

CLGS - PSR  
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Georgia Harkness Lecture: “Engendering Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality for Church Leaders”

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I want to express my gratitude for this opportunity to be in conversation with you about issues of religion, race, gender and sexuality. I thank Dr. Schlager for being so gracious and attentive in extending the invitation and Emily Carduff for, similarly, being extremely gracious and supportive especially while skillfully assisting me with technology.

Introduction: Harkness and my methodological focus

I feel honored to be invited to offer this lecture named for my Methodist denomination’s scholar/teacher/leader: Georgia Harkness. As most of you are already aware, Georgia Harkness’ leadership was known for its attention to global politics of war and peace as well as a deep and active commitment to global Christianity. As the United Methodist scholars--historian Christopher Evans and Christian ethicist Rebekah Miles--have pointed out, in the 1930s Harkness “gave voice to a growing Christian internationalism that repeatedly called her colleagues to look to the churches of the developing world in the southern hemisphere: [Harkness said] 'God has more truth yet to break forth from his holy word - and we may look for it to break forth in Asia, Africa, South America and the islands of the sea.'”<sup>1</sup>

My Africana decolonial work definitely resonates with this Harkness tradition of global commitments. My most recent “big” project *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality* that forms a major reference point as I talk with you today is a transnational project. This book also reflects a long-standing theme of most of my work. My teaching and writing on religion, race, gender, and

sexuality have been primarily focused on gender violence. In this project I interviewed African activist leaders and activist-scholars in Ghana, Brazil, and South Africa whose work focused on ending gender-based violence. I wanted to explore: the role of religion and racism in that work; what it might mean for us, in the U.S. to learn from their ideas; and how to conceive of some notion of transnational solidarity in the common the goal of ending gender violence.

Specifically, I spoke with activists about their leadership ideas and organizing strategies regarding topics that included heterosexual marital rape, the sexual exploitation of children by tourists, and the targeting of black lesbians and gender non-conforming community members for rape and murder.

But I hasten to add that I am not inviting you to some distanced, objectifying Christian paternalistic observation of “the other” from the global South. Rather I am inviting you to venture with me into the fraught dynamics of learning from intercultural, transnational encounter as well as the fraught dynamics in the possibilities for building solidarity in creating anti-racist gender justice. So, for me, method is a crucial dimension in the content of our justice work.

Note that Georgia Harkness was known and, in some theological circles of the 1920s and 1930s, criticized for her methodological disciplinary stance as an “applied theologian”. As a pioneering woman theologian, her seminary teaching was sometimes unappreciated for its “applied” emphasis.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, United Methodist historian Rosemary Skinner Keller summarized as the core of her [Harkness’] approach: “closely relating theological inquiry to social justice and the practice of ministry”<sup>3</sup>

My own methodological moorings resonate with this Harkness tradition.

For I invite you to be fully immersed in a dialogue between theory and practice. The ways in which we conceptualize systemic white supremacist sanctions for gender violence

directly illumine communal practices, including church practices. Even the capacity to creatively imagine the liberative meanings of a blackened, transnational and intercultural solidarity in disrupting those systemic sanctions for violence requires some reference to our shared lived political realities, experiences, practices that exhibit our capacity to depend on each other and learn from each other. I am especially interested in how scholar-activist church leaders can create common understandings that undermine patterns of society-wide abuse and intra-communal betrayal, and instead deepen their solidarity with one another.

Solidarity means confronting patterns of abuse and betrayals

Sometimes I think that my own bisexual identity that was lived out with a heterosexual partner for most of my life and my experience of the ways in which bisexual identity always retains access to the space of both heterosexual privilege and status as well as bi-erasure in queer thought and communities has helped to energize my interest in political betrayals and solidarity. Or my own life-long journey as a black United Methodist (baptized as an infant!) within this Protestant denomination that retains a U.S. membership that is around ninety percent white may be the primary instigator of my interest in these themes. I don't know. But I am certain that finding the means to collaboratively undermine patterns of abuse and betrayals is crucial to creating the solidarity we need to end gendered violence. This is a moment to do so when there is so much public attention to the kinds of systemic patterns of injustice that support this violence.

We can perhaps become bolder in our defiance of abuser-logic because of how abuser-logic thrives in its insistence on isolation. It insists on isolating the person who is victimized or in stressing that the bodily violation and emotional abuse being inflicted constitutes only an isolated

incident, and thus has minimal communal significance. Intimate abuse logic of the abuser is when I [as abuser] tell you:

“I may control who you can text, but I never hit you”

“I may have allowed my eight-year-old daughter to playfully touch my genitals for my arousal but, listen, she flirts with me and enjoys playing around”

“We had sex when you were drunk and totally out of it, but it just that one time”

But this, this is a moment for defiance of that kind of minimizing, isolated-incident, *deep betrayal*, abuser-logic. Right?

This [2020] year, this is a protest moment, when so many people all around the world are collectively expressing that they have run out of patience with violence against, abuse of, and indifference to the violation of basic bodily human rights. They are tired of how the violence and indifference to the violence are sanctioned by systemic inequalities and racist attitudes. Most specifically, they have run out of patience with all of the ways that violent abuse of state police power is nurtured by a deeply embedded sense of racist entitlement that betrays communities of color.

This [2020] year, this is a moment in our history when we can pay attention to abuser-logics that betray and undermine anti-violence solidarity related to race and sex/gender:

- when we can almost, almost, feel the intense vulnerability of an innocent black woman, Breonna Taylor, asleep in bed, at home, shot to death by invading police, and the betrayal in seeing a Kentucky black prosecutor claiming that the shooting was justified and exonerating the officers;<sup>4</sup>

- when watching Rev. Bernice King speaking at civil rights and LGBTQ+ rights advocate John Lewis’s memorial service about racial justice and claiming her father’s [Martin Luther King, Jr.’s] legacy as she did so, but while watching her there, also remembering the betrayal of her fervent opposition to the enactment of same-gender loving people’s right to get married in Georgia as a civil right, famously invoking the violence in the assassination of her father by saying, he: “did not take a bullet for same sex marriage;”<sup>5</sup>
- or, when reading about the horrible, gut-wrenchingly tragic plane crash killing professional basket player Kobe Bryant, his child, and several other people and the dueling narratives of betrayal when, in the immediate aftermath, one black male celebrity sent a public message inviting violence against a black woman celebrity-national news anchor for even mentioning the sexual assault accusations against Bryant that had been such a significant event covered in the news earlier in his career.<sup>6</sup>

This is a moment when we must grapple with issues of race, nation, cultures and the contemporary church’s role in fueling anti-LGBTQ+ violence, for which the UMC is a case study. The so-called Traditional Plan now in effect as church law since January 1 [2020] solidified a policy not just of maintaining the innate superiority of heterosexuals through bans on equal ordained leadership and equal pastoral care across sexual orientations/gender identities but with more efficient expulsions and for LGBTQ+ Christians and their allies who support equality.<sup>7</sup> The UMC is grappling with the role of black African UM conferences, bishops, and districts with seemingly massive support for those discriminatory policies and thus with the betrayal in that homophobic support that sacrifices the safety of their African LGBTQ+ Christian

community members imperiled by gendered hate violence. However, this grappling has most often occurred without similar attention to, for example, the role of Russian UMC delegate support for those same homophobic church laws and its similar betrayal related to targeted hate violence against Russian LGBTQ+ community members.<sup>8</sup> In references to the role of culture for pro-Traditional Plan preservers of innate heterosexual superiority in church law, the whiteness of white U.S. southern support or of white mid-Atlantic region supporters does not get consideration.

The formation of solidarity requires confrontation of these multiple patterns of transnational and national community-wide betrayals of human dignity, freedom, and worth in our intimate and communal lives.

Solidarity requires defiance of racist abuser logic

Now, I am particularly interested in confronting cultural patterns that sustain gender violence, that is, in their imprint and expression as Christian-based racism. Gender violence is a form of racism. Those of us who are U.S.-Americans understand this fact because of our history. We are culturally saturated with an abuser-logic that perpetuates historical-memory patterns of denial. Our U.S. cultural understanding of U.S. moral exceptionalism denies the depth of our cultural commitment to this violence. As I cited in my recent book project, Joe Biden has asserted that world leaders “look to us” for leadership on gender violence and therefore “we are trying to export to other nations” our supposedly globally exceptional consensus on opposing gender violence.<sup>9</sup> This is a typical form of denial and failure to confront the historical embeddedness of racist rape culture. For example, alongside of colonial leader and third U.S. president Thomas Jefferson’s 1776 Declaration of Independence assertion “we hold these truths

to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” is the fact of his rape of his fourteen-year-old black slave, Sally Hemings.<sup>10</sup> Note that the invocation of the notion that human freedom and equality were endowed by our Creator were part of these iconic words Jefferson penned in the Declaration of Independence. A divine, imprimatur is attached to this rape tolerance tradition currently embedded in U.S. society. No matter what our racial or ethnic origins might be, all U.S.-Americans, all those who reside in the U.S. regardless of citizenship status inherit and are morally formed by this collective legacy of divinely blessed, racist hypocrisy and valorization of a child rapist.

Finding solidarity in the confrontation of that reality can be very difficult. I can hear some of you asking: is that really *my* racial or cultural group’s community’s history? Isn’t that just part of sad black history? But we must all confront the moral influence—the collective moral disciplining—this national history bequeaths. Doing so represents another crucial step in the solidarity work in which I am inviting you to consider engaging. This historical legacy of racist rape culture is, of course, tied to the present political and religious landscape.

Specifically, it beckons us to confront how Trump racist anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy directly exemplifies transnational racist rape culture. Federal government policies of white nationalism have given practical expression to anti-brown and anti-black racism that fosters gender violence. In not just the rhetoric of Mr. Trump in iconic instances, such as that meeting in January of 2018 in a conversation about U.S. immigration and asylum policy for migrants with some of the highest level national political leaders, including U.S. Senators from both major political parties. The implications of that policy conversation included documented cases of women seeking asylum because they were fleeing gender violence such as gang rapes

and femicide/feminicide. Do you remember how, at the meeting, President Trump reportedly said: “why do we want all these people from Africa here? They’re shithole countries ...We should have more people from Norway”?<sup>11</sup> I know that [in those comments] he expressed what so many in the public believe. It is what, no doubt, many of you listening to me right now may have incorporated into your own viewpoints, at least, some version or elements of that anti-black white supremacist sentiment. It is a narrative that is part of your perceptions--so much so--that in this moment, it strains the capacity of your political imagination to actually accept the methodological challenge of my contention that encountering and learning from black African activist-leaders is precisely the kind of crucial strategy needed for helping to unlock systemic support for gender violence here in the United States.

Because of its global influence, especially through social media and news media outlets, Trump’s white supremacist rhetoric certainly matters. But it is the federally institutionalized, anti-brown and anti-black racist forms of white nationalism that fosters and abets gender violence expressed through policies that matter most. In one such example, United Methodist Jeff Sessions (when serving as U.S. Attorney General) launched the white nationalist policy of caging and kidnapping brown migrants from the South and invoking Christian scripture to sanction it. But recall how he put in place a specific new policy intervention to ensure that domestic violence could not be considered as criteria for those seeking asylum in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

For Christian activist-leaders, the goal of finding solidarity with one another in the confrontation of this kind of racism can be very challenging. Right now, I hear some of you asking, if only in a whispering voice: but, how does this rape-supporting, transnational anti-brown racism get incorporated in “black lives matter” priorities within our domestic cities?

Should it? Our confrontation of and linking of these examples of the present transnational racist rape culture practices to the historical hypocrisies about exceptional political equality values—all with explicit divine or Christian sanction—constitutes the difficult solidarity work we must find a way to do.

### Engendering communal defiant spirituality

Finally, one instance of the engendering of communal defiant spirituality that I want to cite from my work comes from one of my trips to South Africa. I describe my experience of meeting leaders of a group called Free Gender in Cape Town. The members of this Free Gender group stressed collective action and cultivation of firm alliances among black lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and intersex women as an essential aspect of their organizing. This solidarity-building work within their group and beyond was steeped in the context of the extreme circumstances of ongoing threats to their lives and bodily safety and broad political indifference to them. Free gender pressured politicians, police, courts, and other community leaders to address the ongoing targeting of black lesbians for assault, especially sexual assault, and hold perpetrators accountable.

Free gender created an open and affirming space for gender expression by black lesbians, especially masculine expressions of gender. For black lesbians living under the conditions of being terrorized by the threat of gang rape and murder, the creation of free gender space involved a unique form of defiant spirituality. I describe my encounter and the defiant spirituality of grief work in the following sections of my work. I stood in their meeting looking at a large red cloth with a list of dates and acts of violence their members had experienced.

The cloth linked differing types of violence together as it bore witness to the community's costs and losses. Acknowledgment of the suicides, assaults, murders, and

rapes on the red cloth seemed to constitute a spirituality of politicized, collective grieving. It claimed the space to grieve and the impetus to pursue justice in the courts. The cloth marked the group's timeless allegiance to the lives of the victimized black lesbians, confirming a spiritual and political tether that defied the final ending their torturers had sought. The spirituality generated a defiant continuity, that is, a refusal to accept neither the final breach in the mystery of death by murder or suicide, nor the perpetrator's last word in the psychic theft to survivors that accompanied the brutality and bodily invasion of the assaults. Feminist theorist Judith Butler wrote about the immorality of state violence and torture that consigned others to a status of unworthiness to be grieved, explaining "grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters . . . without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life."<sup>13</sup> In that Free Gender space, the losses of black lesbians victimized by violence were countered by the regard accorded them in ongoing collective grieving. Therefore, the spiritual defiance this regard produced had to be characterized by vehement insistence on the moral irreducibility of black queer existence in all spaces and throughout all of time. This form of timeliness was particularly crucial in the aftermath of violence intended to send a communal message about the reducibility of black lesbian humanity to objects vulnerable to attacks at any moment, in any public space...

Free Gender members started us off with singing. The unique sound of South African a cappella harmony filled the room. They sang "We Glorify Your Name" with the melodious wail of the lead voice followed by an echo response by the other singers: "We glor-rify." "We glo-rrrrify." "Your name." They sang in English, then in Xhosa, and then in English again. With a slow, steady tempo, the tune slid up and down the scale in a heart-wrenching choral invocation of sacred spirit. The naked beauty of their voices enveloped the room, gripped me, and held me. The comfort their voices offered coexisted alongside my captivity to that red cloth hanging with its black handwritten numbers and letters. I swayed to the music, tried to sing with them, and swallow tears before they were seen...

Additionally, in this setting, glorifying signified an honoring of victimized black lesbian lives not only with communal grief but political mobilization as well. The singing underscored the spiritual dimension of routinizing communal accountability on behalf of the assaulted and dead. It illustrated how social movement work of seeking political justice through the police and in the courts involved the spiritual work of refusal to allow the broader society to forget their deaths.<sup>14</sup>

Now, I also want to note a related example of another kind of activist grieving. It occurred here in the United States after the homophobic killing on the streets of Newark, New Jersey of the black teenager Sakia Gunn by a black man when she refused his advances telling him that she and her friends did not date men. At the funeral for Sakia Gunn, black LGBTQ+ Liberation in Truth Unity Fellowship Church leaders stood between the police and the angry

queer youth. The activism of the black LGBTQ+ church leadership demonstrated a specialized buffer of an embodied spirituality of solidarity with the murdered Sakia Gunn and the angry queer youth.

Finally, returning to an exchange that I had at the end of that meeting in Cape Town, the building of “free gender” solidarity through defiant *Christian* spirituality is an especially fraught process.

As the meeting hosted by Free Gender finally started to draw to a close, its honest and sometimes tense exchanges reverberated in the room. When one Free Gender member spoke up late in the meeting, she started out tentatively then, she bravely admitted to wondering what Elizabeth and I might have been thinking during the opening “church songs.” The young woman referred to me as one of “the pastors.” When she recounted an earlier experience of rejection by Christian leaders it provided some context for her stated expectation that Christian pastors think “homosexuals” should not be allowed to sing “church songs.” Looking directly at me with increased self-assurance and assertiveness, she reminded me that a discussion linking Christianity and “homosexuality” introduced a very sensitive subject.

In that moment, my association with Christianity had engendered distrust and vulnerability. It had cast self-doubt upon whether she could or should openly express her Christian faith in my presence because she was lesbian and delivered the opposite effect from what I had intended or desired as I participated in the meeting. Her consideration of how I might have been condemningly judging her as they sang could not have been further from the spirituality that I experienced. I felt the homophobic, terrorizing impact of our religion (mine and hers) and the impediments to solidarity it spawned between us. Once more, Christian spirituality could not be disconnected from its harmful political tentacles, especially for any conceptualization of spirituality that informed activist solidarity in working to end the violence.<sup>15</sup>

This is a glimpse of the kind of blackening of solidarity that we need. We need it precisely because of its capacity and commitment to interrogate the white supremacist-colonialist abuser logic “in the room” that fuels anti-LGBTQ+ hate violence and other forms of gendered violence. This solidarity relies on a defiant spirituality marked by a collective process of encounter, a spirituality that is evocative of truth-telling, intercultural, transnational possibility...

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Rebekah Miles, ed., *Georgia Harkness: The Remaking of a Liberal Theologian* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Skinner Keller, “Patterns of laywomen’s leadership in twentieth-century Protestantism” in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds. *Women and Religion in America, vol. 3: 1900-1968*. Harper & Row, 1981., p. 273

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Marc Fisher, “Kentucky attorney general on Breonna Taylor case: ‘I understand as a Black man,’ but acting on outrage ‘is no justice,’” *Washington Post*, September 23, 2020 at 7:30 p.m. EDT, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/louisville-breonna-taylor-daniel-cameron/2020/09/23/4315f5c8-fdb8-11ea-8d05-9beaaa91c71f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/louisville-breonna-taylor-daniel-cameron/2020/09/23/4315f5c8-fdb8-11ea-8d05-9beaaa91c71f_story.html)

<sup>5</sup> John Blake, “March Divides King Followers,” *Atlanta Journal – Constitution*, Dec 11, 2004, A1; Also see my discussion in “Civil Rights, Marriage Equality, Black Clergy and Media Framing in Massachusetts and Georgia” in R. Drew Smith, ed. *From Every Mountainside: Black Churches and the Broad Terrain of Civil Rights* (SUNY Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Summer Lin, “Snoop Dogg slams Gayle King for questions on Kobe Bryant rape case: ‘How dare you?’” *Miami Herald*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/national/article240035398.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See: E. Julian Swen, “Africa Initiative Gathers Delegates Before GC 2019,” February 22, 2019, *UM News*, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/africa-initiative-gathers-delegates-before-gc2019>; Timothy Williams and Elizabeth Dias, “United Methodists Tighten Ban on Same-Sex Marriage and Gay Clergy,” February 26, 2021, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/26/us/united-methodists-vote.html>; Vicki Brown and Linda Bloom, “Denials, Charges Fly in GC2019 Credentials Review,” March 15, 2019, *UM News*, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/denials-charges-fly-in-gc2019-voting-credentials-review>.

<sup>8</sup> See legal overview, Jeremy Tsuchitani-Watson, “Living Illegal: Being LGBT in Russia.” *Int’l Comp., Policy & Ethics L. Rev.* 2 (2018): 713; Human Rights Watch, (2014), License to harm: Violence and harassment against LGBT people and activists in Russia, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/12/15/license-harm/violence-and-harassment-against-lgbt-people-and-activists-russia> Human Rights Watch;

<sup>9</sup> Traci C. West, *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion, Racism, and Gender Violence*, (New York University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Jefferson fathered six children with Sally Hemings, three of whom lived beyond infancy. See Mia Bay, “Love, Sex, Slavery, and Sally Hemings,” in *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies*, ed. Bernadette J. Brooten (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 191–212; and Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997). On how to interpret this history, see Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Reuters Staff, “Trump questions taking immigrants from ‘shithole countries’: sources”, January 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-immigration/trump-questions-taking-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-sources-idUSKBN1F036O>; Heather Timmons, “‘A heartbreaking moment’: A senator describes Trump’s full comments in ‘shithole’ meeting,” Quartz, January 12, 2018, <https://qz.com/1178678/trumps-shithole-comments-described-in-full-by-senator-dick-durbin/>.

<sup>12</sup> Katie Benner and Caitlin Dickerson, “Sessions Says Domestic Violence and Gang Violence Are Not Grounds for Asylum,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2018, A1.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of war: When is life Grievable?* (Verso Books, 2016), 14–15.

<sup>14</sup> West, *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality*, 200, 201, 202.

<sup>15</sup> West, *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality*, 212-13.



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