving explicit voice to existing identities— providing a vision of a different type of society in reaction

[178] Forman, *Locking Up Our Own*, 158.

to specific threats."[179] From the worlds of Grandmaster Flash who described the conditions of Black ghettos as a "jungle" to Queen Latifah who rapped about the mistreatment of Black women, Black artists rapped to show society that Black communities deserve better. In *Hip-Hop and the Fight for Social Justice,* the authors write:

> While production styles, deejaying techniques, and emceeing methods have evolved since Hip-Hop's emergence, the ability of Hip-Hoppers to speak on politics and society was there almost from the onset. Domestically, they have drawn our attention to urban light ("The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, 1982), economic hardship and employment discrimination ("Bird in the Hand" by Ice Cube, 1991), the inadequacies of the educational system ("They Schools" by dead prez, 2000), "Driving While Black" ("Illegal Search" by LL Cool J, 1990; "Ridin" by Chamillionaire, 2005), police brutality ("[Don't Care about] tha Police" by N.W.A, 1988; "Sound of da Police" by KRS-One, 1993), heteronormativity and homoantagonism (Q.U.E.E.N by Janelle Monae featuring Erykah Badu, 2013; "C70sure" by Lil Nas X, 2019), violence against women ("U.N.I.T.Y." by Queen Latifah, 1991), and violence in Hip-Hop communities ("Self Destruction" by the Stop The Violence Movement, 1989; "We're All in the Same Gang" by the West Coast Rap All-Stars, 1990)…Through the phrase "social justice" has gained popularity of late, Black and brown activists have long pursued full citizenship and equal opportunity for marginalized peoples.[180]

Hip-hop artists rejected the system that subordinated their livelihoods and spirits. This movement was one of social criticism. Influenced by the music of the Black Church and the blues, artists challenged the ways in which police officers mistreated Black persons in the neighborhoods of Harlem and the Bronx. Hip-hop artists suggested that white political leaders constructed ghettos and monopolized off of the crack crisis. These young Black artists such as Queen Latifah, Grand Master Flash, Tupac, Heavy D, LL Cool J, MC Lyte, and others highlighted the real existential

[179] Erin Trapp, "The Push and Pull of Hip-Hop: A Social Movement Analysis" in American behavioral Scientist Volume 48, Issue 11(University of Colorado-Boulder: Sage Publications, July 2005), 1486. <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/doi/epdf/10.1177/0002764205277427>
[180] Lakeyta M. Bonnette-Bailey and Adolphus G. Belk, Jr., *Hip-Hop and the Fight for Social Justice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 3.

realities of Black people; they confronted systemic racism in all its forms and fashions. Erin Trapp writes:

> Latifah and Tupac [and other artists] possess backgrounds that provide them with unique perspectives on their communities because of firsthand knowledge of poverty and significant intellectual preparation for advocacy. Queen Latifah was raised by a single mother in a public housing project. Despite economic privation and a barren inner-city setting. Latifah's mother, a teacher working three jobs, fostered a sense of empowerment in the face of "a dishonorable mentally bred in the inner city" and nurtured her daughter with a sense of strong self-esteem buoyed by a positive female role model."[181]

It is also important to note that Black women were forerunners of the hip-hop movement. Queen Latifah was, indeed, a prominent African-American hip-hop artist who advocated for Black people, particularly Black women. Latifah knew the struggle of growing up in the inner city and fought for change. Throughout her songs, she challenged systemic racism and economic privation. She also challenged the mistreatment of women, and she urged Black women to survive and thrive, and never bend to the status quo. Trapp describes Queen Latifah's musical work:

> Queen Latifah's (1989) debut album *All Hail the Queen* set the stage for her career, advocating self-esteem among African American women. Many songs on the album—including "Dance for Me," "Come Into My House," "Latifah's Law," Wrath of My madness," and "The Pros"—explicitly claim the label of hip-hop virtuoso. Lines such as those from Latifah's "Wrath of My madness" (Owens & James, 1989, track 14)— "I'm coolin' teachin' those needing schoolin'/this mic, this mic in my hand, I'm rulin'"—simultaneously address Latifah's own proficiency as a freestyler and the criticism she faces as a woman in a filed dominated by men. In her early work, such as "ladies Frist" (Owens, Johnson, Apache, & James, 1989, track 7), Latifah expressed a female standpoint: "Who said the ladies couldn't make it, you must be blind/if you don't believe, well here, listen to this rhyme/ a female rapper with the message to send….Also, in "Ladies First," Latifah defended herself against negative characterizations of female rappers, daring the audience to listen to her work and maintain that women are inferior, but her commentary is not limited to an internal debate within hip-hop. She also consciously defied feminine stereotypes…she directly

[181] Erin Trapp, "The Push and Pull of Hip-Hop: A Social Movement Analysis," 1486.

> addressed the phenomenon of impoverished women living on welfare with inadequate housing, describing a society ambivalent to their plight.[182]

Queen Latifah, along with other early hip-hop artists, acknowledged the realities of poverty, crime, drugs, racism, and critiques an unjust criminal justice system. Through music and art, these Black hip-hop trailblazers proclaimed an alternative reality – one of love, justice, freedom, and survival – in the face of death. They utilized the strength of Black faith, the song of Black spirituality, and the survival of their ancestors in order to resist an unjust system of oppression.

### 4.4 A New Plantation: The Prison System

The prison-industrial complex became the new form of slavery. There was an agenda to lock-up as many Black people as possible in order to support the big business that prison had become. Forman states, "The federal role in the War of Drugs escalated in the age of crack. In 1984, 1986, and 1988, Congress lengthened sentences and established ever-stiffer mandatory minimums…someone selling a small amount of crack would incur the same severe mandatory minimum sentence as someone selling one hundred times as much cocaine. This distinction was based on racialized fear, not science."[183] The crimes of Black people did not warrant their sentencing. Black people were going to jail and the time sentence was not connected to the crime. Like slavery, Black bodies were a threat to white spaces, and this was a way to return Black bodies to places of bondage. Like slavery, this system and complex fueled the economy – Black labor supported wealthy white businesses and persons. Not only did crack possession send Black people to jail, by the 1990s, marijuana possession was a way to send thousands of Black

[182] Ibid., 1486-1487.
[183] Forman., *Locking Up Our Own*, 164.

people to prisons. Prisons were built all over the nation at exponential rates. Bryan Stevenson, in his book *Just Mercy,* writes:

> The Florida Department of Corrections built the prison to house 1,600 people in the 1990s, when America was opening prisons at a pace never before seen in human history. Between 1990 and 2005, a new prison opened in the United States every ten days. Prison growth and the resulting "prison-industrial complex"—the business interests that capitalize on prison construction—made imprisonment so profitable that millions of dollars were spent lobbying state legislators to keep expanding the use of incarceration to respond to just about any problem. Incarceration became the answer to everything—health care problems like drug addiction, poverty that had led someone to write a bad check, child behavioral disorders, managing the mentally disabled poor, even immigration issues generated responses from legislators that involved spending people to prison. Never before had so much lobbying money been spent to expand America's prison population…"[184]

Black men and women became commodities for businesses. Black people became property and cheap labor for the prison-industrial complex. This system, once again, was attempting to destroy the freedom of the Black body. Steven Donziger states:

> Goldman Sachs and Co. and Smith Barney Shearson Inc. compete to underwrite jail and prison construction with private, tax-exempt bonds that do not require voter approval. Titans of the defense industry such as Westinghouse Electric and Alliant Techsystems, Inc., have created special divisions to retool their products for law enforcement. Publicly traded prison companies such as the Correction Corporation of America and Wackenhut Corporation, as well as correctional officer unions, also exercise a powerful influence over criminal justice policy. Private companies are growing rapidly as the correctional population expands, and they are aggressively "exporting" their formula for private jails and prisons to other countries.[185]

Donziger also reminds us that prisoners are used as raw materials to support the prison industry and businesses:

> Companies that service the criminal justice system need sufficient quantities of raw materials to guarantee long-term growth. An economist looking at almost any industry might make the same simple statement. In the criminal justice field, Christie suggests a frightening scenario: that the raw material is prisoners, and industry will do what is

[184] Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel &Grau, 2015), 258.
[185] Steven Donziger, *The Real War on Crime* (New York: Harper Colins Publishers, 1996), p. 87-89

> necessary to guarantee a steady supply. For the supply of prisoners to grow, criminal justice policies must ensure a sufficient number of incarcerated Americans regardless of whether crime is rising, or the incarceration is necessary.[186]

The embedded racism within the prison-industrial complex seeks to lower the status of Black people from free-thinking individuals to property for the state's gain and profit. As James Logan writes in *Good Punishment?: Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment,* "Black men and increasing numbers of women constitute a continuing supply of raw materials for the present-day prison-industrial complex."[187] Black bodies, in the prison system, are used as property, and when released, are yet considered criminal which prevents many from obtaining jobs or enjoying life. The forced labor and the neo-enslavement of Black persons, and the perpetual stigma of being incarcerated, not only destroys the person but destroys Black families. In slavery, Black men were usually isolated from their wives, children and families; hence, they could not protect or be a part of their families. At auction blocks, married couples were separated, as well as children. Like slavery, the prison industrial complex impacts Black family homes through the isolation of children from their parents. Michelle Alexander states, "The absence of Black fathers [and Black mothers] from families across America is not simply a function of laziness, immaturity, or too much time watching Sports Center, or [other stereotypes given my white mainstream audiences]. Thousands of Black men [and women] have disappeared into prisons and jails, locked away for drug crimes that are largely ignored when committed by whites."[188] It is also important to note the sexual violence that Black women, in particular, face in the prison system. The Sentencing Project, based in D.C., reports that "women in prison are more likely to be victims of staff sexual

[186] Ibid., 87.
[187] James Logan, *Good Punishment?: Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 140.
[188] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012), 174.

misconduct. More than three quarters of all reported staff sexual misconduct involves women who were victimized by male correctional staff."[189] Like the sexual violence on the slave ships during slavery, Black women are not only separated from their children but are sexually assaulted in an unjust prison system. Overall, racist policies and racialized rhetoric have impacted the ways in which Black people have been forced into an unjust cycle of enslavement and imprisonment.

### 4.5 Tell Their Stories: Restorative Justice Through the Lens of Bryan Stevenson

Bryan Stevenson is a social justice activist and lawyer who has committed his life to proclaim justice for Black persons in the criminal justice system. He formed the Equal Justice Initiative in order to ensure that Black prisoners, juvenile offenders, and poor Black people have effective representation. He has fought for justice for those who have been wrongly convicted and those who have been sentenced to death row, specifically those who have mental illness and dementia. It is also important to note the ways in which Stevenson, in a nuanced manner, titles his chapters. Bryan Steven, through his pivotal book, *Just Mercy*, explores the ways that proclamation has happened in order to protect the lives of Black people in the criminal justice system. Stevenson teaches readers that we ought to fight for those who are imprisoned and wrongly convicted. His passion and drive come from the Black Church. The structure of his book is filled with theological language that is steeped in Black Church tradition. He takes the reader through the "Trials and Tribulations," "The Old "Rugged Cross," "The Coming of John,"

[189] For more stats, see "Incarcerated Women" fact sheet, Sentencing Project, <http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/cc_Incarcerated_Women_Factsheet_Dec2012final.pdf>

"Surely Doomed" (possibly a play on Eschatology), "All God's Children," "I'll Fly Away," and other God-centered language.

In Stevenson's life and in his book, Stevenson knows that the stories of these Black persons must be told. Stevenson is aware that there is a memory that Black people in this nation carry – one that is filled with trauma. It is a memory of what our ancestors faced in the Middle Passage, and during the slaveocracy. It is a memory and story of perpetual fear of white domestic terrorism. In every case, when he fights for a person who is on death row or who has been sent to prison without adequate evidence, he tells the collective story and memory of how Black people have been mistreated and misjudged in the criminal justice system for decades. He also tells the story of those who have been sentenced to prison, most of whom have had their stories buried under the false paperwork of court and the stereotypes of black criminality.

Stevenson, through his work in this book, not only tells the collective story, but he also tells the individual stories of the persons with dementia and mental illness. He counters the story of defectology by telling the stories of Black individuals that give full context surrounding their actions. He moves beyond the neurological documents and lifts up the human experience. Stevenson tells the story of Horace Dunkins who has been sentenced to death because of his crime. He attempts to make another appeal for Horace in order to stop his execution. Stevenson writes that "Mr. Dunkins suffered from intellectual disabilities, and the trial judge found he had "mental retardation" based on his school records and earlier testing.[190] He attempts to tell a story of how Dunkins battled with life circumstances. Stevenson gives a story that took place before the crime. Stevenson shows that people are more than the crime they have committed and more than the condition. He reveals that there are often life experiences that lead to a certain crime,

[190] Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, 71.

and execution should never be the punishment. Although Stevenson attempts to fight for this man, Dunkins is executed. Stevenson tells another story, that of Herbert Richardson, who is sentenced to be executed because he killed his girlfriend. Stevenson tells the story of how this man was a Vietnam War veteran who was left traumatized from the horrors of war.[191] A man in need of love and comfort, Richardson did not want to see his girlfriend leave him. Mentally misguided, he built a bomb, hoping that the girlfriend would run to him for protection, but in the process, his girlfriend's ten-year old-niece, and her twelve-year-old friend were killed. Stevenson attempts to tell the story of a broken and traumatized man; however, Mr. Richardson was also executed. Stevenson tells the story of fourteen-year-old Trinia Garnett who was sentenced to life in prison without parole.[192] The author tells the story of Trinia who suffered from mental illness at a young age. Not only did she suffer from mental illness, but she suffered from extreme trauma. Trinia had to watch her mother be beaten and raped by her father, Walter Garnett. Her father also sexually abused her and her sisters. As a result of such pain, Trinia ran away and was homeless and on her own. She wanted to see two friends one night and she burned down the house trying to find her way to their room. Stevenson attempted to tell her story and the full context surrounding it. He tells the story of George Daniel, a man charged with capital murder of a police officer. Stevenson doesn't tell the story of a man who killed a police officer; he tells the story of a man who suffered brain damage in a car accident and battled to survive.[193]

Bryan Stevenson, along with other team members of the Equal Justice Initiative attempt to tell the life stories of Black persons in the prison-industrial complex, seeking for restorative

[191] Ibid., 74.
[192] Ibid., 151.
[193] Ibid., 189.

justice through love and justice. They bear stories of life challenges that lead to their crimes. Stevenson is not disregarding their crimes and actions; rather, he is telling their full stories. He tells their story because most are recipients of a system that does not value Black life. This work is powerful in the overturning of injustices of the prison-industrial complex, and this concept of telling the stories of Black people, would become important for proclamation in the Black Lives Matter Movement.

### 4.6 The Black Lives Matter Movement

In 2008, millions around the world witnessed a historical and unprecedented moment when Barack Obama was elected as the first African-American President of the United States of America. The election of Barack Obama suggested change, progress, and hope for the nation. After years of racial injustice, an African-American would lead the nation toward unity and harmony. Black people who had endured Jim Crow South, and the grandchildren of persons who were enslaved, were able to witness the hope and prayers of their ancestors become a reality. The idea that a Black man would be the Commander-in-Chief, over the course of American history, was absurd and unbelievable; however, it had happened. The presidential victory of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States, to some, made America a post-racial society. The election of Barack Obama was certainly legendary; however, it did not make America free from the curse and stain of racism. In Isabel Wilkerson's book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents,* Wilkerson writes, "His [Barack Obama] growing up in Hawaii, the son of an immigrant from Kenya, and of a white woman from Kansas, was free from the heaviness of slavery and Jim Crow and the hard histories of ["regular"] African-Americans. His story did not

trigger the immediate discomfort in the dominant caste."[194] President Obama was seemingly not as threatening as other African-American persons. He was, to the dominate caste, articulate, well-groomed, bright, and polished. He was the "token" and the "trophy" that white people could flaunt in order to convince themselves, and the world, that America's original sin of racism and white supremacy is over and absolved. Wilkerson also writes:

> After the election, white Americans in both parties extolled the progress the country had made in the past generation, relieved to be able to say that racism was a thing of the past. We have a president, for heaven's sakes," they would say, by way of example. The fact is, though, this was a development that the majority of the dominant caste was not truly a position to claim. The majority of white voters did not support him in either of presidential bids. He had star power and a way with babies and pensioners, but no matter how refined and inspirational, well-spoken and conciliatory he was, Obama's victory did not occur because most voters in the dominant caste had become more open-minded and enamored of him. As with other recent Democrats running for president, he won despite the bulk of the white electorate. Even as they proclaimed a new post-racial world, the majority of white Americans did not vote for the country's first Black president. An estimated 43 percent went for him in 2008. Thus, a solid majority of white Americans—nearly three out of every five white voters—did not back him in his first election…the shadow of the Civil War seemed to hang over the 2008 election. It turned out that Obama carried every state that Abraham Lincoln had won in 1860, an election with an almost entirely white electorate but one that became a proxy for egalitarian sentiment and for the future of slavery of the Republic."[195]

The myth of a post-racial society after the election of President Barack Obama was a way for some white Americans to no longer carry "white guilt." The myth of a post-racial society enabled some white Americans to feel less guilty about their white privilege and the social sins of their ancestors. Jordan Peele proclaims continual need for justice beyond the election of Obama and also highlights the myth of a post-racial society and the continuation of white violence in his movie entitled *Get Out.* In this movie, Peele reminds America of the horrors of white supremacy. In this movie, Pelle reverses the typical narratives within the movies of

[194] Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 313.
[195] Ibid., 313-314.

Hollywood by painting the antagonist as white Americans who appear to be liberal and nice, yet have racist proclivities. Instead of Black people being seen as villains, white people are displayed as violent, bestial, and racist. Peele in this movie makes an indictment on America: racism and systems of oppression are yet present and embedded in our society. The endangerment of the African American male (and female) resembles the familiar plight of the white gothic heroine in Hollywood.[196] The monstrosity in this film is no longer Black men and women, but white racists. Pelle defamiliarizes horror conventions and highlights the reality that racism is ever present and white racial innocence cannot erase white accountability. Peele's movie *Get Out* debunks the myth of "color blindness" and a post-racial society after the election of Barack Obama. In Thai-Catherine Matthew's "Screaming with Laughter: How Jordan Peele's *Get Out* Reread Obama by Rewriting the Black Messiah," the author writes:

> *Get Out* focuses on the ways in which systemic racism refuses to transcend *itself.* It underscores the ways that racism has proven too deeply ingrained in our cultural vocabulary by demonstrating how every critique leveled at Obama as either "too radical" or "too conservative"— too one, and not enough the other—reinscribes the stereotyped plight of filmic history's "Tragic Mulatto," *Get Out* uses the freedoms of its genre to rehearse the Tragic Mulatto's conflict, reconstructing the stereotype with equal parts humor and horror by making the split between body and mind, self and self-awareness, individual and community a chasm turn chillingly literal. *Get Out* nullifies the fantasy of a Black Messiah whose transcendence of Blackness means the mitigation of racism's intrinsic hold by altering the function of said Messiah—making reintegration into Blackness, instead of transcendence, the ole heroic option. In short, Peele's allegory of race stakes its boldest claims by selecting several racist film tropes that have historically hinged on a character's suspension between divided racial identities, spaces, and paradigms/allegiances to then critique fantasies of postracialism, sending Chris on the same historic path as Donald Bogle's Tragic-Mullatoo, patient Uncle Tom, and Violence Buck in order to dispel the myth of the equally stereotypical Black Messiah's ability to transcend those stereotypes )and consequently, racism). Instead, this allegory asserts that those Messianical powers are most potent when they

[196] Aviva Briefel, "Live Burial: The Deep Intertextuality of Jordan Peele's *Get Out*" in *Narrative,* Volume 3 (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, October 2021), 316. <https//doi.org/10.1353/nar.2021.0019>

> *reject* racial transcendence and challenge the. Need for just such a deliverance—just such a transcendence—in the first place.[197]

State-sanctioned violence and the oppressive racist structures did not disappear after the election of President Obama. The work of Jordan Pelle, through his film, was one of the many forms of proclamation that reminded America that Black bodies were yet under attack. If white America did not believe it, the death of Black people, by the hands of white police officers, and the response of the Black community, would bring an awareness to the perpetual oppression of Black people in America.

Although the oval office was helmed by a Black American, white Americans yet did not value Black lives. America, again, began to crucify and lynch Black bodies across the nation. White police officers deputized themselves as new Confederate soldiers and inflicted death upon Black bodies. The face of the crucified Christ could be seen in the lynched bodies of Black people across the nation. America began to crucify Christ, again, and the blood of Black bodies cried out from the ground. The police departments of America were endowed with the authority to destroy Black bodies.[198] Ta-Nehisi Coates states, "It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. Resent the people trying to entrap your body and it can be destroyed."[199] The agenda to destroy Black bodies, again, "was perpetuated through state-sanctioned violence, and this destruction was merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, humiliations, and, ultimately, death.[200] This cross was not new to Black people. The cross of shame, humiliation and death is steeped in the

[197] Thai-Catherine Matthew, "Screaming with Laughter: How Jordan Peele's *Get Out* Reread Obama by Rewriting the Black Messiah," in *Black Camera*, Volume 13, Number 2, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, Spring 2022) p. 140. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/851872>
[198] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between The World And Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 9.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Ibid.

Black experience. If the Black body appears to be suspicious or threatening, it may be crucified. On February 26th, 2012, a white neighborhood-watcher, protected by a system that devalues Black bodies, murdered an unarmed 17-year-old boy, Trayvon Martin. The young boy only purchased Skittles and iced tea but because his Black body appeared to be "thuggish," he was killed. His Black body was left in the street "like some awesome declaration of the state's inviolable power that would never be punished."[201] This was a modern-day lynching. This lynching went viral across social media and the world. Although the cross represents the historic power of whiteness upon Black bodies, James Cone and Delores Williams point to the ultimate power of the resurrection (with varying perspectives). Cone explains that suffering and death do not have the final word but hope and victory do, through the resurrection.[202] Delores Williams believes that humankind is redeemed through Jesus's *ministerial* vision of life and not through his death.[203] This resurrection would come through the formation of the Black Lives Matter Movement, which consists of people who do not sit by and see Black bodies be lynched without social action.

In 2013, George Zimmerman, was acquitted for killing an unarmed teenager, Trayvon Martin. In that same year, in response to the injustice of Trayvon Martin, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi tweeted a hashtag "#blacklivesmatter." This hashtag went viral and inaugurated the Black Lives Matter movement. People all over the nation and the world marched, sang, posted on social media, and proclaimed the importance of Black life. Three Black women formed a viral statement that highlighted the continual threat of white violence upon Black bodies. The death of Trayvon Martin led these three Black women to formally form the

[201] Ibid., 11.
[202] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 3.
[203] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 148.

nonprofit organization, "Black Lives Matter." This organization spread across the nation with a number of other chapters. This organization is rooted in the liberation for all Black people in every facet of Black life. The Black Lives Matter Movement unashamedly proclaimed that Black life should not be disvalued. This movement proclaimed that Black life matters in a system that has favored white life only. Tara Green writes:

> Death, for some, can be a morbid subject that many would hope to avoid. Yet, it is a theme that emerges in the creative work of African descendants and that is traceable to the Middle Passage [and Egypt and West Africa]. In the twenty-first century, that Black Lives Matter movement has addressed the disparity of convictions in the deaths of African descendants by Whites. A major tenant of the movement is to deal directly with the threats to Black life by speaking to the value of those lives as human.[204]

The Black Lives Matter movement confronts death in its face; it confronts the lynching of Black bodies. Black bodies are primary targets of death perpetuated by white police officers and white authorities. These brutal murders "strike out at those whom the purveyors of White supremacy fear the most." However, this imagery is not new. Its practice, centered in a deep pathology of hate, can be traced back to the first-century world of Rome "where crucifixion was the brutal tool of social-political power."[205] Crucifixion was "an indication of how worthless and devalued an individual was in the eyes of the established power."[206] Jesus's crucifixion affirms his identification with Trayvon Martin in that he was demonized by the state and ultimately killed. Although Black males have been "constructed by narratives of White exceptionalism as dangerous predators," they are actually "defenseless prey."[207]

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[204] Tara T. Green, *Reimagining the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song*, 39.
[205] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 174.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid., 173.

Trayvon Martin was brutally slaughtered because a white racist system saw him as a threat. His Black body was perceived as threatening and criminal. He had no gun but because of his body [his Black body], he was killed—just as the Black body of Christ was killed. This cross, the death of Trayvon Martin, is a hard phenomenon to grasp. The innocent Black body slain by white domination displays the evil and harshness of the cross. Those who value Black bodies have to mourn the loss of Trayvon Martin. In those moments, death appears to have won and hope is seemingly lost; however, the Black Lives Matter movement does not allow death to win—Black people (along with other ethnicities) fought for justice and redemption. Black young people, seasoned people, Black politicians, and even Black families of the murdered proclaimed: "Black Lives Matter." Like Mary (the mother of Christ), the mother of Trayvon Martin, Sabrina Fulton, certainly felt the pain of the cross and yet proclaimed life. She had to process the hideous and ignominious death of her son; however, she marched for justice and sounded the alarm of awareness around police brutality. She did not want any other mother to experience what she experienced. Sabrina Fulton also had a strength that was centered in Black faith. And in that faith, she believed that death would not win, and that the movement would save the lives of other Black people. The Black Lives Matter Movement debunked the myth of America as a post-racial society and demanded that the names of Black persons who were murdered by the white police officers be named. The movement highlighted the harsh reality that Black life was not valued by the American society. This movement would fight for justice and shout the names of: Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Mya Hall, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, and a number of other Black persons whose lives were taken too soon by state-sanctioned violence. Some music artists such as Kendrick Lamar lifted up these names in his song, "We gon be alright!" He, along with other Black artists proclaimed that Black life matters.

Through art, music, and community marches and protest, the world was reminded of the importance of Black life.

America's racism, white supremacy, white domestic terrorism, and white rage reared their ugly heads during the emergence and reign of Donald Trump. During the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, confederate flags and swastikas were seen at rallies across the country. Although the election of Barack Obama did not form a post-racial society, white people across the nation felt that they had lost power–they did not want to lose their dominant status of white superiority. The campaigners of Donald Trump were like the white southerners who formed the Jim Crow South after Black Reconstruction; they wanted to make "America Great Again" or "White Again." At rallies across the country, there was anti-Black, anti-immigrant, and anti-women rhetoric. White people across the nation were coming together to seemingly return the nation back to a white racist-dominant-society. Black life, or any other marginalized life, did not matter.

After the election of Donald Trump, there was an extreme whitelash—steeped in white racial anger and confederate rhetoric. In Charlottesville, Virginia, the city council voted to remove the confederate monument of General Robert E. Lee. This decision led to a rally of white supremacists that resembled the anger of white racists in the South after the Confederacy lost to the Union in the Civil War. In the words of Wilkerson:

> …[white racists] marched through the campus of the University of Virginia, extending Nazi salutes, chanting, "Sieg Heil," and "White lives matter," and "Jews will not replace us." They held tiki torches in the night air, reenacting the torchbearers' rivers of light at the old processions for Hitler. The following day, at the rally itself, the neo-Confederates and the neo-Nazis arrived well armed, which in turn drew counter protesters bearing signs of peace. Then a white supremacist rammed a car into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing one of them, a paralegal named Heather Heyer, and wounding dozens of others.[208]

[208] Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, 334.*

Although Trump condemned these acts of violence, it was the rhetoric of his campaign that fueled this march. Domestic white terrorism yet permeated the soil of America, and it seemed to be intensified. In March of 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman was killed in her home in a supposed drug raid – which turned out to not be the case. In May of 2020, during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man was murdered while a white police officer had his knee on Floyd's neck, as Floyd shouted, 'I Can't Breathe!" Millions of people, around the world, protested against the death of George Floyd who died for allegedly making a purchase with a counterfeit 20-dollar bill. The Black Lives Matter Movement challenged the rise of a New Confederacy and fought for equal justice. This movement looked death in its face and said you will not win. White racists across the nation saw this movement as a threat to an old racist order. At the end of Donald Trump's presidency, on January 6th, 2021, a white mob invaded the United States Capitol building and attempted to overturn the electoral votes that would confirm President Biden as the next President. This insurrection--rooted in racism, violence, and Trumpism--demonstrated white violence upon Black bodies and the desire to preserve whiteness. This insurrection displayed the need for radical justice; this infection showed the importance of Black proclamation and Black faith. Some may argue that the Black Lives Matter movement is not rooted in the Black Church; rather, I argue that it is yet deeply spiritual and connected to Black faith. God can be seen in the faces of those who shout: "Black Lives Matter." The Black Church yet has a role in proclaiming life in the face of death and oppression.

# Conclusion:

# A Reorientation Toward a Womanist Ethic

Contrary to popular belief and mainstream pundits, the Black Church is not dead; it is yet alive and breathing through persons who are reclaiming the tradition of prophetic proclamation. There are churches, scholars, activists, preachers, and artists who have, and are, reclaiming the tradition of proclamation in the Black Church today – we look to them in order to move forward in the path toward liberation. We look to the contemporary prophets who are proclaiming life and challenging oppression in all forms. We look to those, who like our ancestors, have a hermeneutics of justice, love, radical hospitality, liberation, and unwavering faith. We look to institutions and churches that are not drunk by the status quo, worldly recognition, or the Empire of white supremacy. We look to those who have chosen to proclaim the words of Jesus: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."[209]

I had the honor to serve as Associate Pastor to Children and Youth at a liberation-centered church, Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, IL. Trinity United Church of Christ has been a beacon of light for decades on the Southside of Chicago, particularly through their motto and theology—Unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian—affirming Black persons through an Afrocentric theology. In a nation and city where Black bodies and lives are seemingly not valued, Black people have been on a perpetual quest for meaning, and Trinity has given thousands of Black persons meaning and purpose through Jesus Christ. This church has been

[209] Luke 4:18-19, *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*.

known for standing up for: justice for persons who were impacted by the Apartheid in South Africa, unarmed Black people who died by the hands of police officers across Chicago and America, the mistreatment of Black women, those who are unemployed, Black persons who are incarcerated, and the Black youth on the Southside of Chicago. Through powerful voices such as the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, the Senior Pastor of Trinity, marginalized persons have been affirmed and transformed—specifically young, Black young persons.

Young, Black persons are being forged in crisis on the Southside of Chicago. The plight of Black youth of Chicago is situated in one of these categories: gang activity, police force, urban poverty, broken schools, achievement gap, unstable families, dysfunctional city government, and unemployment. Although negative depictions and stereotypes are embedded in the media and in the fabric of the criminal justice system that view Black, young persons as criminal, bestial, and savage—the symptoms which the youth of Chicago are navigating stem from a longstanding racial illness in this nation. Their plight and conditions are not their fault; rather, it is a result of white supremacy and systemic racism. Black youth on the Southside of Chicago did not choose to be this way; they are tangled in a perpetual and almost inescapable web of historic disenfranchisement and systemic marginalization. In the face of deep-seated pathologies of exploitation and hatred, Black youth of Chicago are tired of being shot. The children on the Southside of Chicago are tired of violence and gang-related funerals. The sons and daughters on the Southside of Chicago are longing for a space of liberation, help, and assistance. As a result of this holy restlessness, the church has curated a space where young, Black persons are able to come to be a part of the Worship and Arts ministry, uniting young, Black people on the Southside of Chicago through worship, community, and preaching. This ministry invites all young, Black persons, regardless of who they are or where they come from,

to worship in God's house. Young, Black gang members are leading worship in white t-shirts, bandanas, jeans, and donning tattoos on the Southside of Chicago. Their hats are turned backward, the stench of the Chicago streets is in their clothes, their pants are hanging, while they lift up the name of Christ. Young, Black persons are able to be a part of the choir, lead worship, participate in the Drill team, and other activities. In addition, Trinity provides over $100,000 worth of scholarships to youth, provides jobs, legal assistance for those who have been wrongly convicted in the criminal justice system, counseling services, food assistance, and reentry assistance for those who have been in the juvenile detention system or prison system. The Worship and Arts ministry, the associate pastors, the youth coordinators, and the ministry of Otis Moss III, have curated a space and ministry that has not only formed a nexus between the church and the youth, it has saved the lives of Black persons amid a death-dealing system of violence. The proclamation of liberation-centered homiletics and radical hospitality have given Black, young persons a reason to live. The ministry of Trinity is an example of reclaiming the tradition of prophetic proclamation that churches and proclaimers, today, might emulate.

In addition to the work of Trinity and Black-liberation theologians, the strength and power of the Black Church is what it is today because of Black women. It was Black women who curated spaces of faith and worship during the slavocracy. In addition to facing sexual violence on plantations, having their babies ripped from their arms, and forced to nurse and raise white children, Black women were sages and ministers who passed down wisdom and Black faith to generations of Black children. Black women led a movement during Reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement. Black women were, and are, the pillars of the Black Church. Undoubtedly, the Black Church has failed Black women, profusely—particularly with its sexism and patriarchy. Black men, through internalized racism and sexism, have projected their

insecurities onto Black women. Black women have faced violence by men who have attempted to silence their voices. Black women have been told that they cannot preach, and that if they are to speak they are to speak in front of a podium on the floor, and not in the pulpit. Black women have been relegated to the margins of the Black Church and forced in the kitchen basement of many churches. Black women, under the male gaze, constantly had to cover their bodies in service in order to prevent men from sexually violating them. Today, there are still churches that only allow Black women to preach on "Mother's Day," or "Women's Day." There are still flyers that promote church services that have all-male preachers. Amid sexism, patriarchy, racism, and oppression, Black feminists and Black womanists over the course of history have fought for freedom of Black people and have fought for the liberation of Black women in society and in the Black Church. Black feminists and womanists have responded with a word from God: Black women are affirmed by God and will survive. As we continue to face sexism and oppression, we look to Black feminists and womanists who are yet doing the work of justice and liberation. Our survival and our way forward will be the liberation of all persons who are oppressed – which is beautifully exemplified and demonstrated through the leadership of womanists.

Womanists are reclaiming the tradition of proclamation that seeks to liberate Black women, Black people, and those who are oppressed. Womanist thought and theology can be traced back to the early 1980s. Keri Day writes, "Womanist theological perspectives emerged in the early 1980's as Black women scholars and writers in the fields of theology, ethics, biblical studies, history, and sociality of religion began problematizing and critiquing the ways racist, sexist, and classist ideologies were woven into the fabric of black liberation and feminist theological

perspectives."[210] Early womanists were Alice Walker, Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and others who "prioritized the epistemological production and theological perspectives of Black women." Womanist thought was not only a critique of society, but of prior movements. Womanist theologians critiqued the feminist movement which, in most cases, fought for the equality of white women only. Womanists critiqued Black theology, coined by James Cone, which highlighted the oppression of Black people but failed to highlight the particularity of Black women's oppression.[211] Black womanists, today, are doing the work of pedagogical decolonization, theological reconstruction, and justice-centered proclamation in order to reimagine a more just and inclusive community. They are doing the work that will continue to help the Black Church be relevant for those who are yearning for hope, justice, and reconciliation. Womanists such as Keri Day, Vanessa Lovelace, Neichelle R. Guidry, Wilda Gafney, Sharon Ellis Davis, Linda Thomas, Tamura Lomax, JoAnne Marie Terrell, Angela N. Parker, Kimberly D. Russaw, Yolanda Pierce, Yvette Flunder, Emilie Townes, Kelly Brown Douglas, Melva Sampson, and a number of other powerful seasoned and emerging womanists.[212] In the words of Lorena Parrish's article "Dismantling Domination through Womanist Rituals of Resistance," the author highlights the timely work of womanist scholars and preachers:

> These womanist scholars engaged in scholarly acts of resistance and spiritual liberation informed by their own and other Black women's experiences at the intersection of gender and racial discrimination. They name critical themes, traditions, and methodological strategies that inform the womanist religious enterprise. They affirmed

[210] Keri Day, "Saving Black America?: A Womanist Analysis of Faith-Based Initiatives" in Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics, Volume 33, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2013, (Philosophy Documentation Center, 2013), p. 65. < https://doi.org/10/1080/0458063X.2020.1701897>

[211] Please note that James Cone, in his last novel *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian*, addresses his failure to include Black women and womanist thought in Black liberation theology in the beginning of his career. His students who are powerful womanists today, helped him to see the need for womanist theology.

[212] Please see their published works, articles, and books online. Their works speak to the work of liberation and justice that they are proclaiming across the nation.

> and laid the groundwork for using women's experiences and wisdom as a resource for a womanist God-talk and addressing Black women's struggle for survival and quality of life. They shed a much-needed light on the multidimensional oppression of Black women as they re-imaged Biblical stories (e.g., Hagar's subjection to gender, race, class, and sexual oppression) and challenged theological constructs (e.g., the notion of Jesus as "Lord and master") in light of Black women's lived experience in the U.S. They called attention to the fact that while The Black Church in America has historically served as a place of Black women's survival, strength, healing, community, and belonging, the doling out of tokenized privilege upon some of its female adherents—while participating in the building, shaming, and subordination of Black church women as a whole—has left Black churches impotent in resisting and dismantling oppressive norms and practices that sustain sexual-gender discrimination. They argued the experienced of Black women constitute a valid resource for theological reflection, and they interrogated and unmasked the connections between Christian theological claims and praxis and Black women's oppression in order to enhance the quality of life for Black women and girls and the community as a whole. Their work continues to inspire others to challenge and move The Black Church toward full inclusion and a conscientization about Black women's experiences while endeavoring to foster authentic healing, liberation, and spiritual flourishing for Black women, the Black community and all oppressed people.[213]

Womanist proclamation has an explicit and clear commitment to addressing the oppression of Black women; womanists are also concerned about the well-being of all Black people. Womanists, across the nation, are committed to liberation. They have reclaimed the strength of Pauli Murray, Harriet Tubman, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Jarena Lee, Prathia Hall, and other women who were womanish, even before the word was defined in print.[214] Today, we can find Eboni Marshall Turman proclaiming freedom of Black women's bodies in her sermons and also

[213] Lorena Parrish, "Dismantling Domination through Womanist Rituals of Resistance," in *Journal of the Liturgical Conference*, Volume 35 (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 13-14. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0458063X.2020.1701897>

[214] These are a few examples of women who paved the way in history. These women preached, and fought for freedom amid slavery, racism, Jim Crow, and sexism. The word womanish is coined by Alice Walker in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* written in 1983.. This term was derives from the days when Black mothers would say to their young ladies "you are acting womanish," usually when daughters were "sassy," "outrageous," or "willful," or "acting grown." Womanish became the focus of black feminist, Alice Walker, in that she, along with other Black women reclaimed their dignity and humanity, and proclaimed that they would be womanish in the face of sexism, racism, and patriarchy.

in her thought-provoking and timely book, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*. In her book she writes,

> A womanist ethic of incarnation thus argues that if the oppresses not only seek to overcome their own oppression, but equally privilege the importance of resisting the fantastic hegemonic compulsion to reinscribe injustice in the lives of others (which the moral problem of "making men" demonstrates as a distinct possibility) then the oppressed themselves must first identify common ground that the incarnate necessarily entails, and thus disavow the *primacy* of what happens "according to flesh" in determining its resistance methods. Accordingly, the future of The Black Church, that institution born in rebellion against the social morality that sanctioned the dehumanization of Black bodies, is dependent upon its willingness to destroy the Veil that eclipses the consanguinity of body oppression, and thus enables the proliferation of *either/or* hierarchical moralscapes that always and inevitably leave *some body* out. Instead, The Black Church must embrace and act in accordance with an "in the flesh" body ethic that engenders justice for *every body,* and not just some of them.[215]

A womanist ethic of incarnation highlights the importance of the freedom of Black bodies, especially Black women's bodies. Turman's argumentation suggests that Black bodies are made in the image of God, thus, should not be oppressed by any form of worldly subjugation. The message of womanists is one that mirrors the work of our ancestors who demanded their freedom through the Middle Passage, throughout slavery, during the Civil Rights Movement, and today. I suggest that the Black Church can, and will, survive when we look to the work of liberation that is inextricably linked to our ancestral tradition of liberation and proclamation, and the rejection of death and bodily oppression.

There is yet hope for the Black Church, which was born out of enslavement and emancipation. Because Christ is, indeed, the example for the Black Church, we, ultimately, look to him. When we look to Jesus, whose body was broken over two thousand years ago, we see

[215] Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, The Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 160.

hope. When we look to Jesus, we see someone whose spirit was not crushed even in the face of humiliation by the state of Rome. When we look to Jesus, we are reminded of the man who took a risk at proclaiming liberation and salvation to an oppressed people. When we look to Jesus, we are reminded of a crucified body that was raised. When we look to Jesus, there is a promise that death does not have the final word. The Black Church has the possibility to live – this possibility hinges on these questions: Will we walk in the path that our ancestors walked? Will we resist the status quo and reclaim the tradition of prophetic proclamation? Will we refuse death—in all its oppressive forms—and proclaim life for all of God's creation? These are the existential questions that we must embody in order for the Black Church to continue to be a beacon of light, transformation, and liberation in history, culture, politics, and the world.

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