Sufferation, Han, and the Blues: Collective Oppression in Artistic and Theological Expression

THESIS

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Abstract

Theologies of liberation have existed in multiple cultures around the world and contain similar relationships between oppression and theological reflection. Most notable among theological expressions are the community’s relationship to biblical narratives of the Exodus and the gospel stories relating Jesus’ affinity to the poor. This thesis compares the theological reflections and cultural understandings of oppression of three specific religious communities: Black liberation theology in the United States, minjung theology of South Korea, and Rastafari theology in Jamaica and the Caribbean. This thesis demonstrates that though the mechanisms of oppression are universal, groups experiencing collective oppression utilize culturally specific understandings of that oppression to inform theological ideas. Each group contains a culturally specific idea of sorrowful hope that informs their theology. These concepts, blues, han, and sufferation are the culturally located ideas that inform similarities among these diverse groups.
To the Only God

And

To Laura
Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1: Jesus the Marxist

Trapped in a hotel in Florence due to a traffic jam caused by a papal visit, Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini ironically picked up the most common book in hotel rooms in the western world, the Bible. While reading through it Pasolini, an atheist, found himself captivated by what he saw in the text (Yancey 15). Deciding to make a film about what he read, he chose the account of Matthew.

Negatively, he claimed that John was too mystical, Mark too vulgar, and Luke too sentimental....Positively, however, Pasolini explains he chose Matthew because of the harshness of the Saviour's words, the abruptness of the evangelist's narration, and the “absolute” fashion with which Matthew stages Christ's confrontations: in short, because of the 'violence' of Matthew's Jesus (Rumble and Testa 18).

Using only the words of the Gospel of Matthew, Pasolini endeavored to let the text speak for itself. He wanted to keep as much of his own ideas out of it as possible. The reception of the film, produced in 1964, was mixed. For some this was another blasphemy for which Pasolini should be punished while others saw a new, refreshing Jesus: a Marxist, focused on overturning the oppressive social system imposed on the people. Despite Pasolini’s attempt to let the text speak for itself, his own liberative belief system came through in the artistic expression of the film.
With the publication of his work *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971, Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez stepped into the pages of history. His work, focusing on God’s favor for the poor, is often portrayed as a mix of Catholicism and Marxism that challenges the rights of the rich to rule and force poverty on the masses. Gutierrez’s work became a foundational study for the work of liberation through various factions of the Church world-wide. The 1970s became a historical moment where globalization syncretized religious ideas, dispersing Gutierrez’s ideas throughout the world. His challenge confronted the Catholic Church as an institution implicated in oppression of the poor. He saw the need to speak out against the justification of oppression by the Church through religious domination. Gutierrez writes, "The denunciation of injustice implies the rejection of the use of Christianity to legitimize the established order" (Gutierrez 168). Many saw in Gutierrez’s theology the potential to change the world in favor of the poor. The reality was, however, that the seeds of oppression sown in South America were equally scattered in many other parts of the world. The religious ideas of communities entangled in oppression had been fomenting for some time, but with new opportunities provided by media outlets, their message could be dispersed across the world as well. In essence, we find that Gutierrez was not the only one thinking this way.

When thinking about biblical theology, people often imagine it as a set of fixed concepts with clear boundaries demarcated by biblical authority. The reality, however, is that theologies always exist within cultural contexts and can only be understood within them. Theologies are the product of communal responses to the world, rather than that of lone scholars establishing ideological stances apart from the culture they live. They
emerge from the social relations of the day. Imagined scenes of Calvin, Luther, and Augustine sitting alone in a room with their Bible and lexicon spread out as they write note after note of the *Institutes*, the *Confessions*, and the *Ninety-Five Theses* are not the reality of most theological productions in history. Theology does not exist in a vacuum.

**Similarities in the theologies**

The hypothesis of this thesis is as follows. Whatever universal mechanisms may cause oppression, the understanding of that oppression, however similar, is still culturally specific, finding its outlet in local artistic expression and in the reflections of theologies of liberation. Yet, despite those localized cultural differences, theologies of liberation have striking similarities deriving from how they use local expressions of oppression in light of the liberating and redemptive biblical narratives of exodus and the attitude of Jesus toward the marginalized. This hypothesis will be explored in light of three different traditions: Black Theology in the U.S., *minjung* theology in Korea, and Rastafari theology in Jamaica.¹

This work reflects that of others who have delved into the religions of marginalized people in the past. Scholars of comparative religion would be quick to recall the work by Vittorio Lanternari. His work, *Religions of the Oppressed*, published in 1963, dealt with similar patterns among messianic religious communities who experience subjugation (Lanternari viii). Many scholars would also include the works of Bruce Lincoln as foundational to the work of religious resistance. In *Discourse and the Construction of Society* Lincoln makes the case that comparative studies in religion are

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¹ In this thesis the terms Black Theology, Black Church, Black Caucus, and White Caucus will be capitalized. In all other cases the terms “black” and “white” will remain in lower case.
made more complex “by differences in income level, social standing, geographic
distribution, political orientation as well as in patterns of dress, demeanor, and
recreation” (Lincoln 91). This present work is meant to provide another framework in a
similar strain of thought without relying on similar ideas and conclusions of the
previously mentioned authors.

The idea for this thesis comes from the preface written by James H. Cone in a
book on minjung theology. Cone discusses a visit he took to South Korea where he
noticed similarities between minjung theology and Black Theology, as well as the
similarities between the concept of han in Korean culture and the blues in African
American culture (Commission vi). After investigating both concepts, I found that little
work had been done in the comparative context for them. Minjung theologians in South
Korea discussed the fact that minjung theology could not be understood without an
understanding of han, so the question arose, is it possible to see the same pattern for the
blues in Black Theology? When I found a significant amount of evidence in the
affirmative, the next question was, “Is this pattern found in multiple forms of theologies
of liberation?” I initially investigated dalit Christians in India, but did not find a similar
culturally understood expression of sorrowful hope. Through discussions with others in
the field I came across the terms sufferation and downpression in Jamaican culture. These
terms provided a third case study which fit the particular goals of this examination.

The three communities chosen for this study were chosen in light of these
localized concepts of sorrowful hope. Each of the religious groups examined possess this
similar view which is incorporated in the culturally performed practices of these
communities. The social understanding of these concepts informs the theological reflection in a similar way to the artistic productions specific to each culture.

As stated above, these groups were chosen because of the particular terms that describe communally shared feelings in relation to suffering and oppression. A second reason for the choice is that each group contains forms of artistic representations that express their emotional feelings (thus serving a testimonial role) in relation to the suffering they experience. It is from these two points that I investigate the role that these terms serve in theological reflection, demonstrating them to be a root cause for the tenor of the theology.

A third reason for including these groups is the issue of timeliness. In each case, our analysis focuses on a time period when the group coalesces and has its greatest acceptance. Other time periods will be mentioned only in so far as to shed light on the critical time periods most relevant for the study.

On theology

In this work I am specifically dealing with the space of biblical theology as contrasted with systematic or philosophical theology. Biblical theology is a form of “revelational” theology centered on the biblical text. In a sense biblical theology looks at the entire text to find its overall spirit and meaning whereas systematic theology deals with specific topics within the text such as soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, and so forth. I am also not concerned with philosophical theology which tends to reflect on a pivotal metaphysical question such as “how can an eternal God enter into finite time?” or
“how can Jesus be fully God and fully man?” I am interested in, by contrast, the process of cultural hermeneutics and interpretation as seen through lenses of the oppressed.

Arising out of similar points of economic and social consciousness, theologies of liberation have similar characteristics, despite their diverse cultural differences. These characteristics include an emphasis on freedom derived from the biblical text. This means the overall theme of the Bible in theologies of liberation is the revelation of God as Liberator. God is demonstrated to be one seeking to free oppressed people groups from structures of political, religious, and institutional subjugation.

Oppressed groups at times demonstrate culturally specific understandings of their suffering. This understanding is then represented in an artistic expression like “the blues” in African American culture, “han” in Korean culture, and “sufferation/downpression” in Jamaica. These culturally specific understandings serve to inform all aspects of cultural understanding. Each theme is prevalent in the artistic articulations of a specific ethnic group illustrating the depth of the concept in each society.

In this essay I will demonstrate that the biblical narratives provide another framework of expression for culturally understood forms of oppression. The expressions of pain, sorrow, and anguish that inform the artistic expressions will be shown to inform the theological reflection in a similar manner. The biblical narratives work as a “riff” that allows the new theological stories to be told in a manner of witnessing to traumatic experience. The emotional output used to produce meaning in the artistic expressions of dance, poetry, music, and so forth, also inform the theological storytelling of each community.
Groups experiencing what I call “collective oppression” utilize the biblical stories as a vehicle to tell their story of oppression in culturally specific forms. Culturally specific lenses allow the biblical stories to serve as a framework to express the localized narratives of oppression. For example, a single song can be played in a variety of styles, such as the blues, reggae, jazz, country, and so on. Theologies of liberation “riff” on biblical narratives in a way that appropriates the culturally contextualized oppression. This “riffing” reappropriates the biblical story including them as actors and characters inside and outside the text.² For example, most Americans are familiar with the song “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Though frequently heard, it can be sung or performed in different ways: from the hometown high school singer version to Whitney Houston, from Boys 2 Men’s rendering to Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock, not to mention Rosanne Barr’s baseball game debacle. Despite the differences in style, the basic form of the song remains recognizable, but each version of the song contains its own distinct style. Each has its own special qualities and subtleties, but the song remains the “same.” In an analogous way, theologies often maintain a similar framework. The stories are the same, while the “theologians” give their own version with their own emphasis, their own flavor. This paper will demonstrate that theologies of liberation utilize culturally relevant, socially understood feeling present in the artistic representations of the community to inform theological reflection.

² Concept from discussion with Dr. Kasulis
The outline of the chapters

Each chapter will begin with a historical placement of the groups chosen for the study, showing how the group came to experience collective oppression. Second, I will explain the distinct terms given in each community that signify the cultural understanding of oppression and suffering that are represented as “hopeful desperation.” The third section will demonstrate how the self-understanding of oppression is formed and articulated through artistic representations. Finally, each chapter will demonstrate how the cultural understanding and expression inform the theological reflection present in the religious community.

Scope and method

This study will include theological texts, music lyrics, collected stories, journal articles, historical texts, poetry, sermons, and other written sources. I will show similarities and differences among these groups and how they form biblical theological positions. By examining specific texts, I will demonstrate how theologies emerge, and how this theological process of lived experience produces theological understanding. I will select some of my resources based on their proximity to specific time periods when each theology came to prominence. Other materials will be chosen based on their specific handling of the concepts of collective oppression among the groups (the blues, han, and downpression/sufferation) in relation to constructing group identity.

The term *liberation theology* in this work applies to groups that see their primary relationship to God as involving the social, political, and religious freedom from subservient positions in their culture. Liberation for this study is not limited, though, to
an actually attained “thing.” Liberation can be seen in a practice of resistance such as rebelling against norms by wearing dreadlocks and smoking marijuana, as well as in political demonstrations meant to overturn the government. These strategies are combined with the belief that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed. This theological standpoint takes into account that God’s role is that of “setting the captives free,” a common theme from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

Along with this theme, two primary relationships arise from the theological reflection in these traditions. The first is a specific self-understanding for each group as a people of the Exodus. The Exodus story provides an example of God’s leading an oppressed group of people from slavery to the Promised Land. In the initial story, God, using Aaron and Moses, causes plagues to befall Pharaoh forcing him to release the Israelites. God leads them through the Red Sea, while destroying Pharaoh’s army in the process. After their trial in the desert for forty years, God leads them to the place prepared for them.

Each group chosen for this study contains a self-understanding of their relationship to God in the same manner. They are also God’s chosen people whom God desires to free from oppressive systems. Each group’s history of oppression and enslavement informs their identification with the Israelites.

Secondarily, each group has a specific understanding of the purpose of Jesus (or Haile Selassie as Jesus’ reincarnation in Rastafari). The messianic understanding of Jesus is often framed as a specific relationship to the poor and the outcast that is not dominant in other forms of Christianity. Jesus is primarily understood in liberation theologies as
identifying with the poor, the abused, the oppressed, and the needy. This special relation is seen within the canonical texts by each group in Jesus’ association with them in his profession, birth, friendships, and death. For each group this relationship will be shown to demonstrate God’s preference for the oppressed.

The hermeneutic project

This work is a comparative study in the hermeneutics and exegesis of three particular groups. The value in the study is the demonstration of the “ingenuity” present in groups containing a canonical set of texts while also showing similarities that arise in thought. In *Imagining Religion* Jonathan Z. Smith calls this type of action “sacred persistence.” He writes:

I have come to believe the prime object of study for the historian of religion ought to be theological tradition, taking the term in its widest sense, in particular, those elements of the theological endeavor that are concerned with canon and its exegesis. That is to say, bracketing any presuppositions as to its character as revelation (and from this question, the historian of religion must abstain), the radical and arbitrary reduction represented by the notion of canon and the ingenuity represented by the rule-governed exegetical enterprise of applying the canon to every dimension of human life is that most characteristic, persistent and obsessive religious activity. It is at the same time, the most profoundly cultural, and hence, the most illuminating for what ought to be the essentially anthropological viewpoint of the historian of religion and a
conception of religion as human labor. The task of application as well as the judgment of the relative adequacy of particular applications to a community’s life situation remains the indigenous theologian’s task, but the study of the process, particularly the study of comparative systematics and exegesis, ought to become a major preoccupation of the historian of religion (43).

Theology, for Smith, is the perfect act of sacred persistence. It involves obsession, part of his definition of religion. This obsession is mixed with a practice that encompasses every area of life for the follower. Primarily it is the exegetical act that formulates practice encompassing every dimension of human life that fills the space of sacred persistence. This “exegetical totalization” from what appears to be a “radical and arbitrary reduction” in terms of canon can be shown in each of the groups studied in this thesis.

It is important to recognize that the formation of the “canon” does not imply a “closed” system. Canons can include a large amount of improvisation in their interpretation and application. Smith writes, “canon is best seen as one form of a basic cultural process of limitation and of overcoming that limitation through ingenuity” (52). The canons themselves act and have their own interpretive agency along with the agency of the “hermeneute.” Smith calls this ability to allow interpretive forms “exegetical ingenuity” (44).

The aspect of “ingenuity” can be shown and demonstrated in these groups through the artistic expressions prominent in each culture that form the cultural frameworks of
meaning in which each group lives. The “webs of meaning” are mutually informed by each other through the act of storytelling in each group. Theological reflection provides an opportunity for those experiencing trauma to give testimony in apposite ways through indigenous cultural forms. This allows each group to tell and retell its story, its riff, in its own distinct “key.”

The first chapter will explain the role of the blues in sections of the African American church. The theologically crucial time period will focus on Cone’s work in the 1960s and early 70s. The second chapter will evaluate the role of han in the minjung theology of Korea. This movement arose in the late 1970s and the early 1980s and was expressed through multiple media forms. The third chapter will investigate the place of sufferation and downpression in the Rastafari movement. In particular the theological emphasis will be on the period of the 1970s and 80s. Each group will be shown to emphasize the specific cultural meaning in their artistic and theological works.³

³ In some form, theology can be seen as another type of artistic work that forms as an improvisational and reconstituting mechanism.
Chapter 2: Why I Sing the Blues!

_I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment_ (English Standard Version Exodus 6:6-8).

It [salvation] is the oppressed serving warning that they “ain’t gonna take no more of this bullshit, but a new day is coming and it ain’t going to be like today.” The new day is the presence of the Black Christ as expressed in the liberation of the black community (Cone _A Black Theology_ 227).

The beginning of a theological revolution

Forty-four years ago most Americans would not have thought the full page ad on July 31st, 1966, would begin a controversial theological movement that would potentially affect the presidential election of 2008. The National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC), headed by Rev. Benjamin S. Payton, produced “The Black Power Statement,” a document circulated to influential Black Church leaders in America for their signatures. As Gayraud S. Wilmore writes:

Although the primary emphases of Black Theology, as later developed by James H. Cone, were not extrapolated from the Black Power Statement of
the NCNC, this document was a turning-point in the history of Black Church involvement in the civil rights movement (Wilmore 17).

This statement by the NCNC “erected the ideological and institutional bases upon which Black Theology was to build an alternative to the liberal and neo-orthodox theologies of the American religious establishment” (Wilmore 18).

Not only was the movement a revolution in thought, but it became a revolution in action. On September 27, 1967, a divide was forced at a conference sponsored by the National Council of Churches. Younger clergy within the Black Church, disturbed by the amount of concessions needed to create unity, pressed for division into a Black Caucus and White Caucus. This separation allowed for two valuable activities. It allowed the Black Caucus to discuss their position without influence of whites. Second, it allowed the whites to feel the pain of separation from their black brothers. This point was driven home when a small delegation of whites, not feeling a part with their other white brothers, asked to join the Black Caucus. They were refused because the action was a symbolic action with theological implications. Wilmore writes, “Whites, rather, needed to experience the pain of the disjunction to which God’s judgment had subjected the churches” (Wilmore 19). The separation was a prophetic statement to the white church on the brokenness of the American church along racial lines. In the end, on the final day of the conference, the group would be able to reunite, but the revolution had begun.

This chapter will look at the relationship of the cultural production of “the blues” and theological reflection in Black Theology. I will demonstrate that the feeling/expression of “the blues” is expressed through a variety of forms of African
American art, literature, poetry, theatre, as well as musical representations. Theological reflection, particularly the biblical framework, provides another vehicle for blues expression within certain sections of African American culture.

I will begin with a short history of African Americans leading to the production of the blues. The next section will demonstrate the construction of a blues definition illustrated in cultural aspects of African American artistic expression. After demonstrating how the blues functions in these different artistic forms I will outline how the blues manifests itself within Black Theology. The second part will begin with a specific understanding of the work of James H. Cone which sets a foundation for much of Black Theology. Cone’s work will be extremely valuable as it connects black theological reflection to its origins in the blues.

**African-American foundations**

The first vessel to bring Africans to what would be came the United States arrived in 1619. The eighteen people were traded from a Dutch ship in need of supplies at Jamestown, Virginia. By the end of the process, an estimated twenty million enslaved people made it to the Americas while twenty million or more died on route. The history of the oppressive system of African slavery can be traced all the way back to 1444 (Bennett 27-29).

Bringing multiple languages, cultures, religions, and ideas to a “new” place began the new history, language, and culture that formed the beginning of what is now called the blues. Through hundreds of years of slavery, African peoples molded and shaped their culture through accessible means. Religious practice, storytelling, and songs would
shape the identity and knowledge of enslaved peoples. Religious practice, both forced and withheld, led to secret meetings in places like “bush arbors” where enslaved peoples could meet to worship, sing, dance, and strengthen community. This often oppressive system of religion led to cultural forms such as spirituals that allowed for specific religious expression.

As African Americans passed through the civil war and to “freedom,” they realized the end of slavery did not mean the end of oppression. Cultural forms of expression remained, often serving as ways to deal with and survive what was, for some, these new forms of oppression. The cultural expressions that remained from the spirituals continued on through the forms of the blues (which some have labeled the “secular spirituals”). From this history of oppression, arose the sense of sorrowful hope—the blues—represented in the spirituals. These feelings are foundational to the forms of theology that are expressed within these African American social systems.

The blues in artistic expression

Just what is the blues? Musician BB King writes "The blues is an expression of anger against shame and humiliation" (Kreichbergs). In Black Pearls Blues Queens of the 1920s, author Daphne Harrison writes “The blues is life which is art” (8). The most significant idea for this study comes from the work of Houston A. Baker. In Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, he writes:

Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix. A matrix is a womb, a network, a fossil-bearing rock, a rocky trace of a gemstone’s removal, a
principal metal in an alloy, a mat or plate for reproducing print or phonograph records. The matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting crisscrossing impulses, always in productive transit (3).

From this definition we can understand the blues as something produced in culture but also something producing culture.

Houston Baker specifically “isolates and identifies the blues as the preeminent trope of Black American culture” (Soitos 9). It is a foundation for what Giddens might call the “structuring structure” for a segment of African American culture. The themes of life, pain, struggle, anger, frustration, hope, love, and hurt along with the artistic representations inform expression and provide a framework for understanding life. In his work he attempts to “the historical, mythic, or blues force of the narrative” (H. Baker 123). If this theory is to be accepted and understood correctly, it would stand to reason that Black Theology would draw on or take part in this framework to inform a theology of freedom.4

Synonymous with the concept of the blues in American culture is its form in musical expression. In order to understand the nature of the blues it is necessary to have a clearer picture of the blues. From the perspective of Kalamu ya Salaam, the blues arises from the experience after the American Civil War post-reconstruction when formerly enslaved individuals realized the promises of freedom still did not extend to them. Forty

4 The issue of resistance will inevitably arise in some readers of this study. Does Black Theology exist as a theology of resistance or is it a form derived for resilience or maintenance of the Black Church at the time? Some might say Black theology is resistance while blues music is a coping mechanism similar to resilience. My view is that both are true about each strain. They both serve for resilience and resistance at various moments of time.
acres and a mule represented the beginning of broken promises. It is the realization of the “dispossession of the formerly possessed” (Ya Salaam What is Life 7).

The experience of sorrow and hope associated with this comes at points when the poverty and disparity felt by poor African Americans is reinforced by tragic experiences. Blues lyrics take on the troubles of the African American community expressing anguish and pain on personal and communal levels. For example the song "Rising High Water Blues" recorded by Blind Lemon Jefferson tells the story of the great Mississippi flood of 1927:

Backwater rising, Southern peoples can't make no time

I said, backwater rising, Southern peoples can't make no time

And I can't get no hearing from that Memphis girl of mine

Water in Arkansas, people screaming in Tennessee

Oh, people screaming in Tennessee

If I don't leave Memphis, backwater spill all over poor me

People, since its raining, it has been for nights and days

People, since its raining, has been for nights and days

Thousands people stands on the hill, looking down were they used to stay

Children stand there screaming: mama, we ain't got no home

Oh, mama we ain't got no home

Papa says to the children, "Backwater left us all alone"

Backwater rising, come in my windows and door

18
The backwater rising, come in my windows and door

I leave with a prayer in my heart, backwater won't rise no more (Jefferson)

A lyric expressing pain within the community that has lost everything is a common theme for blues writers. It is not only common themes but common lyrics that can play a part in the blues as well. Themes of crossing waters and floods appear in similar fashion elaborating on the experience of the biblical flood of Noah as well as the crossing through the Red Sea for Moses and the Israelites.

Along with the theme of pain and suffering there is also a cry to the Lord or some type of prayer. This is evident in the commonly known song “Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson:

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees

Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, now save poor Bob, if you please"

Yeeoo, standin' at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride

Ooo eeee, I tried to flag a ride

Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe, everybody pass me by

Standin' at the crossroad, baby, risin' sun goin' down

Standin' at the crossroad, baby, eee, eee, risin' sun goin' down

I believe to my soul, now, poor Bob is sinkin' down

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown

That I got the crossroad blues this mornin', Lord, babe, I'm sinkin' down
And I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west

I went to the crossroad, baby, I looked east and west

Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman, ooh well, babe, in my distress (Johnson)

Through a mixture of pain and hope the blues as a form of music helps to draw out frustration in a way that allows the singer and listener to acknowledge and experience the pain. The individual pain of the singer resonates with the experiences of those in the audience. They reflect on their own personal similar experience that rings true for them. From this a form of understanding can exist between individuals within the community.

Another area where “the blues” can be seen as a productive force can be seen in some African American literature. Consider for example the work of Langston Hughes. His first book of published poetry was entitled *The Weary Blues*, named after this poem:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,

    Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,

    I heard a Negro play.

    Down on Lenox Avenue the other night

    By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light

    He did a lazy sway . . .

    He did a lazy sway . . .

    To the tune o' those Weary Blues.

    With his ebony hands on each ivory key

    He made that poor piano moan with melody.

        O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues!

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan--

"Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more--

"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied--
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."

And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.

He slept like a rock or a man that's dead. (34)

Hughes’ work echoes the pain of the individual while the experience is reflecting the collective experience. The painful experience of life is expressed through the blues in a way that the individual can relate to the collective experience of the community.

Within African American literature a theme of blues music coupled with the trials of life can be seen in the works of Toni Morrison. Author Cat Moses writes about Morrison’s work *The Bluest Eye* in the following way:

The narrative's structure follows a pattern common to traditional blues lyrics: a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion. In between its initial statement of loss and its final emphasis on movin' on, *The Bluest Eye* contains an abundance of cultural wisdom. The blues lyrics that punctuate the narrative at critical points suggest a system of folk knowledge and values that is crucial to a young black woman's survival in the 1930s and '40s and which supports Claudia's cathartic role as storyteller. The lyrics also illustrate the folk knowledge and values that are not transmitted to Pecola--information without which she cannot survive as a whole and healthy human being (Moses 2).

For Moses, the blues represent a cultural knowledge and framework evident within the work of Morrison. Cultural references and concepts are intrinsically linked to the concept of the blues and their referential nature for the African American community.
A common theme in blues music is that of the train. The train represents a space of public transit that allows people to move great distance at low fares. It is represented in the song St. Louis Blues which is a key theme in the *The Bluest Eye*. This can be picked up in the Gospel song *The Gospel Train*:

The Gospel train’s a’comin’
I hear it just at hand
I hear the car wheel rumblin’
And rollin’ thro’ the land

*Chorus:*

Get on board little children (3x)
There's room for many more
I hear the train a’comin'
She's comin' round the curve
She's loosened all her steam and brakes
And strainin' ev'ry nerve
The fare is cheap and all can go
The rich and poor are there
No second class aboard this train
No difference in the fare (Anonymous)

The train is a metaphor for the freedom offered to those who want to find joy at the other end of the line. This song in particular was used for the physical as well as the metaphorical freedom offered by the Gospel. It was used by some to let others know that the break for freedom would be made soon.
The blues also finds a home in Zora Neale Hurston’s work. Hurston is an emblematic figure of the experience of the blues. She “became a blues hero by living life to the fullest, by suffering the consequences of an independent lifestyle, and by giving a voice to her own experience through her art” (B. Baker 63). Hurston’s life mimicked the artistic representation which she felt, experienced, documented, and ultimately died through a life of joy and pain.

Hurston may give us a special insight into the way we conceive of the African American experience of the blues and the way it informs literature and most importantly for this study, theology. Author Barbara Baker draws from Hurston’s writing to give insight into the way she conceived of the African American literary experience. This is evident in Hurston’s portrayal of “lying.” Lying represents the process of refining stories through the process of telling them and increasing the way in which they gain definitive authority within the community. Baker writes:

In the blues, ‘lying’ is not an act of dishonesty; instead it is the creative elaboration and refinement of the raw materials of life into art (Murray, *The Blue* 113). The great lying sessions that Hurston witnessed on Joe Clarke’s store porch after she moved to Eatonville from Notasulga were much like the lying sessions she instigated when she returned to Eatonville to collect folklore first under Franz Boas’s direction, and later under the patronage of Mrs. R. Osgood Mason. Tales, work songs and blues, conjure materials, sermons, and jokes all rose up out of the same desire to adorn, to elaborate, to improvise, and to signify (B. Baker 66-67).
By this process, “lying” constitutes the way stories become a part of the complex social story of the community forming the matrix of the blues. Baker sees in the work of Hurston a space where “In such sessions, themes were established and then re-worked for effect like the great blues riffs. The initial theme or riff itself is not meant to be original; it is a community creation that emerges over time” (B. Baker 67). Applying Baker’s theory to its conclusion in the work of Black Theology it is possible to see the reworking of the story in a similar framework. The theological re-working would include the refinement of theology into culturally relevant themes that structure and restructure the framework of the receivers.

Artistic expression in African American theatre also incorporates the themes synonymous with black blues culture. For example, Blue Holiday, Blues for an Alabama Sky, Blues for Mister Charlie deal with the blues as an aspect commonly understood within African American culture. These films draw on the themes and associations to meaning in the blues themes that they discuss. Particularly Blues for Mr. Charlie addresses similar themes of rampant racism in American life at the time (Hatch 380). Author Stephen Soitos even finds the blues theme running through the framework of African American detective novels. In The Blues Detective, Soitos outlines practices and associations of African American cultural understandings in forms identifiable with the blues (Soitos 7).

**James Cone and Black Theology**

To investigate how the themes of the blues are built within theology it is necessary to expound on the work of James H. Cone. Born in Arkansas in 1938, James
Hal Cone is the most recognized figure in the field of Black Theology. Before the beginning of his tenure at Union Theological Seminary in 1970, Cone wrote two of the seminal pieces for the movement: *Black Theology and Black Power* and *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Having received his PhD from Northwestern University in 1965, where he wrote his dissertation on the neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth, Cone began teaching at his undergraduate alma mater Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas. It was at this point he began struggling with the nature and relevancy of contemporary theology in the life of African Americans (Wilmore 234). ⁵

The famous phrase from his 1975 work *The God of the Oppressed* shared this struggle. He wrote “What could Karl Barth possibly mean for black students who had come from the cotton fields of Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, seeking to change the structure of their lives in a society that had defined black as non-being?” (3) Cone specifically acknowledges that after having learned from some of the leading theological minds of the European framework, he sought to create a theology dealing with the daily life of African Americans. He writes, “I was searching for a way to create a Christian theology out of the black experience of slavery, segregation, and the struggle for a just society “(Wilmore 250). Influencing his thoughts were the belief system of Malcolm X who taught him to accept his blackness while Martin Luther King Jr. kept his theology solidly Christian in order to prevent injustices (Hopkins 251). The work done by James H. Cone is built on the foundation that no theology can be called Christian unless it represents those on the margins of society. Christian theology must identify first and

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⁵ To be sure, James Cone is not the sole figure in Black theology but remains one of the pinnacle figures.
foremost with “those who are humiliated and abused” (Cone *A Black Theology* 17). In particular, the calling of God’s people Israel arises from their living under oppression in Egypt (*A Black Theology* 18).

According to Cone, it is also possible to see God utilizing prophets at strategic intervals in the biblical narrative of Israel, when oppression of the poor became dominant within the Israelite community. This also shows God’s relationship to the subjugated section of society. When oppression rises up, so does the biblical God who fights against the oppressor. This is also evident from the theology of the New Testament where Jesus sets himself up under the oppressive systems at the time which allows for God’s actual identification with the marginalized (*A Black Theology* 18-19). It is from this starting point that Black Theology begins for Cone (*A Black Theology* 21). All theological constructions must begin with God’s relationship as revealed to those affected by the dominant system in the society. Theology cannot be neutral because it can never take the side of the oppressor (*A Black Theology* 22). The question of foundation starts with a question according to Cone, “How do we dare speak of God in a suffering world, a world in which blacks are humiliated because they are black?” (*A Black Theology* 115)

**God in Black Theology**

The God of Black Theology exists as one “who is actively destroying everything that is against the manifestation of human dignity among black people” (*A Black Theology* 108). This means there is an effective challenge by God to whiteness and the “American Way” that manifests itself through the black community’s striving for freedom. The oppression is not chosen by God as a result of God’s will, but black people
are “elected” because they are oppressed (A Black Theology 108). The God of black people is a God who is seeking their freedom now as opposed to the “white God” who sets freedom ahead of them in Heaven. “[T]o see good in evil, is to lose sight of the goal of the revolution.” This happens when black people are focused on the way the “white God” does things (A Black Theology 110). The goal then for Black Theology is to destroy the concept of the “white God” and affirm the God of liberation (A Black Theology 114).

**Hermeneutical principles**

The hermeneutic of Black Theology is founded in the view of revelation from the Bible. This means that it starts with the revelation of God as liberator and identifier with humanity in Jesus. The second principle of its hermeneutics is the action of God actually participating in the present liberation of people. God is a god who is actively liberating the “oppressed of the land” (A Black Theology 116). Because God identifies with the oppressed and because black people are oppressed, Cone argues that God is black for this very reason. “There is no place in Black Theology for a colorless God in a society when black people suffer precisely because of their skin color” (A Black Theology 120).

For Cone the hermeneutics of African Americans has always been rooted in the material reality with which they find themselves. He writes:

The theme of liberation expressed in story-form is the essence of black religion. Both the content and form were essentially determined by black people's social existence ....when Christianity was taught to them and they began to read the Bible, blacks simply appropriated those biblical stories that met their historical need. This is why some themes are stressed and
others are overlooked ... They did not debate religion on an abstract theological level but lived their religion concretely in history. (Cone The Story 149)

Cone’s belief is that Christianity is always socially located in the space of historical and social reality. Theology is the reflection on the nature of God through the lens of the Bible in the specific location “thus all of its assertions are culturally limited” (The Story 144). White theologians in North America constructed a theology based on their social situation as a people needing slave labor. Black Theology came out of the experience of enslaved peoples.

If indeed, as Cone asserts, theology for African-Americans is intrinsically tied together in thought and practice, a blues framework would inform a sorrowful and joyful theology. Black Theology for Cone differs in structure from white theology in a variety of ways. The structure of Black Theology ties into black experience and particularly the relationship of the blues. The blues is a storytelling style of music. Cone emphasizes that Black Theology focuses on story as well. He writes:

White theologians built logical systems; black folks told tales. Whites debated the validity of infant baptism or the issue of predestination and free will; blacks recited biblical stories about God leading the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Joshua and the battle of Jericho, and the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. (The Story 145)

From this statement Cone points out the reality and need of theology to be a part of the material world for the African American. While whites had time to spend on issues that
appeared unimportant to blacks, black people required a theology relevant to their existence and experience.

**Love and providence**

The concept of God as love is an important focus in that the theological understanding of love exists as a partner to the righteousness of God. God cannot wholly love without some concept of wrath and righteousness to punish those who oppress. Without a concept of righteousness God would be equally on the side of the oppressor as of the oppressed. Along these lines is the concept of God’s providence. If God is love from a biblical theological point of view he can not be a part to suffering. He can not be the one who ultimately causes suffering. For Cone, “any view of God that even *indirectly* places divine approval on human suffering,” is impossible to accept within Black Theology. From this perspective, “God cannot be the God of black people and also will their suffering” (*A Black Theology* 149).

**Christ in Black Theology**

Jesus represents another foundational point for understanding Black Theology. As the one who came to live as the oppressed, Jesus becomes a model for Black Theology. His birth is characterized as coming into the world in an oppressed state, to an oppressed people. His baptism and his temptation in the desert also symbolize his identification with blacks in their oppressed state. His ministry and message were also not to the elites but to the common people in the area (*A Black Theology* 202-206). The goal of Jesus’ message then was to liberate humanity from the inhumane conditions they were forced to live in (*A Black Theology* 208-209). Finally, the death and resurrection play a large role in the
foundation of Black Theology. His death and resurrection contain the hope for humanity in his full identification with the state of humankind (A Black Theology 210). It signals the freedom even from the finality and oppression of death. It is through these points that theological constructions of Christ point to the God who signaled the freedom of humanity through the beginning emphasis on the kingdom of God working in the world (A Black Theology 208).

Not just focusing on a kerygmatic Christ, Black Theology focused on the earthly Jesus as, the one who has shared in the struggle. Cone writes:

Black people did not devise various philosophical arguments for God's existence, because the God of black experience was not a metaphysical idea. He was the God of history, the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage. Jesus was not an abstract Word of God, but God's Word made flesh who came to set the prisoner free. He was the "Lamb of God" that was born in Bethlehem and was slain on Golgotha's hill. He was also "the Risen Lord" and "the King of Kings." He was their Alpha and Omega, the One who had come to make the first last and the last first. (The Story 146)

Jesus was one who identified and overcame the destructive forces on earth. The word became flesh and suffered through his identification with the experience of the enslaved person. It is through that identification with the oppressed and his death that Jesus sets the oppressed free physically and spiritually.
**The Kingdom of God and the Black Christ**

The Kingdom of God entering into the world in Black Theology represents a shift from a worldly value on things to a value on people. It means that the things of the world (including white acceptance of blacks) is unnecessary. It is when black people “shake off” the desires of the world and the kingdom of God has come (*A Black Theology* 220). It comes from a particular concept of repentance where people “lay hold on the salvation which is already at hand, and to give up everything for it” (*A Black Theology* 221). In a sense, sin comes in the black community when it involves a loss of identity. Once the identity is accepted and the chains of white acceptance are shaken off it is possible for liberation to be achieved. Salvation comes full when people rise up against the oppressors and demand the justice that they deserve (*A Black Theology* 227).

Salvation in Black Theology configures a multitude of meanings far different from a western construction of a future oriented eschatology where the “saved” go to heaven after they die.

Salvation is not only a train and a ship but also a sweet chariot, swinging low, "coming for to carry me home." It is that "Old time religion" that brought the slaves out of bondage and "good when you're in trouble." It's that "rock in a weary land" and the "shelter in the time of storm." It is the divine presence in their situation that holds their humanity together in the midst of the brokenness of black existence. It is the power to endure in struggle and the patience to remain calm when surrounded by inexplicable evil. (*The Story* 147)
The experience of not giving up serves as a space for potential resistance through resilience. The black experience of oppression demonstrates the functional strength of both the blues and the theological construction that takes hold through experience.

Within the Black Church the role of the preacher takes on similar characteristics to the blues singer. Cone emphasizes the role of the preacher as the storyteller. The preacher in the Black Church must be able to tell a story in a way that relates the biblical texts to the actual reality of the people in the audience. The biblical stories can be seen much like the riffs discussed earlier. Cone writes:

The preacher may begin with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden or with John on the island of Patmos. The concern is not where he begins because the people already know the various scenes in God's drama with his people. They are concerned with how the preacher takes the bare facts of God's story and weaves them into the structure of their lives, giving his unique touch as a story-teller. (*The Story* 147)

Just like the blues riff that is played similarly in community, the biblical stories serve as a foundational structure. When these stories are utilized, the church recognizes them. The preacher serves a role of emphasizing and drawing in the audience through correlations in their own lives. It is through the presentation of the story in a way that “truth” becomes realized for the people. Cone writes, “The truth of the story was dependent upon whether the people received that extra strength to go one more mile in their struggle to survive and whether they received the courage to strive one more time to right the wrongs in this world.” (*The Story* 149) In this way the dialectical nature of the preacher’s argument
becomes valid through the strength of the presentation and performance of the act of preaching. This can be similar to the way in which the blues are received by the audience. The ability of the blues singer to draw the audience into the experience is important. The reality of the performance allows the singer to impart strength to the audience.

It is no coincidence that Cone also wrote *Spirituals and the Blues* in 1972 which outlines the influence of theological reflection and musical influence. 6 Cone sees the artistic expression of the blues as a type of “secular spiritual” (108). It is an expression of the same root feeling of pain and hope that functions to communicate the “secular” dimension of black life. This depicts what black life is like when one “could not accept the divine promises of the Bible as a satisfactory answer to the contradictions of black existence” (109). The blues becomes the artistic expression of this hope and pain in a secular space whereas the spirituals are the expression of this emotional space in the church or religious setting.

For Cone, the musical form of the blues does not take the claims of Christianity seriously. He writes, “It is not that the blues reject God; rather they ignore him by embracing the joys and sorrows of life” (110). The blues take the same sensation felt in the spirituals and overlay it in the secular style of music prominent in the day. The music is shaped and formed in a space of similar oppressive structures with different solutions to the problem. For the spirituals the answer to the pain is trust in Jesus and a kingdom without oppression. In the blues the solution is getting your lover back, jumping on a

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6 In a sense, whether or not the blues function as an actual representation of the black experience, Cone’s theology in particular, draws from it in an effort to pull individuals into the black theology movement. This can come through a process of “framing” the group in a wide space claiming universal “black experience” in America.
train, or having another glass of whisky. Although many within the church denounced the blues as crude and offensive, Cone believes that it is an issue of interpretation. He writes:

If the blues are viewed in the proper perspective, it is clear that their mood is very similar to the ethos of the spirituals. Indeed, I contend that the blues and the spirituals flow from the same bedrock of experience, and neither is an adequate interpretation of black life without commentary on the other. (111)

Cone’s statement highlights my underlying thesis that cultural experiences of pain and joy that are artistically expressed find themselves worked out in the theology of the Black Church.

The history of the Black Church in America is built on a foundation of pain and suffering along with joy and hope that is formed and shaped through artistic expression. The blues, the feeling of pain and suffering with hope for tomorrow expressed in music, theatre, poetry, and literature in pockets of African American communities are also demonstrable in theological expressions of the Black Church. This theological reflection is formed through the experience of sorrowful hope or the laughter that keeps one from crying. It forms either as a space of resistance or resilience filling a void caused by oppression. This collective oppression experienced by segments of the African American community allows a general understanding and communal sensation of oppression evident in Black Church theology. This demonstrates the complexity of the blues framework which presses a sense of pain and suffering through the biblical narratives of Jesus and the story of the Exodus.
And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I will be made well" (English Standard Version Mark 5:25-28).

Minjung history and the concept of han

Almost a decade before the globally charged media event of Tiananmen Square a similar uprising had occurred in South Korea. On May 18, 1980, a group of 200 students gathered outside Chonnam National University in the city of Gwangju in the southwestern region of South Korea. The students assembled to protest the closing of the university. The closing was the result of numerous power shifts within the South Korean governmental powers starting with the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979 and the coup d’état by army general Chun Doo-hwan over president Choi Kyu-hah. (Shin 270-274)

As the students met, government paratroopers prepared for conflict. Throughout the day the numbers increased on both sides as the protests moved into the heart of the
city. Over three days the number of protesters in the city rose to 100,000, while soldiers and police officers continued to increase as well. Protesters engaged in rock throwing, setting fires, and attacking the police station while soldiers armed with automatic machine guns fired into the crowds. The casualties were staggering. Although the numbers are contested it is said that 207 people died, 987 people are missing, and over 2,392 individuals were injured for the most part as a result of military violence against protestors (Kim). This story represents a reoccurring historical narrative of the people of South Korea: violence and suppression aimed at the majority by an elite few. It represents the heart of what the majority of Koreans have fought throughout history. This story depicts the true nature of what it means to be the called the minjung (the masses) of South Korea (Shin 270-274).

The heart of being minjung is also evident in the life of Miss Kim Kyong-Suk, a twenty-one year old factory worker taking part in trade union demonstrations in the mid 1970s. A letter sent from her to her family explained the all too common life of a young woman worker in South Korea. Sometimes left unpaid for three months at a time, Kim survived near starvation on a diet consisting of small cheaply made cakes. Fatigue often caused regular nosebleeds from her constant work. Kim was enmeshed in a life composed of poor clothing, lack of food, meager housing, and lack of heat during the winter. She longed for some type of spiritual fulfillment given through attending church, but even that was impossible because of her work requirements. During a violent demonstration by workers Kim’s misery ended: she was killed during a violent government backlash (Amaladoss 6-8).
Kim’s story is not unusual in the grand scheme of Korean life. It is a part of the common history of the *minjung* (Amaladoss 6). As an individual member of the whole, Kim experienced a sense of collective oppression consistent with the national feeling called *han*. *Han* represents a feeling of collective pain and suffering perpetuated in Korean culture by constant oppression from multiple sources. It also serves a particular productive force evident in the cultural expressions of the Korean people (Amaladoss, 6).

In this chapter I will give a short account of historical oppression experienced by the people of South Korea explaining how that history gave rise to the *minjung* movement which finds one expression in Christian theology. I will then explain how such historical oppression grounds Korean identity in the concept of *han*, a feeling of anguish with a productive component. *Han* will be shown to be a foundational concept for artistic expressions within Korean culture and specifically within *minjung* movements. Finally, I will show how *han* informs theology in its reflecting on the Korean historical oppression through the lens of biblical narratives.

**Korean history**

The history of Korea is stained with the blood of the lower classes. For many, the saga began centuries ago under the Joseon Dynasty founded in 1392. Although historically Korea had been occupied and ruled by different dynasties, the Joseon dynasty changed the official state religion from Buddhism to Confucianism in 1394. Under what was considered to be an oppressive caste structure, women were treated poorly along with servants and others deemed lower class (Kang 272-274).

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7 Minjung movements can also be found in Buddhism and shamanism in South Korea.
In conjunction with the oppressive religious/philosophical tradition, Koreans faced numerous invasions from foreign powers. Japan and the Qing Dynasty invaded and weakened the power of the Joseon dynasty in the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1910, the Joseon dynasty ended as a result of the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty. This began the rule of the Japanese empire over Korea, lasting until 1945 (Pratt 255-256). During Japanese rule many Korean men were conscripted into the armed forces and Korean women were forced into prostitution for the Japanese soldiers (Washington Coalition).

After the war ended and a new government was established in South Korea, the issues of oppression did not end. With the future of the state up in the air, the people of Korea lived in turmoil. US intervention was poorly planned and executed, undermining attempts at strengthening the country. In 1948 after Syngman Rhee was elected president, the land was redistributed creating a new class of elites in the country (Pratt 382, 418). In 1950, South Korea was again the victim of another invasion, this time by North Korea, beginning the Korean War. After the war, the Rhee government returned to power. In April of 1960, a student nonviolent protest led to the end of the Rhee regime, with his resignation on April 25th (Pratt 256, 413).

The rise of the minjung

The concept of minjung is complex and difficult to define. It can even be considered dangerous because of problems related to the literal translation of the term. Min can be understood to mean “the people” while jung translates as “the mass.” These concepts were often tied to communism in the past, which carries a severe distaste for
many people in South Korea (Commission 16). The *minjung* are the larger percentage of the population oppressed by the powerful minority in power.

*Minjung* theologians tie the term specifically to the Gospel of Mark’s use of the word *ochlos* or “the crowds.” In Mark, the crowds are represented as a specific group for whom Jesus has compassion. They are portrayed as collectively oppressed by the religious and political leaders (Commission 18). The contemporary *minjung* movement utilizes a process of historical reinterpretation to claim existence of the *minjung* throughout history. They draw strength by taking stories of uprisings by the oppressed throughout Korean history and comparing them with contemporary trials. This allows them to identify themselves with those who were oppressed in the past. The *minjung* in recent times then claim to have an association with the *minjung* of the past constituting a historical continuity which provides a grander story and a larger communal identity (Commission 55-57).

This reinterpretation of historical narratives is a foundational point for understanding this particular social movement. It serves to construct the *minjung* identity in the context of historical subjectivity of the oppressed (N. Lee 54). In particular, the scholars who initiated the *minjung* movement in the 1970s and 80s looked back to the Tonghak rebellion in 1894 as historical moment of resistance for the Korean people. The particular uprising, although defeated quite quickly, was more revered in *minjung* discourses due to its “advanced political consciousness” in comparison to movements that had preceded it (N. Lee 57).
The Jeju Uprising of 1948 and the Korean War are also utilized by minjung in the reinterpretation of historical narratives. The Jeju Uprising which was originally labeled by the government as a “communist guerrilla insurgency” was relabeled by the minjung as a fight for Korean autonomy and independence from “American imperialism” (N. Lee 58-60). Reinterpretation of the Korean War by the minjung portrayed the US as aligning itself with “Rightist” political parties that did not have the majority support of the Korean people. Minjung scholars began to treat the Korean War as the oppression of the minjung because they saw the US or western influence as having a negative impact on their society and culture (N. Lee 61-63).

The concept of han

It is important begin by noting that han is a contentious term in the study of Korean culture. Some believe it too slippery to define as a contextually dependent emotional response to oppression. It can be challenged as a reductive feeling or category that is imposed on a group leading to an essentializing of the Korean people. While there is controversy, many scholars place the concept of han as a central characteristic among the mixture of cultural forms within Korea (McHugh and Abelman 121-123). Despite the controversial nature of the term, minjung theologians accept the concept and exegete biblical text through their understanding of this term. This may in fact be a type of “strategic essentialism” that, while drawing on han, also produces the beliefs and identities from it.

At first glance, the concept of han seems to be an oxymoron: a sense of despairing hope, a feeling of pessimistic optimism, or a broken heart filled with perseverance. For
many Koreans, *han* is the primary feeling that forms artistic expression in Korean culture and group identity, as well as serving as the foundation for the theological reflection and production of the *minjung*. As one scholar put it “*Han* is an underlying feeling of Korean people” (Commission 58).

The concept of *han* arises from the historical conditions of Korean people who "have suffered numerous invasions... suffered the tyranny of the rulers... the strict imposition of laws and customs discriminating against women" and periods of hereditary slavery imposed on half the population (Commission, 58). These experiences of collective oppression have led to "a dominant feeling of defeat, resignation, and nothingness" (Commission 58). This sense of resignation and defeat is coupled with a "tenacity of will for life" by the oppressed (Commission 58). *Han* gives the oppressed people a strong resolve to fight for their political and religious beliefs.

*Han* is an awareness of accumulated collective oppression that serves as a type of productive “righteous indignation” allowing them to engage repressive structures. In particular I use the term *collective oppression* to signify the belief of many Koreans that their affliction is cumulative. They believe they feel the pain and distress that has amassed over the centuries. *Han* is “inherited and transmitted” to each generation (Commission 64). This means that the repression of ancestors who may have been subordinated under the ruling class through hereditary servitude or dominated under Japanese colonialism is felt by their descendants living today.

Aside from the generalized notion of *han* there are seven specific ways that it can be defined and utilized. The first two concepts deal with collective feelings. *Han* can
represent feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, longing, and so forth. It can also function as a sense of “repressed or suppressed” feelings. A majority of Korean people experience oppression because they are subjugated, but also because they feel the suppression of their ability to express themselves. The inability to adequately express frustration is a distressing feeling within the group. They are hurt by the pain they feel being oppressed and also the narrow routes of expression for those feelings (J. Lee 138-140). Han is a pent-up force looking for a place to vent.

Han can also be interpreted as an experience and not simply a feeling. The oppression of Koreans is a physical reality to which they have responded. They are not merely an object acted upon, but subjects who react to oppressive acts. Han can be understood as the collected experience of individuals, not merely the experience of the group as a whole. Each individual sees himself or herself as a part of the larger history in which they are actors. They are the subjects of history not merely the objects (J. Lee 140-141).

Another interpretation is derived from the “positive and negative” aspects of han. Although han is partly composed of “repressed murmuring, unexpressed in words or actions” it can also function to create “artistic expressions” and “erupt as the energy for a revolution or rebellion” (J. Lee 141-142). For Koreans, experiencing oppression helps build a “deeper understanding of truth…To love good and hate evil”…and brings an “encounter with God” (J. Lee 142). The experience of oppression gives the minjung a sense of humor about life and an ability to endure. It also gives them strength that they can use to fight against the oppression they face.
There is also a “political” understanding of *han*. Based on their consciousness of the oppression through unjust treatment of individuals, *han* provides fuel for the political engagement of the people. Particularly among the masses, the concept of justice comes not from the intellectual centers of the elite, but from the experience and feelings of individuals within society. From this experience the sense of justice specific to the Korean people comes from the felt pain derived from the *han*. This acknowledgement of collective identity through the shared experience of *han* allows for political engagement. Collective identity allows them the ability to be collectively represented in order to garner political positioning within the culture.

A final way that *han* needs to be understood is in its relationship to the concept of *dan*. *Dan* represents a breaking away from the cyclical pattern of oppression behind *han*. If *han* is left unchecked, once power is taken by the oppressed it could be used to oppress others. This is why *dan*, or self-denial, is necessary. Literally translated *dan* can mean to “cut off.” Cutting off of the desire for continued retribution to the oppressors is necessary because, without *dan*, the forces of *han* will “explode into a vicious circle of destruction” (J. Lee 153).

Overall, *han* represents a productive force derived from negative actions on the oppressed. The collective experience of oppression provides fuel for the people to create and stay strong through rebellion or revolt. *Han* has arisen from decades, if not centuries, of oppression within the Korean people. This feeling is carried from one generation to the next amassing to the point where it works to productively fight against oppression. Without control *han* can overflow into an unhealthy cycle. The solution to this is the
concept of *dan* which holds *han* in check through the influence of self denial preventing the *minjung* from continuing the patterns of oppression previously imposed on them.

**Han in the arts**

Korean cultural forms display a complex range of spaces where *han* can find expression. Within the arts *han* finds a home among dance, literature, poetry, drama, and film as well as other stylistic expressions. These forms exist as a space where *han* can vent, allowing the pent up frustration a place of release. The welled up feelings are given a free space to form and represent the place of pain and persistence evident in the Korean people.

The first space in which *han* plays a role is that of traditional Korean dance. Dance is an important art form for the Korean people. It allows people to tie historic stories with the emotional meanings present in the daily culture. The bond with the historic past combined with the present expressive art form provides a basic structure for *han* to flow through. Within Korean dance *han* is expressed as the sensation of overwhelming emotion that comes from within. As a part of Korean dance it is exuded from the individual as they perform. Korean dancer, instructor, professor and national treasure Aeju Lee writes:

> Our Korean dance is not just a form of expression. It is a spontaneous performance of body, which expresses the overflow of emotion. It soars up from the inside, like willow branches saturated with water in spring water, which joins from two different valleys. The dance of Korea is not intentional. It configures all kinds of sorrowful feelings such as pain; grief
that is deeply scarred into the bottom of your heart, the will of the mind, and the dreams inside our souls. Korean dance is a process of transforming all of these things into a dance externally (A. Lee).

From this description we can see the similarities of the definition of han within the structure of performance. It is an expression of “pain” as well as a manifestation of “the mind” and “the dreams inside our souls.” Han is a feeling of pain while also being a representation of the desires within one’s heart. All of these emotions common to the theme of han become constituted to form the artistic expression evident within the national style of dance.

A second area of artistic expression for han is that of Korean literature and poetry. We can see a reflection of these feelings coming from world renowned Korean author Park Kyong-ni who writes, “it (han) means both sadness and hope at the same time. You can think of han as the core of life, the pathway leading from birth to death.” For Park, it is impossible to separate the concept of han from the work of writing. She writes, “Literature, it seems to me, is an act of han and a representation of it.” (Kroman)

Nobel prize nominee poet Ko Eun believes Koreans “are born from the womb of han and are brought up in the womb of han” (Yoo 221). Ko’s poetry expresses the anguish of Korean individuals, showing the sense of personal loss experienced by the larger collective. For example Ko writes:

**The Moon**

Every time the moon rose, she prayed.

Finally Wol-nam's mother, at forty, bore a son.
In dreams before pregnancy,
she swallowed the moon.

After her son was born, Wol-nam's mother
would lose her mind
without fail
every time the moon rose.

Late at night, washing dishes,
she'd smash one bowl-
the moon then hid in a cloud
and the world grew blind (Ko)

Ko’s Poems expresses the brokenness of the individual but also with an understanding that this is a common expression of the pain of minjung people (Ko).

Another cultural expression of han is Korean film. Korean director Im Kwon Taek believes in reinforcing the concept of han through his films as a way to teach Koreans about themselves. In his view many contemporary Korean filmmakers are losing touch with Korean history in favor of movies involving “sex and violence,” while his focus on period pieces attempts to draw on the concept of han as Korea’s “sense of rage and helplessness” (Beech). Particularly important for some scholars is the expression of han in Korean melodrama. The dramatically charged space of film is inclusive of emotionally stimulating musical scores combined with stories of pain and hope. These allow han another vehicle of escape as well as a reification of cultural understanding (McHugh and Abelman 121-122). For the Korean audience, han undergirds the
melodrama while also reproducing the sensation and cultural meaning evident in oppression (McHugh and Abelman 123).

After the Gwangju incident noted above, another form of expression became prominent among the oppressed masses. Politically engaged art called, “minjung art” (art of the masses) challenged the oppressive structures common among the Korean people. Artwork became extremely valuable for representing the themes of the minjung and therefore is a production of han. Each piece expressed the hearts of the politically disenfranchised. Recurring themes of the Korean people are evident in artwork such as the wood-cut entitled “General Green Pea.” This work represents the minjung tie to the Donghak Peasant rebellion of 1894. It depicts General Chon Pun-jun, a leader in that rebellion. This work draws on historical representations of the minjung fight against oppressive forces. The theme of the Donghak Rebellion justifies resistance for the minjung in their fight against oppression (Hoffman)

Other pieces depict the state of the people as they experienced the pain of unjust prison terms. The piece Dog Food depicts a captive with hands tied behind his back eating from a bowl. The experience of han is evident from the suffering of the individual in such a state. Another depiction, Leaflets of Warriors 1, demonstrates the feeling of the collective as they are abused for their role in printing leaflets against political oppressors (Hurley).

Minjung theology

Minjung theology arises out of the political context of the 1970s and early 80s as a response in part to the fight for democracy. As C.S. Song writes, minjung theology is a
“development of the political hermeneutics of the Gospel in terms of the Korean reality” (Commission 17). The hermeneutical principal for the movement comes from specific understanding of God’s relationship to the world. God exists as a liberator of the people. 

*Han* functions in a specific way to inform the contextually dependent form of theology for the Korean People. This section will explain how *han* informs and undergirds *minjung* theology. It is specifically this cultural feeling and understanding of *han* that informs the ingenuity in the text that allows for the particular reading of the text.

**The Minjung and the Old Testament**

*Minjung* theologians begin first with the placement of the oppressed masses within the biblical text to determine the relationship of God to them. Theologians explain how specific biblical stories can be reinterpreted through the eyes of the *minjung*, as a means to fighting against oppressive forces and structures within the Korean society.

Through the retelling of these narratives, the *minjung* can understand who they are, how they should act, and who God is. Cyris Moon describes his method as a sociological interpretation of the Bible that teaches the *minjung* identity and theology (Moon v-vi).

One of the first interpretations is comparing the experience of the Hebrews coming out from Egypt to the Korean people’s experience of coming out from under oppressive leadership and colonialism. Moon argues that as the Hebrews were able to participate with Yahweh in their own liberation, the *minjung* are able to participate in their own practice of freedom. Yahweh revealed himself through Moses and through the miracles to free the Hebrews. For the *minjung* people liberation began through missionary work among them. These two experiences began the process of freedom for
both groups. For the Hebrews it led to the Promised Land. Things progressed for the oppressed for a short time during the late 19th century, but became stifled with the beginning of Japanese rule over them in 1905 (Moon 10-16). The period between 1920 and 1945 became for the Korean church the “Egyptian captivity” when the church “lacked historical consciousness,” yielded to Shintoism,” lived under “imported theology,” and “became captive to those striving for ecclesiastical authority” (Moon 17).

One particular interpretation of the minjung is the comparison of the Hebrews after leaving Egypt with the post WWII experience in Korea. Moon establishes what he calls the “Revolt Model” for the way he believes the conquering of Canaan happened (Moon 23). He believes that the Canaanites were not defeated by physical attack but that they themselves rebelled against paying tribute to Egypt and joined the Israelites in their rebellion against Pharaoh. Therefore the battle against the Canaanites would have been comparatively small, because they would only need to fight the oppressive leadership of Canaan that was upholding Egyptian tributes. In a similar vein, Moon believes that the sense of collective oppression (han) reached by the Korean people allowed the church to progressively conquer the ruling postwar elite by winning more and more people to its fold. This led to a revolt against the Rhee regime in 1960 that was quickly put down, but led to eventual downfall (Moon 24-28).

The next area of comparison is between Solomon in the Old Testament and the leaders that were in charge of Korea after the Rhee regime. Solomon can be understood by some theologians to be a leader who did much to improve the wealth and status of the nation of Israel while oppressing the lower classes. The case he makes is that in order for
a nation to become wealthy to the status of Israel at that time it would have been necessary to utilize cheap labor harming those at the lowest levels of society. This exhibits the framework of *minjung* theology to interpret the biblical stories through the contemporary lens.

The leadership of Solomon can be compared to the experience of Koreans under the leadership of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. The Korean nation did well economically but at the expense of the lower classes and in particular, women (Moon 33-38). Much like the experience of the Israelites under Solomon the *minjung* were oppressed during this time for the sake of contributing to the national wealth.

*Minjung* theologians also interpret the relation of the *minjung* to the biblical prophets who they believe came to serve among the oppressed. The *minjung* see this as one of the foundational points for their system of theology. In particular they look at Amos and Micah. Amos is important because he does not come from the class of professional prophets but from the ranks of the people. He is a shepherd who Yahweh called for a short period to speak out about the oppression of the Hebrews. He serves in the prophet role to challenge the ruling elite in their oppression of the poor (Moon 42-47).

Micah is important for *minjung* theology because he also holds to calling out the oppression of the poor. He is important because he sides with the oppressed, speaks as a commoner, and lives among the common people (Moon 49). These are three distinct functions of anyone who calls him or herself *minjung*. Living among the ranks of the
oppressed demonstrates the particular heart for the poor which is necessary in the *minjung* worldview (Moon 49).

Through this lens of prophetic inspiration, the *minjung* come to understand who they are in relation to God. Their theology becomes a theology “for a better tomorrow.” The main goal associated with this movement is equality characterized by “renewal of human rights and the revolutionary change for justice within the social structure” (Moon 54). With this view in mind, the *minjung* also hold to the concept of *dan* or “cutting off” which acknowledges that there must be a point where the desire for reparations must end so that the oppressed do not become like their masters. In the end, there remains a messianic hope for the future where all things will be made right and restored (Moon 53-55).

The *minjung* are also continually focusing on the “messianic hope” that is read within Old Testament texts. By a particular reading of the fulfillment section of the seventh year and the Jubilee among the Hebrews, the *minjung* find hope. These examples represented times when land would be restored to the people who had lost it. Housing would be restored to family members who had needed to sell it during this time. Money and food would be given to those in need in order that they would be able to be well taken care of. Finally, an extremely important stipulation was the release of the slaves. Since the *minjung*, who are most often common workers or students, are subject to the authoritative rule of Korean leaders, the promise of freedom signals hope. It gives them hope for their release and the release of their children in similar fashion to slaves who were freed in the seventh year under Judaic law (Moon 58-66).
Overall, the Old Testament provides an excellent source for understanding the production of minjung theology. The use of parallels between the Hebrews in the Old Testament and the contemporary experience of the Korean people helps to construct a social identity that allows the minjung to work towards communal liberation. These serve as typologies for freedom within the Korean culture, giving the minjung strength and hope towards a future liberty from captivity. Instead of holding out for a future kingdom they see themselves as participating, like the Hebrews, in their own Exodus story.

Secondly, the minjung see themselves as the people of the Exodus oppressed by Egypt. God initially had planned for humanity “to be fruitful and multiply,” but the oppression of Pharaoh had hindered that. It becomes a promise to the minjung that God is on their side. This allows them to fight against oppression because fruitfulness is a promise of God. The minjung also see a set of specific prophets within the OT canon that were sent particularly to them.

Moses is portrayed within minjung theology as the person who answered the call of the people for freedom. He leads the people in their “revolt” with God on their side. Jesus on the other hand was a person among the people not just over them. Jesus embodied the “cry” of the people. This understanding of Jesus makes him “a part of the minjung not just for the minjung” (Amaladoss 6-7). Moses can be seen as a type of “salvation from outside.” He led a revolution within a specific moment in history. Jesus represents a “permanent revolution” that is continuous (Amaladoss 7).

Minjung theologians see God as specifically on the side of the oppressed throughout history. History is seen as the ongoing act of God’s relationship with the
minjung through time. God purposely chooses those who are the “underdogs” in order to reveal his plan. Minjung theologians look to their historical oppression to find times when the oppressed have revolted. They reinterpret the historical view in light of biblical revelation (Amaladoss 7).

As a cultural production, minjung theology uses a pluralist perspective for its creation. It includes aspects of shamanism, the Donghak religious tradition, some Buddhist belief structures, combining them all with Christian belief systems. This allows for relevance through the artistic expression of han in traditional Korean theatre. Donghak provides an egalitarian structure to work with. These combined with Maitreya Buddhism’s messianic focus form the undergirding structure for Christian theology (Amaladoss 6-10).

**New Testament perspectives**

A traditional story illustrates the han of the minjung that fuels the theological reflection of the masses. A beggar sits beneath a cement statue of Jesus. After a few minutes the beggar begins to feel drops of water falling on him. He looks to see if it is raining and notices that the statue of Jesus has tears pouring out its eyes showing that Jesus weeps for a beggar. In the story Jesus is frustrated because the religious leaders have cast him in cement and placed a gold crown on his head. The money was used for his glorification instead of feeding the poor. The beggar hears Jesus tell him to take off the gold crown that has been placed on his head in order to get food. The story ends with the beggar being arrested for theft (Sugirtharajah 68).
The minjung perspective of the story emphasizes church leaders who consistently focus on the heavenly Christ and ignored the Christ of the Gospels. The religious leaders have again betrayed the masses (the minjung) for religious purposes and not the purposes of God. The cycle of han is perpetuated because of the frustration of the poor in the face of the decisions of the elite. The criticism is focused on the belief that the church has focused on a Pauline interpretation of Christ. The overall consensus of one author is “If one does not hear the sighs of the han of the minjung, one cannot hear the voice of Christ knocking on our doors” (Commission 68).

The minjung argument is that the church has consistently focused on a Pauline Christ and not the historical Jesus represented in the Gospels. From that Pauline viewpoint Jesus is God, while only in a minor sense, a man. Paul’s perspective was hindered because he had not known the earthly Jesus but only had encountered the resurrected Christ. Therefore, a church focusing on Paul’s writings misses the full message (Sugirtharajah 168).

Another foundation for minjung theology comes from Jesus’ identification with the masses of people through the incarnation. This is represented by the ochlos or unorganized group of common people often surrounding Jesus. They were not necessarily the disciples and they were not the ruling class. They often included members of society that were despised by the religious ruling leaders of the community. Through the lens of the minjung Jesus was put to death specifically because of his identification with them. Religious leaders saw him as a voice undermining their authority to control the people (Amaladoss 6).
In the synoptic Gospels Jesus is portrayed as being with the “ochlos” of common people (reinterpreted in the contemporary contexts as the minjung). Wherever the minjung (ochlos) are, Jesus is with them. He is among the sick, the sinners, tax-collectors, prostitutes, women, Samaritans, and the poor—all the alienated groups of people. From the perspective of the minjung Jesus came as an answer or response to the cries of these groups on the margins of society (Sugirtharajah 169). The cry from the broken heartedness (han) of the minjung from the exploitation by the elite is fulfilled through the incarnation. Jesus comes to answer the call of the minjung.

Ochlos is the Greek word translated as “multitudes,” “masses,” “the press” (of people), or simply “the people.” For minjung theologians the ochlos are the oppressed masses of people commonly associated with the minjung. Jesus is portrayed specifically in relationship to them in the Gospel of Mark which uses the term 36 times (Strong). Specifically emphasized is Mark 6:34 where Jesus has compassion on the crowd because they are like sheep without a shepherd. The minjung experience is one of exclusion from the places of power. They are marginalized politically and religiously by the ruling group of both parties. Jesus, in this sense, came to them and for them as the shepherd.

Minjung theology attempts to acknowledge a communal understanding of Christ. He is not merely an individual, but represented in the collective. Jesus is not just among the ochlos. He is the ochlos. He was born into the poor working class and made his name among them instead of among the religious elite. Jesus is a part of the minjung. He identifies himself specifically with them when he sits among the people and says that those who “do the will of God are his mother and brothers.” This demonstrates the
characteristic nature of han in the Korean experience. Jesus suffers with them to be a part of the minjung, and so he feels the han just like them (Sugirtharajah 168-170). This demonstrates the informative nature of han provides a theological frame emphasizing a God who experiences life among them, feels pain and exclusion with them, and becomes a partner with them in their collective experience.

The relationship of the rich and poor in the Gospels are a specific site of interaction for minjung theologians. Second in importance to the Gospel of Mark, is the Gospel of Luke, with its focus on the issue of the oppressed poor. In Luke, the rich are severely criticized while the poor are exalted. Minjung theologians characterize Jesus’ emphasis on the poor by Jesus as showing that the poor demonstrate the path to salvation for the rich. It is not that the poor are chosen for salvation while the rich are condemned, but rather minjung theology claims that the poor show the way for the rich to salvation (Sugirtharajah 172-174).

Within minjung theology Jesus serves as a particular type of messiah. The minjung reject various views of a political and theological messiah. They reject the political utopian views that have been offered by communism, the Japanese, and their own leadership throughout the centuries. The political ideals associated with these groups often become “totalitarian and absolutist” which leads to a destruction of enemies of the state (Amaladoss 9). Theological views based on the “kingdom of God” are also distasteful from the perspective of the minjung. Kingdom of God theologies have often led to a passive nature among the Christians, due to their focus on a future kingdom entered into after death. Minjung theology emphasizes instead a specific view of the
“millennium.” The “millennium” in minjung theology is a time when the rule of God is established in the present world. It takes an emphasis off of the salvation of the individuals, instead focusing on the social reign of God in history. This allows them to strive for the goal of establishing the millennium in a historical period on earth (Amaladoss 7-9). This particular view is similar to other forms of liberation theology that arise at the same time as minjung theology.

Finally, the minjung understand themselves as the preservers of a “minjung Christ.” Since the Apostle Paul’s writings focused on the kerygmatic Christ as opposed to the Christ of the minjung (of the people), the Gospel accounts must have been preserved by the minjung. Because of the humanity of Christ presented by the synoptic Gospels, minjung theologians believe the high church leaders of the day could not have been the preservers. Had they preserved the text, we would know nothing about Jesus except for his position seated in heaven. Because of the synoptic texts Jesus can be seen as more in line with the good news to the poor, that is, as an active participant in the world. This is in opposition to the “cement” Christ the King of the Kerygma (Sugirtharajah 170-172).

In this chapter I have demonstrated the cultural understanding of the concept of han. Han has been shown to be specifically important to the cultural production in a variety of forms such as art, poetry, literature, dance, and film. Due to han’s prodigious nature within the culture of South Korea, it is only natural that it should make its way into specific areas of the theological reflection of the Korean people. In particular, this has

8 Meaning the resurrected Christ only
been shown to be evident in *minjung* theology. *Minjung* theology takes *han* as a given within the culture, acknowledging its own use and identification of the feeling.

*Minjung* theology has arisen from repeated experiences of injustice towards the multitudes. *Han* therefore becomes the experience of pain and hope within the masses that forms theology through the lens of the Bible. *Han* becomes expressed through identification with the poor and oppressed in the biblical narratives. This allows contemporary *minjung* to form theology based on the biblical narrative of God’s relationship to the disheartened masses. Overall, the Bible can be seen as a type of filter or chord structure allowing theology to be formed in a particular key. The *minjung* are able to function within that specific chord structure improvising and adapting while maintaining a certain level of structure.
Chapter 4: Won’t you help me sing?

Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city (King James Version, Ezra 2:1)

Born into the slums of Kingston, Jamaica, Peter Tosh became a gifted musician and well known Rastafari who engaged in a career alongside Bob Marley as well as having a successful solo career. Tosh began life in the cement ghetto encompassed by open drainage ditches called Trenchtown. Surrounded by poverty and violence Tosh built a career that would take him across the globe. Unfortunately, the fame and fortune he achieved would turn out to be what took his life. He was killed by one of the numerous people from his community that he tried to help. On September 11, 1987 Tosh had returned home to Jamaica and was immediately attacked by a close friend who was in the process of robbing his house. After repeatedly telling the armed gunmen he did not have money at the house but was willing to go get some, he was shot twice in the head. He became another victim of the crippling oppression that exists in Jamaica (Veal 15-17).
Much like Peter Tosh the life of Bob Marley faced similar trials and an early death. Born in a small village in Saint Ann Parish Jamaica, Robert Nesta Marley was the son of an Afro-Jamaican woman and an English father. His father passed away when Bob was only ten years old. Leaving school at the age of fourteen, Marley would become one of the most recognizable music figures in history. With songs themed on the struggles of life in the slums of Jamaica combined with the hopeful promises associated with Jah, or God, of the Rastafari religion Marley traveled the world spreading his musically influenced religion. He died from cancer at the age of thirty six; two decades after his musical career began (Veal 15-22).

The lives of both musicians are tales of pain and suffering along with a mix of hopeful desire to see justice in the world. Through a mix of religious language and the optimistically charged faith of Rastafari, both were able to find and teach about peace, hope, and resistance. Rising from the depths of poverty through the transformative power of religion they attempted to help others escape a 400 year history of oppression. Their artistic expression and faith was driven by two specific feelings arising from their sense of collective oppression. These feelings are sufferation and downpression.

**Jamaican history the roots of Rastafari**

To understand sufferation and downpression, it is necessary to grasp the historical realities that produced them. The roots of colonization in Jamaica begin when Christopher Columbus first set foot there in the 15th century. After decimating the indigenous population, Britain gained control of the island and began utilizing enslaved

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9 Ras comes from the Amharic for head. Tafari comes from the given name of Haile Selassie, Tafari Makonnen.
African people to build the empire. Through missionary work on the island, Christianity became the “acceptable” and compulsory religion, but through forms of indigenous resistance to specific structures, new varieties of Christianity emerged. The Native Baptists formed one early strain that allowed for certain freedoms within the African Christian churches in Jamaica. This meant that traditions from Africa were allowed a place in the services. Rejection of packaged Christianity became common and allowed a level of liberty that promoted the spread of the Native Baptists. This autonomy meant “for twenty eight years the Native Baptists were unhindered by Europeans as they constructed a theology that would speak to the enslaved situation. Native Baptists adopted a doctrinal position that elevated the spirit and neglected the written word” (Erskine 10). With this emphasis on an encounter with the spirit instead of literary religion, spirit possession became a part of religious services, and a requirement for water baptism (Erskine 10-12).

Born of the Native Baptist church, the Revivalist Church movement took a foothold after the Great Revival in Jamaica from 1860 to 61. Author Leonard Barrett is careful to point out that this was not a revival of Christianity per se, but a revival of African roots. His perspective is that there was no “Christianity” left to revive among the enslaved people. He writes, “The great Revival is thus better understood as a rejection of Christianity and a revival of the African force-vitale…What really took place was a forcible amalgamation of Christianity with the African ethos (Barrett 115).”

Revivalist practices reached to the poorest of the poor in order to provide healing for their bodies as well as their souls. This emphasis on the body as well as the soul was
due to the specific African cosmology from which it arose. In the revivalist practice, spirits of relatives may possess family members while the spirit of God the Father and Jesus cannot possess them. The Father exists in the highest level of Heaven while Jesus is free to visit church services (Erskine 27). Jesus plays a central role in the revivalist movement, but not as the divine Son of God as with Christianity. For them, Jesus was a prophet much like John the Baptist. This allowed Revivalist leader Alexander Bedward to proclaim himself as the “Incarnation of Christ” in the early 20th century. Jesus, like Bedward, had participated in a similar ministry of healing the sick and attempting to destroy the oppressive system (Erskine 55-57).

The rise of Rastafari

It is directly out of Jamaican revivalism that Rastafari emerges. With the emergence of Bedward’s proclamation as the “Incarnation of Christ” and the revivalist acceptance of Jesus as a prophet, it is possible to understand the root inspiration for Rastafari. If Christ can reincarnate, it is possible for another to take his place (Erskine 27). For Rastafari this was fulfilled by the coronation of Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia who became emperor in 1930 (Mockler 12). Early leaders in the movement saw this crowning as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. They had cherished the biblical verse Psalm 68:31 “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” as a claim to a divine relationship of Africa to God with a particular hope found in Ethiopia (Erskine 29). The decree that proclaimed Selassie as king in Africa was hailed as prophetic fulfillment for the early Rastafari movement (Erskine 30).
The Rastafari believe Haile Selassie I is God\(^\text{10}\) and that he is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings due to his direct lineage to King Solomon through the relationship with the Queen of Sheba.\(^\text{11}\) He is worshiped as the lion of the Tribe of Judah who is prophesied in the Bible. The belief is that he is the reincarnation of Jesus who came to set the African people free and repatriate them back to Ethiopia (Coping with Babylon). This comes from an incorporation of different strains of thought and narratives (Judeo-Christian, garveyism, ethiopianism, etc.). Although it is claimed that Selassie died, many Rastafari believe he is in hiding until the end of the Babylonian\(^\text{12}\) period they are presently experiencing (McFarlane and Spencer 342-343).

Since its inception, Rastafari has had some divisions among its followers: the Bobo Ashanti, the Nyahbhinghi, and the Twelve Tribes. Bobo Ashanti followers often live in communes and devote large portions of their time to rituals. Nyahbhinghi tend to be more integrated into society though they include the goddess Nyahbhinghi as a part of their worship. The Twelve Tribes are found in many sections of Jamaican society. It is the branch of Rastafari that is the most appealing to the middle class, allowing it to accrue a greater proportion of followers. It has a moderate level of discipline which allows followers to engage in both a career and a religious life (Coping with Babylon).

\(^{10}\) How God is to be understood is a point of contention across communities
\(^{11}\) Whether or not this is in actuality true is a matter of debate
\(^{12}\) The Babylonian period refers to Rasta’s and other Afro-Jamaican’s living in “captivity” under the capitalist system of oppression. This concept has changed through time congruently with the life of Selassie.
**Downpression and sufferation**

In patois, the language of Jamaica, two words are fundamental for understanding the form of biblical hermeneutics undertaken in Rastafari theology. The first is the concept of *downpression*. *Downpression* refers to the “weighted” or “burdened” feeling of life caused by oppression. Jamaicans have created the term due to the Jamaican-patois languages sounding of the prefix *op-* as “up.” By utilizing the prefix *down-* Rastafari emphasize that oppression gives the feeling of pressing a person down not lifting them up. This word refers to the feeling of being held down and the term *downpressor* can refer to the person who is holding others down. This term can be found in Peter Tosh’s song “Downpressor Man.”

*Downpression*, as a feeling, can lead to an outward expression as a means of relieving pain and frustration. This is evident from the statement by a follower of Rastafari below.

Suppose, for arguments sake, I come home one evening and I really feel downpressed-like I don't make no scufflings [money] all day-instead of beating I wife or roughing up I children, I tek out I drum and start a little ridim, yuh know? Before yuh know what happen, the whole yard\(^{13}\) is wid I. Yuh no see it? Nect thing you know I man mind come off the worries so much so, sometimes I get a little insight into how fi tackle me problems next day. (McFarlane and Spencer 242)

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\(^{13}\) *Yard* represents a community; typically on with religious significance.
In this scenario the person comes home and realizes that he feels frustrated and oppressed from the work of the day. *Downpression* fuels a type of expression that becomes a part of a collective experience for the group. He starts with the drum himself but by the end, the “whole yard” or community is participating. Communal understanding of individual frustration from oppression leads the community to an act of shared expression. Another Rastafari says, “The drum can work like that, yes. Yuh just feel youself lif outa downpression.” (McFarlane and Spencer 242)

A second term necessary for understanding Rastafari culture and theology is the term *sufferation*. This word means a feeling of suffering or loss combined with a sense of separation. This theme expresses the pain of loss and separation from people, from God, and from the material stability necessary to survive. This is evident in the genre of Jamaican songs. Lyrics like those from the song “Sufferation” by Messenjah Selah are emblematic.

Another day inna di life no easy at all.

Everyday the ghetto children dem a bawl.

Ends nah meet like north and south at all.

*Sufferation! Too much hand to moouth.

Dis ya situation! I got to get out.

*Sufferation! Tired of the hand to moouth.

Dis ya situation I got to get out.14

Everyday prices a rise like the sun.

14 Italicized portion is the chorus of the song
While the value of the dollar going down.

You don’t want to increase the poor man’s income.

Then it woulda decrease the starvation.

You hit us in the pocket to keep us in the slum.

That’s why the youths a pop them ratchets and a bust them guns.

Mama can’t feed me what she want.

She have to make me what she need. Til betta come (Selah).

These two feelings, sufferation informed by downpression shapes the way

Rastafari theology is informed. Through the lens of downpression and sufferation the theology of Rastafari builds an understanding of the situation. Selah’s message is meant to depict the typical life of the “ghettos” where the majority of the community lives a life of “hand to mouth.” The end of the song acknowledges that there is still hope despite the frustration of daily living. While the mothers struggle to feed their children, Selah acknowledges the time when “betta come.”

Of all the genres discussed in this study, the most well known to have a mix of theology and artistic expression might be that of Reggae. Bob Marley’s Redemption Song is one of the clearest representations of this.

Redemption Song

Old pirates, yes, they rob I; Sold I to the merchant ships,

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15 Those familiar Sierra Leonean cultures and languages will notice the similarities to “Bette de” or “Bette go come” that have similar meaning.
Minutes after they took I, From the bottomless pit.\(^{16}\)

But my hand was made strong, By the ‘and of the Almighty.

We forward in this generation, Triumphantly.

Won’t you help to sing, These songs of freedom? -

‘Cause all I ever have: Redemption songs; Redemption songs.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;

None but ourselves can free our minds.

Have no fear for atomic energy, ‘Cause none of them can stop the time.

How long shall they kill our prophets, While we stand aside and look? Ooh!

Some say it’s just a part of it: We’ve got to fulfil de book (Marley)

Marley’s famous song, tells the story of Jamaican history and the hope of the future. While discussing the past, present, and future hope of Rastafari, Marley utilizes a song of freedom to talk about other songs of freedom that carry the burden of the people. This song itself is an excellent example of the mix between theological reflection from the biblical text with the acknowledgment of present suffering and oppression combined with hope for the future.

It was Marley’s appeals to the almighty that helped fuel the fire of resistance for the Jamaican people. Paul Gilroy writes of Marley’s success:

His popularity was built upon the universal power of a language that was simultaneously and inextricably both poetic and political. Its original configuration had been created by slaves whose early claims on modernity

\(^{16}\) The similarity in ideas in this song can be seen in B.B. King’s Why I Sing the Blues. Its opening line is “I first got the blues when they brought me over on a ship.”
had been established when they were themselves reduced to the status of commodities for sale on a global market. Their distinctive relationship to language was shaped by exile from literacy on pain of death. Then, instead of their freedom, they were given only a King James Bible with which to make the brutal world of the plantation meaningful. The tentacles of their vibrant oral culture reached out from its Caribbean beginnings and eventually located remote and distant audiences hungry for the common-sense wisdom and insight that were being offered by the slaves’ descendants (Gilroy 122).

Marley’s work appealed to those experiencing the suffering and downpression played out in societal forces. His emphasis on hope from the position of oppression allowed for artistic expression to unify the aspirations of many.

*Downpression* can be seen as a theme also within Jamaican theatre. The Sistren Theatre Collective of Jamaica has been performing since 1977 and was founded on the principles of teaching people about the oppression (or downpression) to which women in Jamaican culture have been subject. Specifically they take on issues that most people do not want to talk about. The group explores the relationship to poverty experienced by women in Jamaican culture as they struggle against domestic work, unfair labor practices, and violence against them. It is almost with a prophetic voice that the first play performed by the group was entitled “*Downpression, Get a Blow.*” This debut for the group told the story of oppression existing among Jamaica’s garment workers. It was performed for the 1977 Worker’s Week festivities (Drusine).
A second genre that demonstrates the relationship of downpression and sufferation as major themes within Jamaican culture is within film. One of the most popular films to come out of Jamaica is Perry Henzell’s The Harder They Come starring reggae artist Jimmy Cliff. The film tells the story of a young man named Ivan who comes to the city in order to make a living. He writes music and becomes successful but at the hands of a bad record producer. He then becomes a drug runner and vigilante in order to make ends meet. He ends up becoming a rebel who is respected by the general culture for his anti-authoritarian and anti-corruption stance. At the end he attacks the police with an unloaded gun and is killed. Author Kalamu ya Salaam writes:

Perry Henzell’s movie The Harder They Come is beautiful in its brutality: its unapologetic depiction of what the system has created and how the Sufferers (the poor) were twisted and deformed, but also their indomitable spirit to resist and push on….Although it is a fictional film, much of it is shot like a documentary, especially the street scenes and the church scenes. Henzell was absolutely insightful in his skewering of class repression and equally unsparing in showing the reality of how the struggle to escape sufferation is most often a futile fight in which the overwhelming majority don’t succeed. (ya Salaam “We Salute Jimmy”) Henzell’s film depicts the space of suffering with hope that is a part of sufferation. The film expresses Ivan’s optimism as he seeks and finds success among the musical elite. It also shows the frustration of trying to make it in everyday life of Jamaican culture.
Tied to the film in a similar manner is the musical score. Lyrics depict the frustration and desire of the main character that is fueled by the *sufferation* and *downpression* of life. This can be seen in the lyrics to the title track.

**The Harder they Come**

Well they tell me of a pie up in the sky. Waiting for me when I die

But between the day you're born and when you die,

They never seem to hear even your cry

Chorus:

*So as sure as the sun will shine*

*I'm gonna get my share now of what's mine*

*And then the harder they come the harder they'll fall, one and all*

*Ooh the harder they come the harder they'll fall, one and all*

Well the officers are trying to keep me down, Trying to drive me underground

And they think that they have got the battle won

I say forgive them Lord, they know not what they've done

And I keep on fighting for the things I want,

Though I know that when you're dead you can't

But I'd rather be a free man in my grave, Than living as a puppet or a slave (Cliff)

The theological reflection that goes into this song is evident when the context of the Jamaican culture is recognized. Starting with the rejection of the “pie in the sky” notion associated with Christianity, the material conditions and reality in this world are the focus. The pain and suffering experienced by the individuals between the time they are
born and when they die can become a foundational place for Rastafari theology and practice. The *downpression* experienced under police trying to hold people down is acknowledged as well as the fight for freedom. The author responds to the *downpression* by saying that he is willing to die to stay free from the oppressive system.

In a similar fashion to the response towards pain and suffering through reggae, a form of poetry arose alongside the musical construction. Dub poetry is a form of spoken word accompanied by reggae style music. Its approach is composed of recitation alongside music as an artistic patterned lyric. The beat of the music undergirds the poetry’s form. Dub poets such as Mutabaruka, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Oku Onuora, d’bi Young, and Malachi Smith. For these poets, the suffering faced in every day life informs the way their poetry is written. Much like Marley’s work, the ties to historical memory of slavery and oppression are the foundation for the present day.

Also demonstrating depictions of *sufferation* are Rastafari artists. Particularly evident are representations of the pain and suffering of Rastafari along with the suffering of Jesus. Artist Albert Artwell’s painting depicts the passion of Christ. He says, “The example of the painting is to remember the *sufferation* and the agony that Christ go through.” Understanding that undergirds the physical painting is a comprehension of *sufferation*. We can see that Rastafari painting is also informed by this sense of pain and joy. From the point of view of the artist, the theological reflection invoked through the painting allows the viewer to recognize the historical suffering of Christ and acknowledge the present day suffering that people share with Christ.
The theology of Babylon

A key point for the groups that consider themselves Rastafari is Babylon and their relationship to it. Babylon is conceptually necessary for the people of the Exodus as a place to escape from. Although the original Israelites initial Exodus was from Egypt, the Babylonian empire represented a place of similar captivity.

Many leaders of Rastafari equate America and American cities like New York with the biblical city of Babylon. Babylon represents a system of oppressive materialism that draws people into it. Babylon is a state of mind, a mental attitude that regards material things like buildings, monetary institutions, and modernity as products of Satan. It is an enslaving mentality driven by the religion of the slave master. For some Rastafari leaders “U.S.A.” means “Under Satan’s Authority” (Coping with Babylon).

A main weapon against the forces of Babylon is music. Music is political because it incites people to change themselves. Leaders teaching the message of Rastafari through reggae and “dance hall music” believe the more music they have, the less violence will occur. Rastafari theology is a theology of peace and love that is expressed through music. They reject actual violence against individuals, but in ritual and prayer, violent rhetoric can be a means of expression. Prayers such as “death to the pope, death to George Bush, death to America” are pleas to Jah (God) for vengeance against their oppressors.

Black biblical hermeneutics

The biblical text is a vital part of the Rastafari religious worldview. Many Rastafari take great care in reading and memorizing the Bible. From the specific worldview of the Jamaican Rastafari a particular form of hermeneutic has arisen called
by some, the black biblical hermeneutic. The foundation for the black biblical
hermeneutic is “downpression.” Nathanial Samuel Murrell writes, “The black biblical
hermeneutic of Rastafari that is at work here is a hermeneutic of faith rather than a
rationalistic, academic discipline. It is a hermeneutic designed to aid a ‘downpressed’
people in their self-definition and in the procuring of liberation in Babylon” (McFarlane
and Spencer 340). Although there is no biblical hermeneutic that is followed by all
Rastafari, this appears to be the root idea behind them.

A main practice in Rastafari is “citing down.” This particular practice is linking
different scriptures together with the theme under discussion. The Rastafari will pile text
upon text constructing specific meaning to apply to the contemporary situations. Though
multiple meanings can be taken from the texts individually, when put together, they can
gain new meaning that is specific to the context and need for the situation.17

The Rastafari engage the text with knowledge of their personal bias in understanding the
biblical stories from the “black perspective.” This approach is called “hermeneutic of
Blackness” (McFarlane and Spencer 326). It is a creative approach recognizing main
characters, stories, and circumstances as coming from the black perspective. All the
authors and stories are read to be about black people and black experience (McFarlane
and Spencer 327). This hermeneutic of blackness acknowledges at the outset that whites,
after enslaving blacks, interpreted the Bible from a different perspective. This resulted in
making black people believe they were the ones who should be enslaved. Whites
corrupted the original stories and doctrines to maintain a dominant theology. It is now up

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17 This would be an excellent example of Smith’s argument pertaining to sacred persistence.
to the Rastafari to find the original meaning within the text in order to better understand how to worship “Jah” or God (McFarlane and Spencer 326).

Three themes play a large part in the construction of Rastafari theology: resistance, repatriation, and redemption. Resistance is considered a part of the African experience since the transatlantic voyage of the people. Once in Jamaica, Africans used a variety of means to resist oppression through music, adaptations of culture, and escape/rebellion. Repatriation began through the teachings of Marcus Garvey. It was and is a physical hope of repatriation to Africa, but many believe they must settle for a spiritual repatriation until Babylon is destroyed by Jah. Redemption for the Rastafari is not in a future heaven that they reach after they die. They believe they need to fight for and find freedom here on earth. Promises of Heaven created a passive nature in the people of Jamaica and Rastafari see Christianity as historically holding people back from spiritual and physical liberation (Coping with Babylon).

The text of the Bible is a vehicle for new interpretation. It is an “open canon” meaning the Bible contains half of the truth and the other half must be determined by interpretation. The Rastafari are able to discover “new insights” that are just as valuable as scripture. Despite the distortion by whites, the Bible can still influence, instruct, and inspire (McFarlane and Spencer 328). Biblical interpretation is a process that comes through reading themselves into the text. The biblical stories are not solely about the past, but are about contemporary situation for Jamaican people. Interpretation also comes from inspiration through contemporary media. For example some leaders believed that microchips being placed into the skin would be the final sign of the end times. Having
read articles about these new chips one Rastafari leader proclaimed them to be the number of the beast. People would be forced to get them or else die as a result. The same is true with the war in Iraq being hailed as an end times prophesy. George Bush, like Mussolini in Italy, and Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, before him, had attacked innocent people and would face the consequences. The theology is radically interpretive and appears to take precedence over other aspects of biblical study (Coping with Babylon).

Another main focus is black superiority. For the people, chosen by God, blackness becomes the sign of God’s preference. Many Rastafari believe black people developed civilizations before whites. This interpretation comes from the influence of Marcus Garvey and the influence on biblical elucidation. Garvey challenged the white biblical narratives of blacks as the race of Ham under the curse of Canaan and the predetermination to slavery for blacks by God. Rastafari utilized inversion on the biblical story used to hold them down. They claim that it was the white race that was originally cursed, but after enslaving blacks, whites changed the meaning of the verses. Whites are also under the curse of sin by Adam, while blacks are not. They are also a part of the curse inflicted on Miriam, Moses’ sister after she challenged him about his marriage to an Ethiopian (McFarlane and Spencer 344)\(^\text{18}\). Overall, this perspective offers a hermeneutic through the lens of self interpretation not unlike other theologies through history.

*Sufferation* and *downpression* influence biblical theology in a similar manner as *han* and the blues. The theme of oppression when expressed through the lens of the biblical narrative provides a similar liberative theology. First there is a significant

\(^\text{18}\) In this story, Miriam confronts Moses for taking an African wife. The curse inflicted upon her is leprosy which manifests as “whiteness like snow”. Whiteness from this perspective is a curse.
identification with being the people in captivity in need of a similar exodus. Many Rastafari have believed this exodus will come with mass repatriation to Africa, specifically Ethiopia. The Rastafari as the people of God, continue to focus on Ethiopia as the Zion proclaimed in the Bible. Through this lens, it becomes necessary to return there. This specific view has changed through the last fifty years to include the belief that a mass of ships, a mass of planes, or even UFO’s would be the vehicles that would carry those in captivity back to the Promised Land. Babylon has also shifted to a state of mind that must be escaped in order to free oneself and the community (Coping with Babylon). Babylon is the oppressive system, or “shitstem” from which the Rastafari must fight for freedom.

The focus on Jesus and his relationship to them is also similar. Jesus is one who comes to identify with those who are oppressed. The belief that Haile Selassie is the second coming of Jesus manifesting himself as an African, demonstrates this and allows for the “ingenuity” toward canon which Jonathan Z. Smith writes. Not only does Jah have compassion for the oppressed, he comes as a king in order to set the world right. Through this lens, the Rastafari have a visible manifestation of Jah on earth. Despite Selassie’s claims that he was not God, the Rastafari look to the biblical text and find similar cases among the Gospels for the words of Jesus.

Selassie, as an incarnation of Jesus, provides the hope in oppression common among the themes examined in this study. Over and over the expectant endurance found among the minjung, African American, and Rastafari communities manifests itself

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19 This is evident in Redemption Song.
20 This is another play of language common in Jamaican linguistic play which challenges authority.
through the interpretive ingenuity applied to the biblical texts. The biblical depictions of Jesus can be overlaid on the “character” of Selassie providing new interpretations through his actions. For example, Selassie is believed to be in hiding. The biblical text can claim the same for Jesus. He said he would go where no one could find him. Selassie can be seen as the “comforter” promised in the Gospel of John. Repeatedly, the text can form new interpretations of hope in suffering that is formed through the experience of sufferation.

The overall hermeneutic for the Rastafari is its foundation in the feelings of sufferation and downpression. These feelings inform a variety of artistic expressions within the community and provide a biblical framework seen through the lens of collective oppression. As I have shown in previous chapters these feelings of collective oppression inform the hermeneutic principles. Specifically, in this case, they inform how Rastafari find identification with biblical characters who are on the side of God, or more importantly, those who God is on the side of. This demonstrates that theologies of liberation draw from these feelings in order to construct and retell the story in a way that provides meaningful spiritual and social resistance for practitioners.
Chapter 5: In My Father’s House

In this study I have sought to demonstrate that the biblical text serves as a vehicle of expression for culturally specific understandings of collective oppression. The specific understandings of collective oppression have been displayed in other culturally relevant forms of artistic expression and that expression has been shown to inform theological reflection in a way that constructs similar, yet culturally specific, theologies of liberation.

Each culture that was examined demonstrated a specific cultural expression of hopeful sorrow that informed many layers of everyday life for those who experience it. Sufferation, han, and the blues have many similarities that may themselves be informed by one another and through similar histories of oppression. Class struggle, enslavement, forced religious practice, separation from structures of capital, and so forth all work within the groups experiencing the collective oppression. Each case study has demonstrated the types of “exegetical ingenuity” discussed by Jonathan Z. Smith. Smith’s argument for sacred persistence demonstrates for us the beauty of diversity in these groups in the way they “attack” the forms of oppression through a refusal to lose all hope. Let us review here the three cases studied.

Black liberation

In chapter one I investigated the claims and reflections of James Cone and other black theologians. Specifically, I looked at the relationship of theology and the blues in
African American culture. Born out of a history of oppression, Black Theology has been shown to take its form from culturally specific ideas. Briefly examining some of those cultural forms I showed where the blues, as an ethos of hopeful sorrow, forms in pockets of African American culture. Often through the process of “storytelling” the pain of real life is expressed while also the hope of the future is presented. The blues has been shown to be a specific framework through which sections of African-American culture create meaning. The blues works in a specific music style that serves as a secular spiritual for groups disenfranchised by larger social structures. The blues also functions as a support system for literary works where blues songs and stories play an intricate role in the development of the story. In African American theatre, storytelling allows the audience to see the story played out by actors in the material world. These stories and musical frameworks play on previous works and themes, allowing the story to be told and retold in new ways that allow the historic and the present to become one.

As with these other forms, Black Theology is a structure through which the blues is allowed to “play.” Through storytelling the theologian becomes the author spinning the new story from the common thread. The biblical stories are able to tell the story over and over in ways that meet the needs of the contemporary context. Through the process of storytelling theology, the past molds the now through a present and future space that demonstrates hope.

These retellings take on specific meaning from two specific foci of the biblical narrative. From the Old Testament, we have found the story of the Exodus to be of special significance. God’s people are the people of the Exodus. He is on the African
American side from the beginning of the book. Black theologians include enslavement in their own history to the history of the enslaved Israelites.

The second main theme repeated through the act of storytelling is how Jesus (God in the flesh) identifies himself with the poor and oppressed. In human form he takes up the cross of oppression to demonstrate people’s inhumanity toward each other. In that, we have beside the exodus another common pattern of storytelling: Jesus as a black man, the embodiment of the oppressed in the form of God on earth.

**Minjung**

Chapter two demonstrated the influential role *han* plays Korean culture. *Han* was shown to be something built up through years of oppression in Korean history. Without *han*, some have claimed, it is impossible to understand any aspect of Korea. Built of the foundation of enslavement, oppressive religious/political structures, and various shifts and changes in the country’s ruling class, the minjung people reached a point where they realized they are the dominant force in the structural building of the country’s culture. Because of this, the *han* that they feel and produce through the inherited nature of the pain and oppression allows them to become the key topical theme of Korean history.

Because *han* plays such an integral role in the culture it is not surprising that it can be found in so many aspects of the people’s artistic life. For them, dance, poetry, art, literature and film *han* informs all the aspects of their lives. *Han* provides a framework for understanding and provides structure to the self-awareness of the people.

As the blues informs Black Theology, *han* informs its own Korean form of theological reflection. The minjung theologians have used the exodus narrative to
themselves as the people of God. Again, as in the case of Black Theology, *minjung* theology also interprets Jesus as identifying with the oppressed common people, in their case, the *minjung*.

**Rastafari**

Our study of the Rastafari began with the most easily applicable example of fusion between Rastafari theology and reggae. The biblical theology flows through the musical expressions more clearly than in the other two groups studied here. The historical suffering founded in a history of enslavement informs the roots of the *sufferation* and *downpression* which illuminates theological and other artistic expressions. After independence, the long awaited freedom found itself prolonged by capitalistic oppression.

Through a demonstration of the themes of *sufferation* and *downpression* we found that their feelings and artistic expressions are part of the undergirding of life of the oppressed peoples in the Caribbean, specifically Jamaica. I explained the way these expressions flow through other forms of art in the communities. Much like the other two groups discussed, Rastafari followers identify themselves with the people of the Exodus with Jesus as Jah in the flesh. Through this identification, Haile Selassie as the reincarnation of Jesus, can fulfill biblical prophecy. He can be seen as the joyful hope of the future for those experiencing a collective oppression.

**Implications**

The implications of this study lend themselves as topics for further research in the areas of comparative theology, sociology of religion, narratology, and folklore. More comparative studies may find similar trends in liberative theologies displaying other
culturally specific expressions in their theologies. Furthermore, one of the main recurring themes in the groups studied in this thesis leads to a new critique of Marx based in the specifically cultural aspects in theology. Marx accuses religion of being an “opiate” to the people. “Religion” promises a future kingdom where the poor will be clothed and fed and they will no longer have worries, sorrows, or pains. This emphasis on the future kingdom, says Marx, becomes a hope for the poor, luring them to continue to work for the landowners to make them richer while they remain destitute. Yet, viewed from the perspective of the groups studied in this thesis, a flaw in Marx’s argument is that he assumes the masses accept the theology given to them and do not have theologies of their own. The masses may not be used by theology, but rather, may use liberative theologies to analyze their own oppression and to address it in this world.

In this regard we need to develop a more critical cultural model of theology. For example those who create a theology that emphasizes heaven may be quite detached from the world of the “working.” If a theology is created by a person who has time to theologize, has the time to educate themselves or be educated, lives a life of relatively little physical labor, does not know personally the pain of dying spouse or child, sitting cloistered in a room not worrying about where their next meal may come from, the type of theology produced may be one that focuses on a heaven. It would be a place of no death, affinity to God, little physical labor, and a place with no dying spouses or children. For the oppressed people discussed in this thesis, such a theology would be more irrelevant than, as Marx claimed, oppressive. Though the church could be seen as an oppressive institution, a theology of a future kingdom never meets the poor where they
are. This would match the experience James Cone writes about when he says Barth has nothing to say to a poor black man in Arkansas. Marx assumes the oppressed lack agency and ingenuity—that perhaps tells us more about Marx than it does the oppressed.

Other implications for those practicing theology is the ability to utilize culturally specific forms for the construction of new theological forms. The practice of ingenuity is one that appears to be practical even when fully acknowledged. Using culturally specific forms of understanding and ingenuity in the biblical hermeneutic offers oppressed groups the ability to frame theological ideas in ways their audience can understand.

For the field of comparative theology this study shows the fruitfulness of taking a deeper look into the artistic expressions of communities as an informative structure. This study suggests that artistic expressions in “secular” spaces may be crucial in the construction of theological forms. The study of the life situation of specific theologians might improve our understanding of how the habitus of the individual theologians informs their texts.

Future endeavors may demonstrate that these comparisons will shift over time. Will theologies in America become informed by heavy metal, Goth, R&B, or contemporary film? Can Rastafari theology become more deeply affected through western influences? Will South Korea become affected by foreign films, art, music, and poetry? Will han, the blues, and sufferation always exist? Like many other works, this thesis was spurred by the work of a prolific writer and theologian, James Cone. His quick analysis of similar cultural forms and their influence on theology informed the impetus for this study. The question remains, however: have these theologies of liberation gained
for their communities the political, cultural, and religious liberation they sought? The future of these communities depends on their ability to utilize the contemporary themes and expressions liberative theology proposes.
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