

Ramona L. Hyman, PhD

741 Plummer Rd., #124

Huntsville, AL 35806

[rhyman@oakwood.edu](mailto:rhyman@oakwood.edu)

First Serial Rights

**Presentation DRAFT**

Jesus and Civil Rights in Alabama: Poetic Activism

Ramona L. Hyman, PhD

The critic in me understands the need to critically frame this poetic tribute--  
“Jesus and Civil Rights in Alabama: Poetic Activism.” Implicit in this poetic  
tribute is an appreciation of Alabama as place and Jesus Christ as spiritual  
guide who has carried my vision and intuitive model for this project. I find  
myself reaching into a Christian ethos grounded in images and models of  
“Grace” for the portraiture of the persona as the protagonist of this poetic  
tour de force through Alabama’s civil rights history. In many ways, this  
poetic tribute beckons a reading of Alabama as the cradle of racism and civil  
rights activism. I must say, moreover, “Jesus and Civil Rights in Alabama:  
Poetic Activism is compelling me to go home, to explore the geographical,  
social, political, and religious landscapes of a place that has bequeathed to me  
as poet and cultural critic a sense of shared value. This project is a creative

examination of the images of Jesus Christ found in the American Civil Rights Movement as seen through the eyes of “Grace.” This tribute reaches into the social/political/religious vein of the American Civil Rights Movement in Alabama.

The topics of the poetry are drawn from texts on the Civil Rights Movement as it manifested itself throughout the state of Alabama, and more generally, the United States. Images are drawn from historical and cultural texts such as archives, books, magazines, museums, artifacts and the geographical landscape—Alabama.

### **The Methodology**

Utilizing interdisciplinary methodology, “Jesus and Civil Rights in Alabama: Poetic Activism” is grounded philosophically and religiously in what the African American critic Dr. Joyce Joyce says of Hyman’s poetic voice. “Hyman’s work,” says Joyce, “is grounded in a feel for the southern landscape, African American literary and political history, Black spirituality, and a creative fusion of Black folk speech with a Euro-American poetic vernacular” (qtd. *Sanctuary* Cover). Her work, continues Dr. Susan Walker, Alabama poet laureate for the years 2003-2013 is a “choral, a cry, a celebration. It is telling . . . of historical import [of] testimony. . . . [of] how it means to [be] Black American in the Deep South” (*I Am*

*Black America: Cover*). Theoretically, moreover, “Jesus and Civil Rights in Alabama is grounded in what theorist and cultural critic Julia Kristeva calls Intertextuality.

Conceived by Julia Kristeva, Intertextuality concerns itself with “text as a network of sign systems situated in relation to other systems of signifying practices (ideologically marked sign usage) in culture” (Kristeva). This means several texts merge, and thus a new text emerges. In this integration of history, poetry, and religion, a new text is emerging, and that is “Jesus Christ and Civil Rights in Alabama: Poetic Activism.”

I am not the first poet to make an attempt to merge history, religion and literature as if they are blood relatives, nor am I the first to pull literary meaning from history and religion into the public square using the poetic imagination. Many African American poets have accepted this challenge. African American poets Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, for example, call on us to specifically imagine the religious and historical themes of Jesus Christ in Montgomery. In his poem “Christ in Alabama” Langston Hughes uses a religious sign system, Christ, to interrogate and protest “threats of violence against blacks.” Hughes says, “I meant my poem to be a protest against the domination of all stronger peoples over weaker ones”:

Christ is a nigger,

Beaten and black:

Oh, bare your back!  
Mary is His mother:  
Mammy of the South,  
Silence your mouth.  
... Christ  
On the cross  
Of the South. (Hughes)

Hughes reimagines Jesus Christ as an African American black body to bring attention to the diabolic nature of racism and the beating of the black body. Hughes message is this: to beat, to lynch the black body physically or psychologically is to lynch Christ. To lynch Christ is to lose the life of a country or a nation as Christ is a representation of sacrificial blood, i.e., life given for the purpose of saving mankind.

In her poetic critique of Montgomery after 1955, Gwendolyn Brooks acknowledges the cradle of the confederacy as well as the cradle of the civil rights movement. Gwendolyn Brooks calls on the poetic imagination as she honors the participants of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and acknowledges the systemic failure of Montgomery as historical monument to continue the struggle to free the Black American body. In her poem "In Montgomery." Brooks says, "The first thing I saw at Court Square corner was Black, lifting that bale . . ./Blackness is what stood up and clawed the oppressive ceiling till, behold, there was light, and clawed the

oppressive walls till, behold, there was room to extend!" Brooks helps twenty-first century citizens of the world to understand what ED Nixon, the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1955 told them: "Montgomery was 'Fifty thousand Negroes [who] began to ROCK that Cradle and segregation started to fall!'" (Brooks).

Continuing the tradition of poets Hughes and Brooks, as a creative contribution, "Jesus and Civil Rights in Alabama: Poetic Activism" is an expression of the Intertextual moments from which civil rights literature as religious practice in the public square is born. For example, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a historic suffering martyr of the Selma Campaign, Jesus Christ, the Suffering Soldier, are imagined as transformative activists who impact the life of Grace, a foot soldier, committed to entering the public square to walk from Selma to Montgomery in honor of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a representation of the sacrificial lambs who died during the Civil Rights Movement. Grace's model is Christ who "walked on water." Thus, the poetry in this project is, itself, an illustration of poetic activism. Therefore as symbol, the poetry suggests a birthing act born out of an integration of history, poetry, and religion, where Christ is the center and imagined as actively engaged, questioned, and examined in the public square. I invite you to imagine Grace's story.

## The Poetry

Indeed, as cradle of the confederacy and the civil rights movement, Alabama is a representation of the dual role that Alabama played as a demonic sanctuary of racism and the citadel of America's fight for racial and cultural inclusion for all Americans. Indeed, Grace understands that this is ironically what makes Alabama beautiful:

"Alabama the Beautiful"

Grace says,

On December 14, 1819, Alabama

Breathed itself beautiful

Alabama rocked itself into beauty like "sweet tea time"

on a front porch

A rocking chair,

a square wooden table

Was all that was needed

Sweet lemon tea what turned

Alabama from heart break soul to lovely

All that porch drinking

All them prayers

Made them souls fancy the hue of all Alabamians

From sweet cream tan to chocolate brown

met along the Mississippi River

To baptize the new Alabama

*Something about if you emerge the soul in water*

*the troubling ways become lost in the*

*wrinkles of the water—Hallelujah*

Worlds on end saw Alabama

Shape itself lovely

That's why when you riding down 65 south

You see that sign before you:

“Alabama the beautiful”

Alabama's beauty, for sure, can be seen in the public servant most identified as an emblem of Christ-centered activism—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Grace, as persona and representation of the many Americans involved in the Civil Rights Movement, understood King's prophetic call to social and spiritual activism. She says:

“The Sea's Arisen: For Martin and Coretta Scott King”

January 30 of 1956,

Grace was in the crowd at

309 Jackson Street.

The sea rose:

Baptizing hate at 309 Jackson Street into love

The “light” colored car came

Mumbling segregation/

Delivering dynamite to kill

The dreams and dreamers.

The Sea’s a-rising to

Drown hate into love

Grace presses her head into

the ground on the South side of

Martin and Coretta’s home on 309 Jackson Street:

*Jesus:*

*Did you tell them*

*Martin, Coretta, and Yoki*

*Be birthed (first) then brown*

The sea is rising to drown hate into love

Mrs. Alberta’s boy (Martin) speaks:



*We believe in law and order . . . .Don't get your weapons. He who lives  
by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. .  
. .I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let  
them know you love them. . . What we are doing is just.*

The sea rises to drown

Hate into love

Grace whispers:

*Amen!*

The Civil Rights movement was, indeed, undergirded by a Christian sensibility—  
even in the mist of what seemed to be senseless tragedies like the death of Jimmie  
Lee Jackson. Many Christians then and now prayerfully question the death of  
Jimmie Lee Jackson. Grace also questioned his death; yet it is his death that fueled  
many civil rights activists to continue the fight for equality.

“Grace’s Story: for Jimmie Lee Jackson”

February 26, 1965:

When Jesus caught up with Grace

She was sitting on the steps of the shack house

Broom stick resting on her lap

A bleeding cross around her neck

Her blood shot eyes were traveling up

Heaven met her half way

She's whispers—Jesus

*Did you know Jimmie Lee Jackson*

*Your deacon at the St James Baptist Church*

*Cager's grandson , Viola's boy*

*Was shot down right there in Mack's Cafe*

*Old Fowler stole the boy's life*

*I'm marching in honor of Jimmie Lee Jackson*

*Need to hug him healed in my head*

When Jesus met Grace

She was leaning on the broom

Cross hanging from her neck—dripping blood

She's walking to Selma on to Montgomery

For Jimmie Lee Jackson

Like Jesus walked on water

Grace also understood a breakthrough would come; therefore:

Grace stepped out on highway 80

Like a woman knowing the answer was coming; she was feeling Jesus.

Indeed, Christ has been an illustrative symbol for the American attempting to snatch the lynching noose from around the neck of the Black body. Placing Christ as the omnipresent guide of the Civil Rights Movement puts Him in the center of the public square, and thus provides an example for the poet as activist (or the theologian); it is, therefore, a call for the poet to be as Sonia Sanchez says, --a “. . . creator of social values.” Further poetic activism with Christ as the center is a pedagogical example of the Christian activist working in the public square. That I do believe!

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