

Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil: Testimony and Justice from Ferguson to the Classroom

Seth Emmanuel Gaiters
University of North Carolina-Wilmington

“At approximately noon on Saturday, August 9, 2014...”
Lezley McSpadden, *Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil*

Histories cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also narrates them.
Giambattista Vico, *New Science*

The linking of those gone, ourselves here, those coming; our continuation, our flowing not along any meretricious channel but along our living way, the way: it is that remembrance that calls us. The eyes of seers should range far into purposes. The ears of hearers should listen far toward origins. The utterers' voice should make knowledge of the way, of heard sounds and visions seen, the voice of the utterers should make this knowledge inevitable, impossible to lose.

Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*

There are these moments in which it seems time stands still. When everything seems to stop. Without closing your eyes, in your mind's eye, the recollection is so strong that you can still imagine yourself there. Our brains are so delicate and fragile; they imprint the details of the sudden and the tragic. At a cellular level there are these microscopic scripts we enmesh where the body, with all of its unfathomable material, affective, and spiritual qualities, internally shares stories of tragedy and our place in it. As humans we (in)voluntarily tell our stories. We testify. We bear witness. We first tell our stories to ourselves, and we remember them, before we direct those stories to others and the world. The body remembers. Anne E. Streaty Wimberly put it so well, “Story is a powerful part of human existence...our stories are the ‘sacred texts’ of our lives.”¹ Life is a story in evolution that is formed from the narratives around us, and we both shape the storied world around us and find our place in it by testifying and sharing our stories too. We must remember the sacred texts of our lives.

LM and the Traumatic

After her son's death, Lezley McSpadden testifies to the visceral registration of the tragic and consequently chronicles, through life narrative, what Henry Louis Gates calls “the impulse to bear witness.”² Someone called her cell phone. And she answered, “Hello.” “Somebody been shot on Canfield.” When first hearing this she “quickly straightened up...beginning to shake all over...hands trembling now.” Though the details were not fully clear yet, they were nevertheless foreboding fragments formidably fomenting fear since her mother lived in the Canfield Apartments and her son Michael Brown had been visiting her for the summer. McSpadden remarks, “I swallowed, my mouth was all of a sudden dry, and I felt a dull thud fill my chest...trying to stay in control, but my hand holding the cigarette was now shaking uncontrollably.” Between sobs Brittanie, her sister, “was able to get out eight words: ‘Nette Pooh, the police just shot Mike Mike.’” Shell shock settles in; “I heard her, but my mind wasn't trying to understand nothing like that. I quietly started gasping for air. What she had just said was trapped between my ears like some muddy standing water...A gust of wind shot through my body, and then like lightning...tears exploded from my eyes...” The poetic and creative expressions she mobilizes to demonstrate the viscosity of her fear, anxiety, rage, tears, and grief, in colliding with this traumatic event, share the emotional valence of her memoir as testimony. She testifies to move us—into the truth she knows so deeply settled in her bones. Registering within her body is an impulse and compulsion to Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil, as her memoir is entitled. While within the devastation she lyricizes the life, legacy, and love of her son Michael Brown as a way of creatively getting at the truth and refusing the satanic capture of that devastation. The truth shut up in her bones she cannot forbear to tell. Through autobiography she bears witness. She remembers her story out loud.³

SG – Faith and Justice

I wasn't there. I didn't go to Ferguson. I was not there to face the extremely militaristic police force. I did not experience the punch and bruising of their rubber bullets. My head did not ache nor did my ears ring, because of the shrill of the sound canons they call LRADS (Long Range Acoustic Devices). I did not need

a comrade to rinse my eyes out with milk to quell the irritation of tear gas that was fired my way. I was working on writing my thesis paper to complete a Master of Theology Degree at a seminary in Pasadena, CA. There was no curfew behind my desk, no armored vehicles passing by my window to regulate my complicated and controversial thoughts about race and religion. I wasn't there, but I was there. The moment and the movement, which exploded through it, reached me. Though I had participated in Los Angeles-based actions before this, beginning with the outcry following Trayvon Martin's death, Michael Brown and Ferguson left me with new eyes; after this activation I saw things differently.

There was something powerful about August 9, 2014, the Uprising in Ferguson, and the Movement for Black Lives that ensued which changed me and transmuted my conception of faith. It left me asking, “How can you espouse a faith that has no connection to justice?” James Cone had learned through the conjuncture of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, that faith “is not abstract but concrete, not neutral but committed.”⁵ I had learned this too, through this contemporary movement. Beginning with *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone, clearing his throat, clarifies that decrying racial domination and “speaking truth to power” on behalf of the least of these is a faithful act demanded by the gospel. As such, Cone actualized the practice of his faith through scholarship. Cone's scholarly awakening and vocation to justice came through his convergence with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, whereas I found my own came through collision with the BLM movement. I too recognized my vision of scholarship expanding as an explicit act of faith working through justice. Through my concrete experience, beyond the theorizations of others, I learned that the question of the relationship between faith and justice, or religion and social movement, or the gospel and liberation is very much alive, through the testimony of others. Their testimonies moved me and I have heeded the powerful call to story by testifying myself. The question of faith and justice abides, is active, and continues to remain unresolved. It was through my own kairotic access to this catalytic moment that the question was revived in me. Entirely attributable to the Spirit's guidance, the movement, contending with tragedy, taught me and offered me a renewed opportunity to explore this inexhaustible intersection, in a world in which the condition of Black life remains in the wake of anti-Black violence. Now. I. Know. What. Faith. Means. I could not believe what I was seeing. I remember sitting in front of my computer screen and watching this moment and trying to figure out what happened. And pondering deeply about what was happening, in that moment. I wish I could detail the paradigm shift that was registering in the cells of my body. Something characteristic of what Thomas Kuhn would call a “revolution” of knowing. It was like “scales falling from my eyes,” an attempt at answering “flashes of intuition,” like lightning striking me through the computer screen, and into a “conversion.”⁶

The movement taught me. Ferguson forced me to answer a call. This call somehow became clearer through tragedy and required I find my footing in scholarship to follow it. For this entry I consider the place of testimony in the learning process, in a moment and context that demands justice. I am particularly interested

in examining the phenomenon of testimony within the African American tradition as a way of teaching connections between faith and justice. For instance, what does education and scholarship in social justice mean, from the perspective of faith? And how are teaching and research impacted by the vocation of involvement in justice? I contend that the practice of testimony, emanating from traditions and practices of Black political faith, has pedagogical value in academic formation. Testimony is needed in protest and building connections for marginalized communities. Comparatively I explore fragments of three different stories of “that day” (August 9, 2014)—two testimonies I have already begun to pry open, and one sterilized account: these are Lezley McSpadden’s story in Ferguson, my own story in absentia, while in Pasadena, and the report of the Department of Justice (DOJ) scripted from the many hours several officials took peddling about Brown’s lifeless body. I want the comparative collision of these multiple layers—of testimonies alongside an administrative report—to illuminate another analytical layer that examines how testimony provides pedagogical value in teaching justice. I do this through stories, through testimony: Lezley McSpadden (indicated by “LM”), my own (indicated by “SG”), and the Department of Justice Report (indicated by “DOJR”).

Testimony and Protest

Black people in America are familiar with the knowledge-making and spiritual power of testimony. Testimony is a weapon, an ideological weapon, a counter-narrative, a counter-discourse, a sword of the word that Black people have wielded to contend with the racial regime of anti-blackness and white supremacy, and other forms of domination interconnected with it, that seek to obscure the voice and obfuscate the humanity of oppressed communities, so that their needs are obfuscated and out of sight. Testimony is a type of political engagement, as it is “a personal story that contains a message from a subordinated group involved in political struggle.”⁷ This understanding of “testimony” is also carried by other subordinated groups; such as, “testimonio,” which elsewhere finds expression in the works of Latinx scholars.⁸ Unless McSpadden and others practice this tradition of telling and retelling their experiences as knowledge from the margins they cannot talk back. Testifying is how they speak truth to power. Testimony is a way of interrogating the “official ideological accounts of the story of the Republic”⁹—such as the “Department of Justice Report Regarding the Criminal Investigation into the Shooting Death of Michael Brown”—and getting at the truth that many times gets obscured through the amnesiac sterility of various administrative formalities, procedures, and regulative protocols. Instead of acquiescing to the sterile abstractions and forgetfulness of the powerful, African Americans and other marginalized communities have remained committed to what Toni Morrison, in her magisterial text *Beloved*, termed “rememory,” the remembering and reassembling of experiences past.¹⁰ Rememory is a burden not only embodied in Black culture, due to the weight of traumatic history during and after slavery, but it is also an enfolded practice of remembering correctly and sharing the story of that trauma in spite of the systematic and intentional distortion of historical fact in white culture. Pedagogy can and is used imperially. But McSpadden, grounded in a tradition of truth-telling, remembers—or remem-

ories—to tell the truth and shame the devil. Though the trauma follows her, in opening herself and releasing through testimony what is within her, she claims her self and her truth in spite of a world that seeks to deny both her and her testimony. Without her testimony, “as Hegel had it, there could be no ordered repetition or memory, and without memory, there could be no history. Without history, there could be no self.”^{11,12} And she refused to let go of herself and her son.

Shrieks, cries, cursing, yelling, screaming, lamenting, anger, joy, celebration, shouting, writing, dancing, and the myriad ways in which an enfleshed testimony takes shape reminds us of the truth of the humanity we are hearing. Testimony takes us beyond protocol, juridical reports, and media reviews. In *Bearing Witness*, Gates writes, “If the individual black self could not exist before the law, it could and would be forged in language, as a testimony at once to the supposed integrity of the black self and against the social and political evils that delimited individual and group equality for all African Americans.”¹³ McSpadden will not remain silent. She testified, bore witness, and both claimed and proclaimed herself and her son as an intrinsic part of the world.¹⁴ Lifting up her voice she reminds us she is Michael Brown’s Mama, that he is her baby, and that they deserve(d) so much more—love, justice. Following testimony, we land in what Theodore Adorno describes as, “the condition[s] of truth, [which] is to allow suffering to speak.” For the scholar, listening to the testimonies of the oppressed and their suffering, alongside their own testimony, must be part and parcel to the work of scholarship in getting at truth, in both teaching and research.

My research and teaching help me make sense of things; they help me to get at truth and understand false claims. On the one hand, they help name the lies and distortions of the powerful and the privileged, and on the other hand, they help me to more acutely amplify and appreciate the truths that those without power and privilege are telling. They offer me the opportunity to experiment and connect human experiences with theories that illuminate those experiences, and by taking those human experiences into consideration they also let me interrogate those theories. In fact, scholarship for me is an act of faith: it presents me with instruments and opportunities in building a just world. Listening and embedding these tools within the testimony of everyday people guides the work and insight of research and teaching to a just world. In this sense, testimony provides pedagogical value in teaching justice and can be a part of reorienting us to new perspectives of the world, as just and habitable for all. To this end, teaching and research must be grounded in love and justice—which is a new way of looking at the world, where the “first are last and the last first.” Our stories are linked, compassionate listening is encouraged, and the conditions for community are created.

The witness of this contemporary social movement and the movement space it created—closing distance and building relationships—participates in this long tradition of truth-telling. McSpadden is a witness raptured up into this movement space as well. As Deva Woody so wonderfully positions us to perceive in *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movement*, I believe the BLM movement has so much

to teach us about democracy, radicalism, faith, power, justice, “and the pragmatic paths toward making other worlds politically possible. And though I am neither architect nor visionary of this movement, I am a witness. The movement made me a witness.” And what I write or teach is my testimony: it is “an act of political care rendered by way of scholarship,” because this language of research and teaching is a language I know well and a service that I can faithfully render.¹⁵ I must tell the story.

DOJ – The Report

Department of Justice Report Regarding the Criminal Investigation into the Shooting Death of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri Police Officer Darren Wilson (DOJR):

“Wilson shot Brown at about 12:02 p.m. on August 9, 2014.” (8)

It seems the epigenetic impact of trauma illuminates that we are physiologically and psychologically inclined to tell stories. Autobiographical memory is genetic. We are anatomically inclined to autobiography, even at a cellular level. The body remembers. The body keeps score.¹⁶ There are pains of the past that will never leave us. It’s like an assertion elsewhere of Howard Thurman I remember. “Black people carry the memory of lynching in their bodies and that the nation as a whole has not come to terms with the history of lynching.”¹⁷ Living in such realities, Black people carry the memory and the impulse to share the story. As James Baldwin aptly shares in *Sonny’s Blues*, “While the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness...and this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation.”¹⁸ McSpadden’s articulation of memory and mourning is deeply needed in lifting light to forge a path forward and present new depths of understanding, not only for herself, but also for a country that functions by not remembering her trauma, Black trauma—functions by means of social and cultural amnesias.¹⁹ As Benedict Anderson argues, there is a forgetting that is central to the project of American nationalism. There’s something so American about just scrubbing the blood off the pavement of Canfield Drive with soap and brush, and just moving forward and moving on. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. But no, McSpadden reminds us, his body, in so many ways, is still on the ground. She honestly contends, in her memoir, “I’ll never get over what happened to my son.”²⁰

DOJR: “Crime scene detectives and the SLCME [(St. Louis County Medical Examiner)] medicolegal investigator completed the processing of Brown’s body at approximately 4:00 p.m., at which time Brown’s body was transported to the Office of the SLCME.” (9)

I remember what I saw.
I remember where I was when I saw it.
I remember what I felt.
I remember.
I remember what the Department of Justice said.
I remember what the St. Louis Police Department said.
But I remember what I heard.
I remember what I saw.
I remember what I felt.

The DOJ so technically indicates on paper in their “Initial Law Enforcement Investigation,” that protocol was followed. Should one read the cold facts as the DOJ scripted them in their report it would appear that the work of those who first arrived before Brown’s body was taken off the ground—
the Ferguson Police Department (FPD),
the St. Louis County Prosecutor’s Office (SLCPD),
the Bureau of Crimes Against Persons (CAP),
the Bureau of Criminal Identification Crime Scene Unit,
the St. Louis County Medical Examiner (SCLME),
the Highway Safety Unit,
and the Tactical Operations Unit,
amongst many other personnel,
before and behind paramedics—

it would only appear that they reasonably took over four hours to do their job. The report stories tragedy with tragedy, as if it could be clinically detached from the feelings of a mother, a family, a community, a people—from truth, from justice. Its litany of units, personnel, and protocol exhibits the very violence and inhumanity that discarded and abandoned human life on the pavement, to fester, face down: bloodletting as a “terrible spectacle” of domination. On paper, to most, it may appear that they abandoned no details and professionally did their job.

But this is their story and I remember what I saw and felt.
I know a different story.

Reflecting deeply on the dramatization and pedagogical function of such primal scenes Sadiya Hartman asks, “Are we witnesses...Or are we voyeurs?”²¹ The invitation to voyeurism is brutal, systematic, and sophisticated; it exacerbates indifference to Black suffering, as a consequence of numbing spectacle, or it encourages prurience.²² But McSpadden—and the “cloud of witnesses” about her—remind us to be witnesses and to tell the truth; to truthfully convey the impact of such brutal violence and its ongoing effects, to narrate and tell a different story.

LM and DOJ

Lezley McSpadden, Michael Brown’s mother, contends, it was “Four and A Half Hours Too Long.” “They left his body in the street.” She keeps track of the humanity of her son, without the morass of inapt technicalities, and so-called protocol, when Brown’s body was still on the ground. She does not want us to forget the terrible spectacle:

I caught a glimpse of a blood-covered white sheet laying over the form of a motionless body stretched out on the ground and screamed, throwing my arms into the air, 'Naw, naw, naw, that ain't my child! It can't be!'²³

'Let me see my son! Why ain't he off the ground yet? Do anybody hear me?' I begged, frantically running from officer to officer. Didn't these fucking police understand? I said, 'Do anybody hear me?'²⁴

Though I was not there, I felt that I was there. I could not turn away from his body. I cannot forget this image. Like writer Charles Pierce, nationally recorded in *Esquire*, I keep coming back to that "one simple moment...one image, from which all the other images have flowed. They left the body in the street."²⁵ For four and a half hours in the unrelenting sun Michael Brown's body remained to fester where it fell, with from-his-crown blood escaping from underneath a shoddily played sheet melding into the pavement. Pierce goes on to express what many felt concerning this:

Dictators leave bodies in the street.
Petty local satraps leave bodies in the street.
Warlords leave bodies in the street...
they leave bodies in the street. As object lessons, or to make a point, or because there isn't the money to take the bodies away and bury them, or because nobody gives a damn whether they are there or not.²⁶

I saw a lynched human. I saw a lynched body. Lezley McSpadden, Michael Brown's mother, fiercely charged, "The police had a strategy... crucifying my son."²⁷

DOJR: Darren Wilson has stated his intent in shooting Michael Brown was in response to a perceived deadly threat... Because Wilson did not act with the requisite criminal intent, it cannot be proven beyond reasonable doubt to a jury that he violated 18 U.S.C. § 242 when he fired his weapon at Brown. (86)

Lezley McSpadden:

There were three people out there on Canfield that day. So there are three sides to the story. The truth hasn't ever been told. Your truth. You're not here to tell the world what happened. So I'm gonna represent, baby, as best I can.

Sometimes, when I'm laying in my bed awake because I can't sleep, you come to me. I see you so vividly, and I know that you are just watching out for Mama, I know. And I know I'll see you again one day.

I love you,
Mama²⁸

August 9, 2014, revealed anew the depth of racial hatred in the country. "Requisite criminal intent"? Does this need to be determined by a jury for us to know this was racist violence? Certainly not. As I watched the news a virulent wave of antiblackness and

white supremacy seemed to crest in my body with a Black teenager's brutalized body desecrated and disregarded in the street for all to see for over four hours. I was close enough in age to thoroughly identify with him. The officer that shot Michael Brown revealed patterns and practices of antiblack violence systematically oppressing Black residents. It revealed so much of what Black communities across the country—like Canfield—already knew. This moment in Ferguson, Missouri was not an aberration in America, but a microcosm of the larger landscape of antiblack violence in the country. Not a singular occurrence, but systemic. Not peripheral, but central and fundamental to serial realities of oppression. Ferguson is America. The reality of such brutality for many called into question the integrity of U.S. democracy. And yet, something about this moment was markedly different and tipped the scales of political engagement in the country, while also reviving religious engagement for many.

DOJR: VI. Conclusion

For the reasons set forth above, this matter lacks prosecutive merit and should be closed. (86)

"Lacks prosecutive merit"? "Lacks...merit"? I remember what I saw. Protests began immediately after the shooting. Tensions erupted as demonstrators were met with riot police and dogs. They were demanding justice and they were not backing down.

"Black Lives Matter!"

More than a despotism object lesson of antiblack brutality, Brown's murder also pointed to a sociality of protest for Black lives that surged around him and transformed the direction of Black religion and politics in the United States, in the wake of his death. The energetics of this movement—belting "Black Lives Matter"—moves beyond the officer's gun and exceeds into the critical connections of people caught in "the spirit of liberation." A new generation of activists and organizers quickly moved to pick up the mantle of justice for the defense and sanctity of Black lives. I was watching a movement of global proportions unfold. Before my eyes the mantle of justice was caught connecting BLM to earlier eras of the Black Freedom Struggle. Seeing all of these things unfold left an indelible imprint upon me. I found myself caught up into a wave of activation that swept across the country. I was being drawn to a story in a new way that now made sense. I was in seminary at the time, but the story of Black political faith in the streets was teaching me anew the place of faith and justice, the synchronicity of spirituality and social justice.

Conclusion – Testimony and Connections

Is justice a value worth teaching? Is justice something that is teachable? What's the pedagogical value of being awakened to justice? What does it mean for students to be awakened? Where does this go? What does it mean for a teacher to craft these "burning bush" experiences? Must the scholar's teaching and scholarship burn? How might this burning occur? How does a scholar aflame for justice collide with those who just think that such teaching and scholarship is "indoctrination" and "brainwashing" of youth? How do such teachers and researchers

deal with people who think this is not something for the public space? In this current moment in which such engagement is often the targeted focus of restrictive legislation on diversity and inclusion we must grapple these kinds of questions. Testimony becomes a pathway into such wrestling. Testimony becomes a way of making connections.

Testimony functions as an invitation to genuine connection, whether in teaching or research. It functions as an invitation to students and readers to connect with the pedagogue, the scholar, even with other worlds. Across the gulfs fixed between us and our students—whether culturally, generationally, politically, racially, or otherwise—"the possibilities of connection" are opened when we raise the testimonies of marginalized communities and give audience to their stories.²⁹ Natasha Tarpley knows that the practices and possibilities of this linking and connection through giving testimony are rooted deeply in the fertile soil of Africana religious imagination:

reaching back to slavery (and before), to the places our ancestors created—behind somebody's wood cabin doubling as a makeshift church or meetinghouse, or in a nearby clearing—where they opened themselves up to one another, showed their scars, spoke of their day-to-day life, their hopes and dreams, prayed to their God, and tried to remember everything they had lost.³⁰

In a society that still renders them invisible or in some way inferior, Black people have testified not only to commune with God, but "also to define and redefine [their] humanity; to ground [themselves] in community...in voices that know... making a bridge from this world to the next." Testimony³¹ has provided both religious and political function, whereby the marginalized have been able to make themselves visible and explore the acoustics of their own voices when they were rendered silent and unthought.

The pedagogue understands that historically marginalized communities' experiences are legitimate sources of knowledge and that their experiences can tell us all something about larger concepts we analyze in the complexity of social relations and human existence. McSpadden, alongside others, wants us to know that truth and justice cannot be understood apart from the perspective of the margins, apart from the traumatized of Canfield Drive, apart from those who are familiar with the ground of domination and antiblackness. Through traditions and practices of Black political faith I learned that the moral aim of my work must be connected to center and amplify the voices and testimony of the marginalized, while remaining attentive to the structural problems of racism and inequality that created their marginalization. Pedagogically, I express this commitment to justice and truth through the voices that I bring into the classroom (or my research), and how I bring those voices into the classroom (or my research). My positional experience of marginalization and theoretical reflection about it is related to a goal of enacting social change for marginalized people. Somewhere in the vulnerability required through the linking of stories—of teacher and of student with the stories of the marginalized—in commitment to truth and justice, do we discover anew our common humanity in testimony.



About the Author

Seth Emmanuel Gaiters is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies, and Africana Studies at University of North Carolina-Wilmington. He is a scholar of African American religious studies, with particular interest in the exploration of religion and race through Black progressive social movements and cultures in America. His interdisciplinary research and teaching trajectory engages the intersection of African American religious thought, political theology, race, African American literature, and critical theory. He is currently completing his book manuscript, tentatively entitled, *#BlackLivesMatter and Religion in the Street: A Revival of the Sacred in the Public Sphere*. In this project he brings his interests to a study of *#BlackLivesMatter* (BLM) as a way of broadening normative notions of (Black) religiosity and elucidating the synchronicity of spirituality and social justice in Black political organizing. He has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, Louisville Institute, Forum for Theological Exploration, and Social Science Research Council.

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10 "What were you talking about?"

'You won't understand, baby.'

'Yes, I will.'

'I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.'

'Can other people see it?' asked Denver.

'Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes.' [Sethe answers.]

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