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Abstract

"To be clear, you should read this book because it's good poetry. It's musical and accessible, yet multivocal and idea-laden."

Posting about the book *Touch the Earth* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/poetry-to-break-the-power-of-empire-a-review-of-touch-the-earth/>

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Poetry to Break the Power of Empire: A Review of *Touch the Earth*

Howard Schaap

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Title: *Touch the Earth: Poems on The Way*

Author: Drew Jackson

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We're used to the gospel being abstracted. Boiled down into morals. Dissociate into theological principles. Made over for use in every time and place, meaning also for no specific time and place.

Of course, there are dangers in reading yourself into scripture, in making yourself the people of God, as both recent and historical events have shown. Maybe abstracting the gospel is the safer option.

But when you read the gospel within certain specific contexts, something happens. You can feel it start to heat up. I've heard this happens in prisons, such as in Bob Ekblad's *Reading Scripture with the Damned*.

I once had it happen when telling bible stories at a Royal Family Kids Camp. With kids in the audience from severely broken homes, the stories about Daniel in exile and Esther in proximity to powerful men suddenly meant different things.

In Drew Jackson's second poetry collection, *Touch the Earth*, you feel Luke's gospel smolder. *Touch the Earth* is a follow-up collection to *God Speaks Through Wombs*, a collection of poems based on the Gospel of Luke, chapters 1-8. In *Touch the Earth*, Jackson picks up where he left off, writing poems prompted by reading Luke 9-24.

To be clear, the poems of *Touch the Earth* are not commentaries on Luke's gospel. Rather, they happen at the intersection of Luke's gospel and Jackson's life in New York City, NY, USA, present moment. Jackson lets the gospel speak to him where he is, physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually: as he remembers listening to hip hop or getting his haircut, as he walks his dog or works with a church building project, or even as he eats at a fish fry.

Out of these details of life, the gospel arises to speak. A sequence of poems in the first section of the book, "Students," will illustrate the balance of personal, communal, and philosophical that runs throughout *Touch the Earth*.

In a poem called "Silence Disrupted" (Luke 9:1), Jackson recalls his father resting in his room, watching Saturday TV, "Tiger Woods hitting drives," "A bag of Hot Cheese Curls/ already half-eaten," with the young speaker of the poem busting in and "plopping my body next to his/ lying sideways across the bed," disturbing his dad's peace, yet also welcomed in.

On the very next page, in the poem "We Feed Each Other" (Luke 9:2-7, the story of five loaves and two fish), Jackson follows a quote from Kiese Laymon to consider "black abundance" and specifically the contrast between dominant economic theories and those Jackson witnessed in his black community. "There isn't enough to go around—/ the engine that drives our way of life," the poem begins, before making it's turn:

Five loaves and two fish
will only get you so far.
But we were taught *ujamaa*
before we internalized the empire's mantra.
Blessing and breaking
what little we have.

Ujamaa is an economics of sharing, developed in Tanzania, that this reader had to look up.

Immediately after this poem heavy with economic ideas, Jackson follows with a specific communal vision entitled "Leftovers," about communal meals, where Jackson advises:

Never show up to the cookout
or slide through the fish fry
without some Tupperware in hand.
You won't want to miss
the blessing of these leftovers
for days on end.

These lines also illustrate the subtle music to many of Jackson's poems. The internal rhyme of "slide" and "fry," the slant rhyme of "hand" and "end," the percussive of "miss" and "blessing" are sounds that you might miss if you don't read it aloud, and these poems were meant to be read aloud.

Both the lyricism of Jackson's lines and the snapshots had me thinking of Langston Hughes (a poem titled "The Kingdom Is Ours" conjures Hughes by dropping "stardust") and Countee Cullen, but in truth the voices that inform and appear in *Touch the Earth* are incredibly wide-ranging. Jackson's poems dance with lines and ideas from Mary Oliver and Ada Limon, from Cornel West and Kendrick Lamar, from Cheryl Sanders and Gertrude Stein, and they're the product of just as many voices and strains.

But if *Touch the Earth* is first of all rooted in black community, it's also a wrestling-with-empire book—as the gospel of Luke is. Jackson grabs with one hand the threat of empire in Luke and with the other hand the threat of empire—especially upon black bodies—in America and holds them together for us.

This doesn't mean the book is only for the black community, however. It's for Christians concerned with empire and the kingdom of God.

For example, the fifth section of the book, "Tyrants," is based on Luke 13, a chapter which mentions both Pilate's massacre of Jewish worshipers and the casual information that comes to Jesus—delivered by the pharisees—that Herod wants to kill him. In "Ask Them Why?" the poem asks us all,

When they come
warning you
of government threats
against your body...
ask them why
they are urging you
to get away
and not seeking
safe haven for themselves.
Ask them why

they remain in the realm
of good graces
and do not find themselves
in the crosshairs.

The connection couldn't be clearer. *Touch the Earth* takes seriously that if the lives of the marginalized—black lives—do not matter, then we are all either in danger, or we're envoys—unwitting or not—of empire.

To be clear, you should read this book because it's good poetry. It's musical and accessible, yet multivocal and idea-laden. You will be able to read and reread this book.

Then, too, as my need to look up *ujamaa* illustrates, white readers should read this book because it's a hospitable invitation to educate ourselves. Many events Jackson references—the betrayal and murder of Fred Hampton, the treachery of J. Edgar Hoover, the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal church by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones—are things citizens of the United States should know about but that many, in my experience, don't. You will find that you are not at the center of this book. That can make for a strange reading experience; it can also make for a tremendously rich reading experience.

Which brings me to my final reason to read *Touch the Earth*: read it as Lenten practice, for your imagination's sake. Read it to touch the “upside down kingdom” in both historical and present-day examples.

For example, in the poem “Situation Ethics,” Jackson recounts how deception became a kind of value for slaves by which to undermine slavery itself, illustrated through a story told by Booker T. Washington: In the middle of the night, his mother awakened him to eat a chicken that she had taken from the master.

Jackson ties this anecdote directly to our ideas of God. “Who sets the standard of morality?” he asks. “God? Whose god? The one who sovereignly ordained these chains?” And later, after the anecdote about the chicken, his answer: “We call God immutable, which usually means we refuse to change our view of God. Let every deception be in service of heaven.”¹

Especially as Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem, Jackson's poems will help you see the passion of Christ in new ways. One of my favorite examples of this is in the poem “Via Crucis: Two Others,” about the two thieves—sorry, the two men crucified alongside Jesus. “I will not criminalize these two,” Jackson says of the two men.

I do not know their crimes.

I do know they did not deserve to die.
And to die nameless
at the hands of the state,
staked to poles lowered into the ground.

Again, Jackson brings his whole self to the text, his experience of empire:

I do know the state has a reputation
of crucifying
the innocent

He will not let the ruts of the story dictate how he hears it.

Their story
turned into an allegory
about deathbed confession.

In *Touch the Earth*, Drew Jackson asks us to see differently.

At the end of this review, I feel like I have said almost nothing really about the artistry of these poems. Jackson displays a range of poetic forms at least as wide as his reading, from radical spacing to dropped-line, from the closed form *ghazal* to prose poems. But sound is the star of Drew Jackson's poetry, never clearer than in "Under the Ground," read so memorably as part of the *inallthings* podcast. Listen to the resonance of "womb" and "entombed," the staccato "pip" and "pit," the ringing of "broken" and "open" and the way that "luminous" and "humus" both resonate and tingle.

Touch the Earth is a book of poems that live, that smoke, that you can return to again and again. You should absolutely read it this Lenten season, considering the place where you stand, the threat of empire, and the power of God.