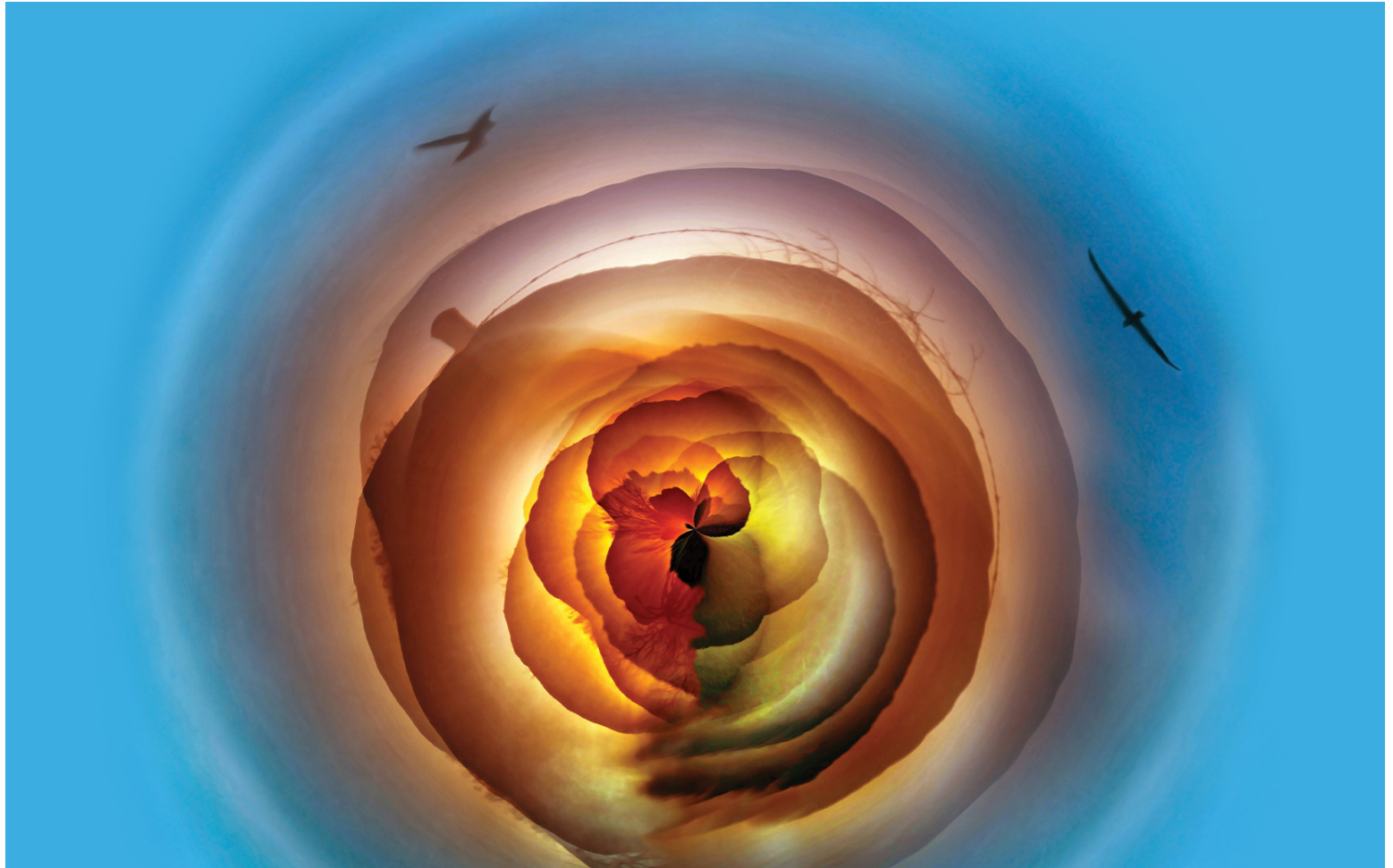


# MEDIA KIT



# FLIGHT SONGS

Notes for an Album of Exile and Rebirth

Poems by Stacey C. Johnson

2024: Finishing Line Press

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Only life.  
Only hope.  
This is about  
Liberation.**



Stacey C. Johnson is a lifetime educator and student in the perception of mystery. Her work is about liberation through cycles of destruction and renewal and her primary obsessions revolve around the cultivation of hope against the possibility of despair, particularly relevant in an age of mechanized destruction. *Flight Songs* emerges from this work. This polyvocal collection highlights voices from the margins--neglected, abused, surveilled, dispossessed, and unseen--and resonates with a transcultural pulse to expand familiar notions of human struggle into one that expands to encompass a mythical narrative of the living and the dead in this pivotal moment.

# STACEY C. JOHNSON

**AUTHOR OF *FLIGHT SONGS***



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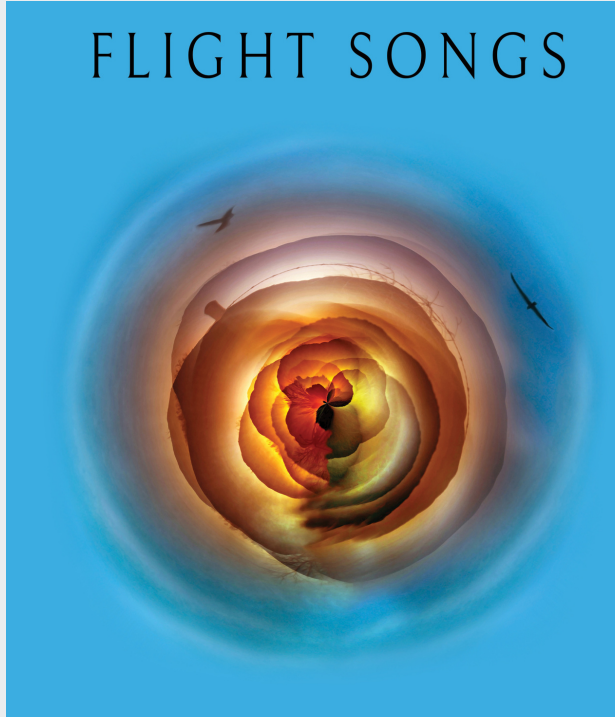
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# Press Release

*for immediate release*

## FLIGHT SONGS



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### **Book Information**

Publisher: Finishing Line Press  
Publication Date: February 16, 2024  
ISBN #: 979-8-88838-453-4  
44 pages/ Language: English  
Trade Paperback (5.5 x .25 x 8.5 “)

**Finishing Line Press announces the publication of  
*Flight Songs* by poet and educator dedicated to  
liberation theology and social justice.**

In her debut poetry collection, Stacey C. Johnson delivers a vision of restoration. The music of *Flight Songs* is a collective singing through the aftermath of exile, into restoration, embodying communal grief and enduring hope of a vision in which the silenced, erased, displaced, and dispossessed voices of the moment—and throughout histories—reach a critical mass and corresponding volume vast and resonant enough to curve the long moral arc of the world in the direction of restoration. The speaker’s central invocation, to be “a bridge between relief and this emerging specter” parallels an offering of her spine as the “crossing from the land of none” to a place where courage stands as everlasting source. Here is a praise song for the living who “bake bread and hold the babies” and a walking meditation over the endlessly repeating way of sorrows, toward a vision for wading into the sanctifying moment of crossing from a time of destruction into a place of rebirth. Lamenting the erasure of histories “removed by the surgeons. . . [with] efficient needles to our lips,” here is a voice singing forward into territory “where another womb confronts us,” that its ancient beginnings may speak with a voice to lift the horror of the moment “from the ashes of our once and future wings” into resounding and perpetual chorus of new life, redeemed.

POETRY

CURRENT EVENTS & SOCIAL ISSUES

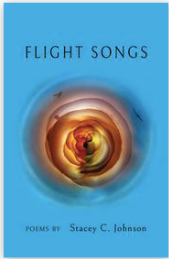
PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION

WOMEN’S STUDIES

ECOLOGY

# Praise for *Flight Songs*

🏠 > REVIEWS > NONFICTION



## FLIGHT SONGS

NOTES FOR AN ALBUM OF EXILE AND REBIRTH

BY STACEY C. JOHNSON · RELEASE DATE: FEB. 16, 2024

*An admirable and powerful collection that's politically astute and relates grand emotions.*

Johnson presents a set of contemplative and urgent poems that confront discrimination and the climate crisis. This collection begins with scenes of travelers—displaced but determined refugees who want to stay near their ancestral roots and have freedom of movement. Some of the book's most moving passages describe the tortuous dynamics of exile, as in "Homeland": "My people are not the ones to tell you how to think, and I / spent lifetimes wishing they were but we are fluent in the / language of losing it all." Many poems contain evocative language: "We blew our canvasses across car windows, fingertips tracing: here a smile, now a cat, heart" ("Flame Throwers: A Retrospective"). The works share themes of migration and of the exploitation of colonialism, and the staggered motion of constant displacement has an almost rhythmic quality. Gradually, the poems become more formally inventive. Many include footnotes, which have different effects; some elaborate on historical incidents, and others are more affecting in their detailing of the physical and emotional effects of dispossession. Toward the end of the collection, many poems consist of two columns, side by side, with one showing the perspective of an oppressed people, and the other the colonizer's point of view. As one reads these poems, up and down or across each column, one gets a keen sense how much these two groups of people are entwined. Still, the poems are not simply about pain and suffering, as the author makes sure to depict the beauty and joy that endures despite hardships. An admirable and powerful collection that's politically astute and relates grand emotions.

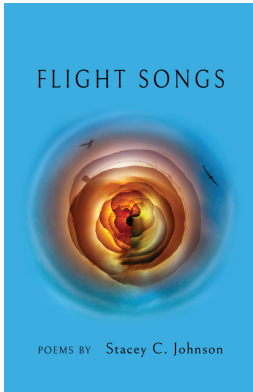
- Kirkus Reviews

The world in Stacey C. Johnson's new collection *Flight Songs* is filled with voices demanding to be heard: "Our voices are what we raise because we have found no other/ way yet, to call attention to those forever without them,/ who died without--." Each song is one of endurance, hope, and restoration where "buried songs emerged/ from the dust of the husks.

-Leah Huete de Maines, Poet-in-Residence Emerita at Northern Kentucky University



# Editorial Review: *Flight Songs*



*Flight Songs*, by Stacey C. Johnson, is an evocative collection of poems that offers an insightful portrayal of human emotions and experiences amidst life's uncertainties. The collection thoughtfully engages with themes such as survival, resilience, and loss, presenting these complex emotions in a manner that deeply resonates with the reader. The poet's use of rich, haunting imagery and expressive language captures the essence of human struggle, emphasizing the constant pursuit of hope and humanity even in dire circumstances.

Johnson effectively draws upon motifs such as the reverberations of war and the ephemeral beauty of forgotten melodies, weaving together a tapestry that illustrates the multifaceted nature of existence and the indomitable strength of the human spirit. It is a reflective journey that delves into both individual introspection and the shared experiences of collective memory, revealing the fragile yet resilient nature of life.

Reading *Flight Songs* is an immersive experience; the collection is filled with profound insights and raw emotional depth. Each poem is a meticulous exploration of themes that are both personal and universal, crafted with a careful choice of words and structured in a way that adds significant depth to the narrative. While I feel that the complexity of some poems may pose somewhat of a challenge in understanding, this aspect enriches the anthology, inviting the reader to engage in a more profound reflection and introspection.

*Flight Songs* stands out for its genuine and emotionally rich content. Stacey C. Johnson's collection comes highly recommended for readers who appreciate poetry that not only reflects on life's realities but also has the power to stir the soul and leave a lasting impact.

-Literary Titan

# Interview with Stacey C. Johnson

## “Only Hope. Only Life”

*Published March 8, 2024 at Literary Titan*

**Flight Songs addresses, through poetry, some of life’s most impactful struggles and the intense emotions associated with loss, survival, and resilience. Why was this an important collection for you to share?**

What matters to me is nourishing hope against destruction and despair. Most of my stories and essays revolve around the perspective of a character on the brink, about to give up, and then something gives oxygen to a tiny flame, and life continues. This collection arose with urgency and insistence out of that constant obsession. I don’t usually see things so fully with such force all at once, but in the case of this collection, it was a powerful and almost singular vision: women and families on the road, carrying babies away from the engines of war, singing to survive.

**Do you have a particular selection in your collection that resonates with you?**

I am most connected to the “Notes” page and the “Song of Gratitude” at the end, because it affirms my connection to the teachers and artists who have guided me, the community that sustains and inspires my hope, and the friends and family who have made it possible for me to live.

**What were some themes that were important for you to explore within your poems?**

Only hope. Only life, and how to maintain and protect what may yet live in an age of mechanized destruction. I believe in the power of interconnected voices to move the moment and protect the living and the dead.

**Can readers expect to see more work from you soon? What are you currently working on?**

Yes. I have more poems coming out from a collection that emerged after Flight Songs. And a variety of other bodies of work that I dare not characterize just yet. They still haven’t told me their names.

**Author Links:** [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Website](#)

# Excerpts from *Flight Songs*

## Homeland

The breaking was tremendous. All we could say in our silences was all we knew of this descending dark. Our flames burned like the dendrites we lit when we touched in forbidden spaces in the days when space itself was forbidden--except when you were claiming, making, owning, taking it, and we were twirling tiny leotarded dancers in the wind. We would not go gently, we whispered, refugees from ourselves, from the forever metals and the concrete that no one would name except when they were about to be paved.

We laid hands into its give, as if to take it back and heal what was choking beneath it, as if to say, Look. That was me, I was here, and the roles were forever ambiguous: the hero or the damned, the sailor or the slaughtered, the seventh son or the seventh daughter in a row buried up to her neck for seven days in the heat, learning to wait.

My people are not the ones to tell you how to think, and I spent lifetimes wishing they were but we are fluent in the language of losing it all, and if you cry wherever two of us are gathered, you will not be alone, we will listen with you to the wailing in the wind of the mothers on the road making the sounds of their babies after they stopped.

Our voices are what we raise because we have found no other way yet, to call attention to those forever without them, who died without --

We were listening and the war was everywhere, but so was the noise and it rose  
a B-movie zombie  
grabbing our necks.

# Excerpts from *Flight Songs*

## Holding Patterns

*We travel on the surface, in the expanse, weaving out imaginary structures and not filling up the voids of a science, but rather, as we go along, removing boxes that are too full so that in the end we can imagine infinite volumes.* - Édouard Glissant

We baked bread and held the babies.  
We remembered bread and babies,  
sat in parked cars, shook our heads,  
wondering about others behind glass,  
shaking heads, and at those walking  
in circles in the intersections, waving  
arms to shout. We could not decipher  
them yet

we looked often to the creatures nearby,  
kept them close in our homes, in our cars,  
in our beds we studied their movements  
and tried to read their eyes and faces, we  
gave food and names, followed them with  
cameras, listened as to ciphers and kept  
watch, as with oracles. They were judging  
us, we knew. But how?

The children looked away and talked less,  
and outside play we once took as birthright  
became fraught as religion, history, and plans.  
Everywhere you looked, there were images  
over images, and they held us.

Most of what we did was wait and watch.  
We'll see, but it was a question. See? Maybe.  
We watched the sky and bread, the ovens, and  
the pets, watching us, and the children, there  
was something we wanted to tell them. Wait,  
we wanted to call to the children,  
the right words. It was silent except  
for the noise, which was everywhere,  
like the next beginning about to erupt  
from the holes of our mouths.



# Excerpts from *Flight Songs*

## Baptism

We sang each other's names.  
It burned our eyes  
to look against the gas and  
now was the time  
for our tears. Machines  
gnarled the earth and the flesh  
of our flesh with metal  
teeth and the bones sang  
between them, refusing to be  
swallowed again. Louder, we  
said, louder now.

## Flight Songs

We pulled the husks of cicadas from our ears  
and the buried songs emerged from these  
gestating skeletons, and in the end  
we held them, dusting toward our lives.

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth  
--and we pulled the husks of cicadas from  
our ears--and dies, so that the buried  
songs emerged from our forthcoming  
bones

unless we pulled the husks of our  
songs from our ears as we died,  
we could not sing, we could not fly

unless the buried songs emerged  
from the dust of the husks of  
our bodies, from the ashes of  
our once and future wings.

# Interview Resources: Stacey C. Johnson

You have been described as a critical practitioner of liberation and social justice. Can you elaborate on this?

My first teachers were nuns and Jesuits. My next teachers were connected to the civil rights movement, the project of challenging the canon, feeding the hungry, freeing people from prisons and debt slavery, and establishing a living wage. If I was smart and certain when young, I would have become a journalist. But I was very uncertain and aware of my ignorance and felt I had some living and learning to do before I could a question posed to me by a very influential writing teacher I met in college. He was encouraging of my early work and what he described as my voice, and wrote in the margins of my final paper in his class, What will you do with it? I really didn't know. So twenty years ago, I started teaching and learning in a vibrant community made up of people that are, by the standards of empire, often dispossessed. The families I work with include immigrants, refugees, survivors, single moms, the sons and daughters of incarcerated parents, of mothers who were five months pregnant when they crossed the border, the brothers and sisters of babies who had died of preventable waterborne illnesses. Who loved and laughed, created and inspired, welcomed and nurtured me with open arms, abundant food, prayers, laughter, music, and faith. I never left. Liberation is at the center of my practice. It always has been. It seems fair to say that this is the task of this moment, and it is my life's work. While the mechanics of imperial empires destroy lives of humans and non-humans alike in the name of power and control, it is imperative that the collective imagination returns regularly to the project of collectively envisioning a way beyond this destruction, into a life of abundant hope and community.

**From your bio I learned that the creator and curator of *Breadcrumbs: The Unknowing Project*. What is this project and how does it relate to your other work?**

*Breadcrumbs* is the blog portion of the author website where I post daily. It began as a challenge to myself in the same year that I was writing *Flight Songs*. I had just finished my MFA at San Diego State University, the pandemic was still going on and I had been having some modest some publishing success: essays, stories, poems, and interviews in various journals. But I was eager to announce myself in a larger way that felt more sustaining and also immediate. I was hungry to establish a small but meaningful foothold as artist in the world, grappling with the central themes and questions that consume me. Maybe it was a vocational pull, or maybe it was just pride. The work of teaching in a comprehensive public high school can sometimes wear on the soul, and this was one of those times. My first post actually included a solo rendition of "this little light of mine" that I posted on YouTube along with a sort of manifesto about creating and putting it out there. After about a year and a half of daily posts, I noticed that the project had become something larger than "Blog." It had become something central to my practice, a touchstone that returns me back always to a place that in my mind, is a posture of listening, leaning in, and creating from a place of uncertainty. So I decided that the work might expand into a larger umbrella and called it *The Unknowing Project*, which for now is just a different way of thinking about it for me. But I suspect it wants to become something more. For now, the title helps me remember what I am about and what I am always aiming toward, which would be much less real to me if it was known.

## Interview Resources: Stacey C. Johnson

### **How is the posture of unknowing/ uncertainty central to your practice?**

My observations, limited as they are, tell me that the need for certainty is definitely part of the pathology of the moment. We all want it, and that's normal, but the thing about living as a human is reckoning honestly with the fact that you don't get to have it. To avoid this, it's popular and very good for sales if you can peddle in bravado and false certainty, and people will eagerly follow to avoid having to face something much more mysterious. Once you go there, you're ripe to believe anything a strongman will tell you, and you are likely to profess any manner of ridiculousness ad nauseam for fear of appearing uncertain. And so, look around. This is everywhere.

But we are all uncertain creatures of fragile life living in uncertain times. And what is called for now is a kind of faith in the best of what is possible—in love, community, liberation—and one of my favorite teachers taught me that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. That lesson really resonated, and pointed me in the direction that increasingly becomes my whole life. And this understanding has sustained me through some really terrifying personal crises, and part of the pact that I made as I was desperately wading through these was that I would bring what I learned out to others, because it is clearly needed in this moment. I grew up standing in churches between the pillars of my grandparents who had weathered between them war, loss of a child, migration, alcoholism, financial crises, cancer, and the raising of eight healthy children and so many grandchildren I have lost count of my cousins.

### **This influenced your later practice?**

Because of this background, I understand The Unknowing Project to be something that runs parallel to the posture of prayer: humble, open, listening, and honest. This is not to say that the posts necessarily read like prayers. I have quite a number that feature conversations I am having with my cat, various monsters, and people on Craigslist. But they are all experiments in listening to the moment at hand, and proceeding with full understanding that whatever comes next will never measure up to the standards of "good enough" that I would have applied if I had any other standard than posting every day.

## Interview Resources: Stacey C. Johnson

### **Can you describe your process for these daily posts?**

I almost never know, when I wake up, what the post is going to be, and I rarely have more than an hour to do them. I started the project on a summer break, so in the beginning I could spend a lot more time on a post if I wanted to (It shows; lots of those early ones are long!), but I knew this wasn't sustainable, so I developed a strict limit of an hour per post, which includes the 15 minutes I may be noodling around sipping coffee and checking emails while I wake up, 15 minutes of reading or journaling while looking for something that sticks, 15 minutes to type it up, and the remaining time to publish, add an image and correct whatever typos I missed the first time around. Then it is time to start preparing lessons and lunches and getting ready for school and whatever manner of chaos the day will bring, and whatever time I can manage in the evening to write needs to be preserved for my "real" projects--manuscripts, etc., which tend to take a while to develop.

### **Does your work as a teacher relate at all to your writing?**

Absolutely! By this point, it is a central part of my practice. I have been teaching for twenty years, and in the beginning there was this constant tension because if I was writing, I wasn't teaching, and if I was teaching, I wasn't writing, and both made me feel like a constant failure. But over time, I have become aware that my central vocation is neither writing or teaching, per se, but the project of liberation through art and connection. This work extends into all aspects of my life--as a mother, teacher, friend, partner, and ongoing student--and informs and nurtures my writing.

I don't mean to pretend that I am in some zen state about it all. I feel perpetually stressed about wanting more time to write. Or breathe. Or sleep. Or parent. Or visit with loved ones. But I know that it is all part of a unified project.

### **Throughout this collection, your poems feature extensive footnotes. In some poems, the footnotes are actually longer than the original poems. Can you talk about this?**

Sure. This was one of the great discoveries of this collection. I like it so much that it's going to take some restraint not to do it in every collection, for fear that it may become seen as some sort of fetish or gimmick. The first reason was practical. I had a full-length manuscript that I thought was almost ready to go at a time that I saw Finishing Line Press's call for chapbooks. So I cut and cut, and then I experimented with having poems talk back and forth with one another, using footnotes. This was wonderful, as it allowed an easy shorthand for welcoming multiple speakers into the space of a poem.

## Interview Resources: Stacey C. Johnson

### Can you elaborate on how your use of footnotes opens space?

Often, the central voice of the poem is an uncertain, besieged person and the answer in footnotes is that of an ancestor taking the long view, encouraging faith. Other times the voice is a non-human entity, like a lemur. Other times, the footnotes can provide context, as they do in the middle section.

I first started using footnotes with poems in a project I was doing with Dr. Yetta Howard at San Diego State University. She taught a class on censorship that deeply moved me, especially because I was introduced to the work of David Wojnarowicz. He was pilloried by the Catholic church leaders and others for using twelve seconds of footage involving image of a crucifix covered with ants in *A Fire in My Belly*, which he created during the ACT UP movement, and it became one of most notorious and least understood films in contemporary art.

My understanding of that controversial image, long steeped as I was in the teachings of liberation theology, lit a proverbial fire in me. I thought his use of the image to critique capitalist and imperial engines was perfectly in line with my understanding of the Gospels, and it also seemed tragically predictable that the people to most avidly call for the artist's crucifixion in this case were—as it had been in the original story—leaders of the church. So I created a project that involved the stations of the cross (known as the Via Dolorosa, or "Way of Sorrows") interspersed with narration of oppression drawn from Wojnarowicz's texts. I was completely consumed by these ideas, and generously encouraged by Dr. Howard, to develop a project that became the seed around which *Flight Songs* emerged. The central image of a persecuted person on the road toward crucifixion as a gateway to redemption and resurrection expands to include a collective body of dispossessed people the world over, across centuries and continents. And the call to recognize this central possibility, as far as I can tell, has never been more resonant than it is now.