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### Christian Forgiveness as Incarnational: Turning to the Black Existential Experience in an Era of Hate

Simon Ahiokhai

*University of Portland*, [ahiokha@up.edu](mailto:ahiokha@up.edu)

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**Christian Forgiveness as Incarnational:  
Turning to the Black Existential Experience in an Era of Hate**

*SimonMary Ahiokhai*

*University of Portland*

**Introduction**

Christian forgiveness speaks of God's radical commitment to journey with creation in a manner that evokes surpluses of encounters. God becomes human to make concrete an abundance of possibilities of experiencing mercy in a saturated manner. What does this mean for us in our world? How does our history as faith communities reflect these key truths of the Christian faith, especially in an era of hate? As how do we experience the epiphanic embodiment of divine forgiveness in the world we live in? These are not questions that demand mere linguistic responses without any concrete link to our lived experiences.

Christian forgiveness is dangerous. It stands as a prophetic lamentation that calls aloud for the abandonment of systems of evil that lead to the very violence that the ritual of forgiveness is attempting to erase. In Donald Trump's America, it became clear that the idolatry of White supremacy cannot mediate life for White bodies or for anyone who embraces a worldview of hate. On the other hand, blackness, in a world where systemic evil prevails, becomes the very epiphany through which true humanity must always be encountered. The deprived, the marginalized, the erased, those who endure prejudice stand firmly as the light of grace in a world overshadowed by systemic evil.

This essay aims to articulate how Christian forgiveness can be understood via the concrete histories of Black bodies. It will conclude with a brief articulation of a theology of hope

that is in dialogue with the experiences of Black bodies, as the pathway for embracing a Christian identity in a time when hate has been enthroned on the altar of dialogue and encounter.

### **Remembering the Stories of Black Bodies as a Kairos Moment**

Christianity in the United States is fast becoming an empire Christianity, one that ritualizes the features of empire and gives the agenda of empire—control, power, silencing of dissent, exploitation—a religious backing. To disagree with this form of Christianity is to quickly be condemned as un-American. For those who, sadly, embrace this form of Christianity, many of whom are White U.S. Evangelicals, the human-God story is simply a story that points to the joyfulness of the resurrection. When the Good Friday event is recounted, it is told with an uncomfortable haste in order to move on to the climax, the resurrection. The haste is an erasing tool for soothing their consciences in such a way that their existential comfort is always maintained even in the most sacred of places: our shared communal spaces, our churches, and our traditions. The human-God story, when properly told, ought to force us to address the question, “What does it mean to be human in God’s world?” The late African American theologian James H. Cone calls attention to how some American theologians have responded to this foundational theological question. In his words:

The weakness of most “Christian” approaches to anthropology stems from a preoccupation with (and distortion of) the God-problem, leaving concrete, oppressed human beings unrecognized and degraded. This is evident, for instance, in fundamentalist and orthodox theologies when they view the infallibility of the Bible as the sole ground of religious authority and fail to ask about the relevance of the inerrancy of scripture to the wretched of the earth. If the basic truth of the gospel is that the Bible is the infallible word of God, then it is inevitable that more emphasis will be placed upon “true”

propositions about God than upon God as active in the liberation of the oppressed of the land. Blacks, struggling for survival, are not interested in abstract truth, “infallible” or otherwise. Truth is concrete.<sup>1</sup>

Cone ends his observation with the statement, “Truth is concrete.”<sup>2</sup> Christian theology teaches that God’s truth is itself incarnational in the person of Jesus Christ. It believes that humans are made in the image of this divine incarnational truth. In other words, our true humanity is shaped and divinized by the humanity of the God-human, Jesus Christ. What does this brief anthropological theology mean in light of the Black experience in God’s world? Let me offer a bold response: God’s truth is concretized in the lived experiences of Black bodies. The incarnational truth of God ought not be understood in a spiritual way such that when we speak of God becoming human, we fail to see how this plays out in the messiness of our lived experiences. The radicality of the incarnational-divine-truth is to be found in the traumatized bodies of our Black brothers and sisters in a world that has been hijacked by the hateful philosophies and policies bolstering whiteness as a mode of being in the world.

Again, as Cone writes, “The paradox of a crucified savior lies at the heart of the Christian story.”<sup>3</sup> The relevance of this truth lies not in our attempts at resolving such a paradox, as seems to be the case in the way the human-God story has been told by the benefactors of Americanized empire Christianity, whose interest is in the resurrection and not in the messiness of the events that occurred on the hill of Golgotha. This truth has power only when it is seen through our

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 82-83.

<sup>2</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., 83.

<sup>3</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013), 1.

embodied experiences. The fact that God has become human in the person of Jesus Christ means that all God-talk must also be human-talk (creation-talk). This human-talk that points to God's revelation in the world ought necessarily to make us aware of how we are human-in-the-world. It is this point on which Cone sheds light in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Stating it in the form of a question: How does the lynching tree become the locus of a saturated vulnerability and yet transforming power of God in a way that it is both powerless and powerful? Cone's response is telling:

The lynching tree joined the cross as the most emotionally charged symbols in the African American community—symbols that represented both death and the promise of redemption, judgment and the offer of mercy, suffering and the power of hope. Both the cross and the lynching tree represented the worst in human beings and at the same time “an unquenchable ontological thirst” for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning.<sup>4</sup>

In line with mainstream theological views, Cone speaks of the cross as a source of life and hope for the oppressed. Reminding White Christians to resist the totalization of the resurrection as though the one who is risen had never suffered, Cone cites the words of the German scholar Ernst Käsemann, “The resurrection is . . . a chapter in the theology of the cross.”<sup>5</sup> Let me add a perspective to Cone's insights: Just as the cross reveals God's surplus love for the oppressed, the cross stands as the prophetic judgment of all that creates the possibility for the cross to be. The cross stands as the *kairos* reminder to all in God's world that evil must always be condemned with all forcefulness. Similarly, the lynching tree and the traumatic

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<sup>4</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 26.

memories of Black bodies stand as a prophetic statement that calls into question the legitimacy of the faith of those who proclaim their Christian identity and yet embrace the privileges that come from unjust social, political, economic, and religious systems meant to favor whiteness as a mode of being in the world. Contemporary Christianity risks being delegitimized due to its romance with evil insofar as the lynching tree stands erect on our streets with Black bodies on it.

The cross is the culmination of the embodied stories of God's interactions with us. Similarly, blackness reveals the totality of our embodied stories that stand as prophetic lament against structural systems that idolize whiteness as a mode of being in the world. Just as the cross shatters the power of injustice in a world hijacked by evil, so too does the lynching tree in a world where whiteness has been defined and validated at the expense of all that is not White. Blackness reveals limitless stories, some nostalgic, some traumatic. What is common about all of them is that they are revelatory moments of what it means to be human in God's world. On the other hand, whiteness evokes limited stories of scarcity, competition, manipulation, and exploitation of alterity whenever difference is encountered.<sup>6</sup> As Boaventura de Sousa Santos strongly writes, whiteness "cannot conceive of the body as an ur-narrative, a somatic narrative that precedes and sustains the narratives of which the body speaks or writes . . . The body thus necessarily becomes an absent presence."<sup>7</sup> What comes to mind here is the massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina on Wednesday, June 17, 2015 and the murder of George Floyd by police officers in the City of Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020.

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<sup>6</sup> See Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2007): 13-38.

<sup>7</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of The Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of The South* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 88.

The story of the massacre of Black persons by the White supremacist Dylan Roof at Mother Emanuel AME Church is one among many accounts of the evils Black bodies have suffered in the history of the United States of America. The video of the slow and deliberate strangulation of Mr. Floyd by Officer Derek Chauvin while Mr. Floyd was being held down by other police officers defies any form of logic, except for the fact that a form of dehumanized humanity has become the normative expression of the human in the eyes of some White persons who embrace racism as the lens for seeing the world around them. Nonetheless, faith is central to Black liberation. The Black religious worldview is saturated with religious motifs that point to a sense of gratitude for life received, sustained, and guided by the enduring power of the divine. W. E. B. Du Bois was right when he made the claim that the survival of the Black Church was dependent on the ingenuity of the African priests and their ability to mediate life for the Black community even when the social systems instituted by the White slaveowners were set up to bring about death for the Black race in the Americas.<sup>8</sup> Noel Leo Erskine states this beautifully in *Plantation Church: How African American Religion was Born in Caribbean Slavery*:

One of the reasons that enslaved persons survived on plantations in the New World in spite of the long hours and brutality was their ability to adapt their religious practices and beliefs to a Christian frame of reference without losing the essentials of their native beliefs. They found ways of maintaining the integrity of their religious beliefs while at the same time they were open to the change that a new sociological and theological environment imposed on them.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See W. E. B. Du Bois, ed., *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903), 5. See also Noel Leo Erskine, *Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born In Caribbean Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 95 – 96.

<sup>9</sup> Erskine, *Plantation Church*, 117.

Referring to the murders that occurred at Mother Emanuel Church, President Barack Obama, in his eulogy for the victims of the shooting, noted:

Over the course of centuries, black churches served as “hush harbors” where slaves could worship in safety; praise houses where their free descendants could gather and shout, “hallelujah!”; rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad; bunkers for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement. They have been, and continue to be, community centers where we organize for jobs and justice; places of scholarship and network; places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm’s way, and told that they are beautiful and smart and taught that they matter. That’s what happens in church.<sup>10</sup>

Mother Emanuel AME Church serves as the locus of God’s encounter with us in this land. In a society where social, political, economic, intellectual, and religious structures are established to favor whiteness as a mode of being in the world, this community stands as the prophetic voice for justice and a conduit for experiencing authentic faith in a God that shatters all chains of slavery, whether spiritual or physical.

The relevance of faith to political discourse has not been lost on the members of this faith community. Beginning with the Reverend Richard H. Cain, who was both pastor and South Carolina state senator after the Civil War, down to the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, also a state senator, this church has had pastors who knew that the freedom and dignity of the Black community in this city, state, and country cannot be won only from the pulpit. Political activism, allied with religious activism, is necessary for the birthing of holistic freedom. Since religious

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<sup>10</sup> See Jennifer Berry Hawes, *Grace Will Lead Us Home: The Charleston Church Massacre and the Hard, Inspiring Journey to Forgiveness* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2019), 289-290.



idolatry and unjust political systems have been used to dehumanize the Black race in this country, authentic religiosity and just political systems can be used to right what has gone wrong.

Again, President Obama said this beautifully:

Clem was often asked why he chose to be a pastor and a public servant. But the person who asked probably didn't know the history of the AME Church. As our brothers and sisters in the AME Church know, we don't make those distinctions. "Our calling," Clem once said, "is not just within the walls of the congregation, but . . . the life and community in which our congregation resides." . . . Our Christian faith demands deeds and not just words; that the "sweet hour of prayer" actually lasts the whole week long—that to put our faith in action is more than individual salvation, it's about our collective salvation; that to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless is not just a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society.<sup>11</sup>

### **Embracing a Prophetic Anthropological Theology**

The crisis our world faces today is one of identity: Who belongs? Who does not belong? This calls for an elaborate critique of our understanding of what it means to be human, an understanding that sheds light on the demands of relationality. Boaventura de Sousa Santos makes the distinction between how the global north creates empire epistemologies and the ways the global south responds to them:

The epistemologies of the South cannot accept the forgetting of the body because social struggles are not processes that unfold from rational kits . . . bodies are as much at the center of the struggles as the struggles are at the center of the bodies. The bodies are

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<sup>11</sup> Hawes, *Grace Will Lead Us Home*, 289.

performative and thus negotiate and expand or subvert the existing reality through what they do. As they act, they act upon themselves; as they say, they say of themselves and to themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Johann Baptist Metz, in *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, reminds those of us who live at the center of empire dynamics that any discourse of the human person must move away from abstractions. It must begin with concrete human experiences.<sup>13</sup> For Christians, the starting and ending place for any discourse on what it means to be human must necessarily be the Eucharist. By Eucharist, I do not mean a whitewashed understanding of the theology of the Eucharist that speaks solely of the resurrection without a radical engagement with the scandal and trauma of Good Friday. The Eucharist is a ritual of awareness of the power of evil done by the powerful to the innocent. The Eucharist is the place where the community of the followers of Christ sits with and allows itself to be an active victim with the suffering innocents of our world. It is a ritualized place where our solidarity with others becomes the source for experiencing the fullness of our humanity as a gift that can only be attained when we choose to become one with the victims of the systems of erasure.

To speak of what it means to be human in God's world is to enter into the anamnetic space that reveals and yet grounds our experiences of ourselves as persons in relationship with others. This anamnetic space where we experience pain and sorrow brought about by our capacity for evil is also the source and pathway for our collective liberation. How is one to understand this paradox? Let me once more turn to two African American theologians, James

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<sup>12</sup> De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History And Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 75.

Cone and M. Shawn Copeland. Cone categorically claims that the answer can be found in Black theology, because it “proclaims God’s blackness.”<sup>14</sup> He writes:

Those who want to know who God is and what God is doing must know who black persons are and what they are doing. This does not mean lending a helping hand to the poor and unfortunate blacks of society. It does not mean joining the war on poverty! Such acts are sin offerings that represent a white way of assuring themselves that they are basically “good” persons. Knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming *one* with them, and participating in the goal of liberation. *We must become black with God!*<sup>15</sup>

In *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Copeland speaks of a God who has become human and whose human

life and ministry exemplify what it means to take sides with the oppressed and poor in the struggle for life—no matter the cost. In Jesus of Nazareth, the messianic Son of God endures the shameful spectacle of death by crucifixion . . . the sufferings of the crucified Christ are not merely or only his alone. In his own body, Jesus, in solidarity, shares in the suffering of the poor and weak.<sup>16</sup>

For Copeland, the experiences of women of color reflect how the crucified Christ identifies with the victims of our human-made structures of erasure. The realization of this fact must necessarily lead to a new way of asking the question, “What does it mean to be human?” For her, the

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<sup>14</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., 65.

<sup>15</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., 65.

<sup>16</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 87.

question must be framed in the following manner: “What might it mean for poor women of color to grasp themselves as human subjects, to grapple with the meaning of liberation and freedom?”<sup>17</sup> This anthropological question, Copeland concludes, can lead us to “understand and articulate authentic meaning of human flourishing and liberation, progress and salvation.”<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, if authentic anthropological theology is to be realized, a Eucharistic theology must reorient us to a hermeneutical framework centered on what Copeland calls “difference and interdependence rather than exclusion.” Our humanity must also be grounded in “solidarity with the exploited, despised, [and] poor ‘other.’”<sup>19</sup> This radical reorientation entails not just how we conceive and perceive our humanity; it invites us to embrace new ways of understanding how God operates in God’s world. The entire story salvation history must be retold in ways that reflect this new orientation. The dominant narrative of salvation, which speaks of the salvific work of God in a sinful world without demanding the active corporation of humans in this graced process of redemption, must be discarded. There can be no passivity in how we understand, tell, and live out our lives in this *kairos* moment of salvific encounters with God in and through our neighbors in God’s world.

*Ecce Homo*—“Behold the [hu]man!” (Jn 19:5). These are the words that the author of the Johannine Gospel puts in the mouth of Pontius Pilate after he had Jesus scourged and mocked as a king. These words are not just some form of spiritual talk that begin and end there. They reflect the type of human that God became when God chose to gift creation with God’s presence in a radical manner. Jürgen Moltmann states this beautifully:

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<sup>17</sup> Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 88.

<sup>18</sup> Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 88.

<sup>19</sup> Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 89.

He became the kind of man we do not want to be, “an outcast, accursed, crucified.” *Ecce Homo!* Behold the man! is not a statement which arises from the confirmation of our humanity and is made on the basis of “like is known by like;” it is a confession of faith which recognizes God’s humanity in the dehumanized Christ on the cross. At the same time the confession says *Ecce Deus!* Behold God on the cross! Thus God’s incarnation ‘even unto the death on the cross’ is not in the last resort a matter of concealment; this is his utter humiliation, in which he is completely with himself and completely with the other, the man who is dehumanized.<sup>20</sup>

Stating it more radically, Moltmann makes the following claim: “There can be no theology of the incarnation which does not become a theology of the cross.”<sup>21</sup> I would add to Moltmann’s claim that there can be no transformative anthropological theology that does not lead back to the *Ecce Homo!* What are the implications of this claim I am making?

First, if human personhood is radically defined by solidarity in difference and oneness with the hypostatic reality of the Second Person of the Trinity, then the pain and suffering of the marginalized ones of our world stand as a witness to how God conceives of our humanity when God chooses to be one with us in a world defined by evil. Cone is correct when he argues that

The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of the black theology doctrine of God. There is no place in black theology for a colorless God in a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color . . . Either God is

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<sup>20</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., new forward by Miroslav Volf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 295.

<sup>21</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 294.

identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God's experience, or God is a God of racism.<sup>22</sup>

For Cone, blackness is an epiphany of the Johannine *Ecce Homo!* Blackness in contemporary global society and especially in the global north reveals “the tension between life and death.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, blackness prompts the question that Black people ask themselves; “How are we going to survive in a world which deems black humanity an illegitimate form of human existence?”<sup>24</sup> Again, for Cone, blackness, in a world where racism defines what is to be considered human, reveals a “crisis of identity” just as it does with regard to the *Ecce Homo!*<sup>25</sup> The Roman soldiers who were instructed by Pontius Pilate, along with the crowd who mocked Jesus as an impostor-king, thought that they knew how and what a king ought to look like. They forgot that God's understanding of how a king ought to look goes against the very logic of humans. Similarly, for those who embrace racism as a mode of being and whiteness as an essential way of living, blackness cannot but be problematized. They forget also that the *hypostasis* of God-human points to blackness as the authentic epiphany of God's solidarity with creation. God's solidarity with humanity is kenotic in all its epiphanic presence (Phil 2:5-11).

Second, an anthropological theology that leads back to the Johannine *Ecce Homo* must begin with concrete human experiences. To speak of being human in the image of Christ without accounting for the suffering Christ and suffering humans in the nowness of their existence is to

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<sup>22</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., 11.

<sup>24</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., 11.

<sup>25</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., 13.

fall into the idolatry of whiteness that both Cone and Copeland invite us to reject if we are ever to understand what it means to be human in God's world. In other words, the starting place for any theological discourse on what it means to be human must not be the locus of power. Rather, it must begin with the experience of powerlessness. The God-human kenotic existence that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Philippians reveals our true identities as humans; one of letting go of the trappings of power. To experience powerlessness, as blackness has come to represent in our world, is to receive a prophetic invitation to position oneself against the structures that dehumanize. This leads to a very important insight worth keeping in mind as I explain the third implication of the claim I am making.

Third, if whiteness, as a mode of being in the world that defines privilege at the expense of others' dignities, is to be honestly critiqued, a sure conclusion one can reach is that whiteness, as a mode of being in the world, is dehumanizing. Where blackness calls for solidarity with all who suffer, as the *Ecce Homo* has become in Christian salvific history, whiteness speaks to individualism and greed. Whiteness is to be understood here as a way of positioning oneself in the world, one that prioritizes power over solidarity, exploitation over sharing, and individualism over community.<sup>26</sup>

Again, the insight of Katherine Fugate is worth repeating here:

For a black person to say, "Black is Beautiful," a white person first said  
"Black is Not Beautiful."

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<sup>26</sup> See Charles W. Mills, "Global White Ignorance," in *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, ed. Mathias Gross and Linsey McGoey (New York: Routledge, 2015): 217-227.

For a black person to say, “Black Lives Matter,” a white person first said,  
“Black Lives Do Not Matter.”

Perhaps we’ve said enough for a while. Perhaps it’s time to listen.<sup>27</sup>

Fourth, a prophetic anthropological theology that is centered on blackness must necessarily be hospitable. Just as the *Ecce Homo* reveals a vulnerability that evokes in the one who encounters him a response of solidarity, so also are we who are made in his likeness when others encounter us daily. Both in the gospels and in Christian devotions, one notices that the *Ecce Homo!* of Good Friday evokes in those who encounter this human being a response of solidarity. Tradition has it that Veronica went to Jesus to wipe his bloodied face as he was being led to his crucifixion. Catholics celebrate this pious act of solidarity during the Lenten Season at the Sixth Station of the Cross. Simon, a Cyrenian, though pressed by the Roman soldiers to assist Jesus in carrying his cross, willingly agreed and helped the *Ecce Homo* in his vulnerable state (Mk 15:21; Mt 27:32; Lk 23:26). The Matthean account of the crucifixion reveals the sympathy of some in the crowd, one of whom took the step to offer the dying Jesus wine to alleviate his pain (Mt 27:48). The Lucan account of the crucifixion speaks of many in the crowd, mostly women, weeping as Jesus was being led to his death (Lk 23:27). A criminal crucified with Jesus came to his rescue as another was ridiculing him (Lk 23:40 – 41). It is in solidarity with the marginalized that we are gifted with our true humanity. Is this not what the crucified Jesus does on the cross when he responds to the good thief who comes to his rescue as the other thief was reviling him? “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43). To say that the *Ecce Homo!* reveals to us our true humanity is not to say that we should be complacent

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<sup>27</sup> Katherine Fugate, “White People Are Broken,” *Medium*, August 22, 2018, <https://medium.com/@katstory/white-people-are-broken-ab0fe873e5d3>.



in the face of evil. The examples above, especially that of the good thief, demonstrate to us that we must always resist the trappings of power that come from structures of oppression in our world. The good thief is promised a beatific humanity that he could not attain for himself via his cunning as a thief. The structures of injustice that whiteness has come to represent in our world cannot give us God's gift of authentic humanity. Authentic humanity is embodied in the victims of structures of oppression. How is one to experience this gift of humanity? It is through the grace of forgiveness. Let me now explore this notion of forgiveness.

### **The Demands of Christian Forgiveness**

How are contemporary Christians to understand Christian forgiveness? The ancient pastoral text the *Didache* speaks of Christian forgiveness and the effects of sin as something affecting the life of the community (*Didache* 15.2-4).<sup>28</sup> One must then ask: Which community? Does this include the non-Christian community? It is only recently, since the liberation theological movement began by Cone in the Black Church, other liberation theologians in Latin America, and political theologians like Metz and Moltmann in Europe, that the global church is embracing a more robust understanding of sin and the rituals of forgiveness. Perhaps the wisdom of the Indigenous religions of Africa can be a teaching guide for Christians. In African religious thought, sin always has a cosmological effect. The forgiving process must also address the cosmological harm effected by the sinful act itself. If we accept the faith-argument that creation reflects the goodness of God and thus embodies divine holiness, then sin, understood as life denying disruption in one's relationship with God-in-the-world, must necessarily have a cosmological effect. Also, if Jesus Christ is the prototype of our true humanity, then sinful acts

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<sup>28</sup> As cited by Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 126.

must necessarily injure the beauty of the marriage between God and creation. To be a Christian is thus to celebrate and live out the harmony of this relationship.

At this point, let me make the following conclusions; First, Christian forgiveness is a person and it is incarnational. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God's forgiveness for a sinful world. Since we are made in God's image and likeness, and Jesus Christ is the prototype humanity of which we are made through the new life we attain in baptism, each of us who identifies as Christian is a replica of God's incarnational forgiveness in the world. All that one does must necessarily evoke the generosity of the gift of forgiveness that one has received freely and been commanded to give freely (Jn 13:34 – 35).

Second, Christian forgiveness is not an act. It does not occur in a moment. It is a process experienced through relationships. If God chose to become one with creation as a way of expressing God's forgiveness of a world gone astray, then we cannot speak of forgiveness except as a relationship. It is on that note that I make the following claim: to love is to forgive and to forgive is to love. One cannot forgive another unless one loves the other, and one cannot love the other unless one also forgives the other. This is at the heart of Jesus's command to his followers in the Johannine Gospel: Jesus commands his followers to love one another just as he has loved them and states that by so doing, they will reflect the authentic meaning of discipleship in their lives (Jn 13:34-35).

Third, because forgiveness is itself embodied and realized in and only through relational encounters with the God-human, those who identify with this reality and the community the God-human instituted, are called to give freely what they have become. What have they become? In Jesus Christ they have become God's *Ecce Homo!* that Pontius Pilate proclaimed from his seat of judgment. In the Black community, sorrow radically defines our collective memories. To be

Black is to embody the trauma caused by structures of alienation and erasure found in a world constructed for whiteness. Forgiveness in the Christian tradition does not erase these marks of social existence, just as the forgiveness of the perpetrators of the unjust crucifixion of Jesus did not erase the marks of the crucifixion even on the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. Popular theology tends to speak of the reason for this as based on the love the incarnate Christ has for humans. I do not deny this at all. However, I have to ask the following question: How is this to bring about the forgiving-divinizing *catharsis* in us sinners? When the Black community tells its stories of unimaginable suffering in the hands of a system that dehumanizes, the reason is not to shame the benefactors of the system; rather, the intent is to give them the gift of authentic humanity. Such stories serve as the means for entering into the relational process of being humanized and divinized as well. To tell such stories involves all the emotions. If we honestly tell our stories with our full humanity, they are meant to bring about some form of decentering of the locus of power created by systems of erasure and exploitation. By our telling our stories in the full expressions of our embodiment, all false identities embraced by the perpetrators and benefactors such systems are invited to embrace an authentic humanity that is mediated through the scars on the bodies and memories of the storytellers. This is another way of reading the marks of the crucifixion on the resurrected Christ. The resurrected Christ stands at the center of the Christian church in his shattered and yet resurrected body to remind the church that the gift of true humanity and divinity that Christ gives to us freely can only be received through our embrace of the broken body of Christ. This broken body of Christ stands as a prophetic witness of God's truth to us.

Lest we think that embracing victimhood is the way of being human--the prophetic witness of the marks of the passion of Christ is similar to what Emmanuel Levinas argues when

he speaks of identity. Identity is always conditioned by the other. “The Other alone eludes thematization.”<sup>29</sup> To come to know oneself, one must necessarily welcome the other at the core of one’s being. This “welcoming of the other,” Levinas writes, “is ipso facto the consciousness of my own injustice.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Levinas argues, identity is itself ethical at its core. Identity evokes ultimate vulnerability that is brought about through an “obsession by other or approach to others.”<sup>31</sup> Simply said, “identity is for others.” How then does the other present itself at the core of my being? Levinas argues that the other comes to us through the transient encounter of the face, one that cannot be conceptualized as an idol or a thing. The face of the other is itself a mystery to be encountered. The inability to idolize the other is what brings about the shattering of power to control.<sup>32</sup> The paradox of this mysteriously eluding face of the other that escapes the agenda of the subject to idolize and control it is that “the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all.”<sup>33</sup> This eluding face of the other speaks an ethical command: “Thou shall not kill.”<sup>34</sup> Consequently, one can argue that to forgive another is to command them to live in such a way that their new way of life leads them to embracing the gift of a new humanity. By telling the Jesus story, Christians remind themselves of what the sin

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<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 86.

<sup>30</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanity of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 64.

<sup>32</sup> See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 89.

<sup>34</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89.

of humanity has done to a loving God who chose to enter into a relationship with creation. Also, by telling their stories through their Black bodies, all are invited to repent of their sins and embrace a graced humanity.

### **Toward a Theology of Hope in an Era of Hate**

I want to make a bold claim here: Christian forgiveness points to and is saturated with a vision of hope. Why would God want to forgive sinful humanity? It is because God invites humans to embrace the content of hope for a new way of being human. Why do we forgive those who offend us? It is because we believe that a different way of being human is possible for all of us. Perhaps the wisdom of Moltmann might sooth our pain from the trauma of systemic injustice Black bodies experience in our world. Reflecting on all that the Jewish people have gone through in the hands of their fellow humans, from the Christian church, from the political machines of Europe, and from his own fellow Germans under the Nazi dictatorship that saw the unjust killing of millions of Jews, Moltmann writes:

A “theology after Auschwitz” may seem an impossibility or blasphemy to those who allowed themselves to be satisfied with theism or their childhood beliefs and then lost them. And there would be no “theology after Auschwitz” in retrospective sorrow and the recognition of guilt, had there been no “theology in Auschwitz.” Anyone who later comes up against insoluble problems and despair must remember that the *Shema* of Israel and the Lord’s Prayer were prayed in Auschwitz . . . God in Auschwitz and Auschwitz in the crucified God—that is the basis for a real hope which both embraces and overcomes the world, and the ground for a love which is stronger than death and can sustain death.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 416-417.

How does Moltmann’s insight speak to the experiences of Black bodies and all who are silenced by unjust systems? Their traumatized memories, lynched bodies dangling from tree branches, marks on their bodies from beatings, unrealized dreams, and memories evoking a sense of anthropological poverty brought about by slavery, systemic racism, and segregation that manifest themselves in all aspects of our collective social life, are the very means for doing theology. They reflect how God has identified with marginalized people during the dark nights of doubt and sorrow. They reflect the content of Christian hope—the possibility of recreating a new way of being in the world that transcend such dehumanizing experiences. The bodies and memories of the victims of systemic injustice reflect to the world what inhumanity looks like: the actions of the victimizers. These wounds of trauma are the inviting gestures of friendship extended to the victimizers through embodied lament. The victims’ traumatized bodies bear witness to the evil of sin and demand that righteousness reign in God’s world.

Michael Downey is correct when he writes, “Hope is the theme of the entire Bible.”<sup>36</sup> Hope is a relationship that is “laden with anticipation of some future good.”<sup>37</sup> The word “future” must be problematized lest we slip back into an empire theology that has sometimes given us a distorted understanding of Christian hope as subservience. Christian hope is eschatological. It speaks of a continuum of what is becoming. Christian hope points to the gift of being truly human in ways that all oppressive and dehumanizing structures cannot have the last word.

Remembering (*anamnesis*) is at the heart of Christian worship. But one has to ask the question: What do Christians remember? Because remembering is *kairos* in nature, that which is remembered is present to us as that which we are becoming. Remembering is not just about

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Downey, *Hope Begins Where Hope Begins* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 104.

<sup>37</sup> Downey, *Hope Begins*, 104.

historical events. If this were the case, we could easily read historical texts and move on with our lives. Remembering is not only about history. It is about being in the world. It is about relational identity. As Angela Schwendiman notes:

Memory is collective in that it is supra-individual, and individual memory is always conceived in relation to a group . . . memory is always group memory, both because the individual is derivative of some collectivity, family, and community, and also because a group is solidified and becomes aware of itself through continuous reflection upon and re-creation of a distinctive, shared memory.<sup>38</sup>

Christian hope, like the covenantal relationship Israel has with the Holy One “is ineluctably tied to membership in God’s people.”<sup>39</sup> What then does this God’s people look like? In Christianity, it is Jesus Christ revealed to us in his “utter humiliation, in which he is completely with himself and completely with the other, the man [human] who is dehumanized.”<sup>40</sup> Just as Moltmann notes, that the “crucified Jesus is called the ‘image of the invisible God,’” one can also argue that the *Ecce Homo!* encountered by Pontius Pilate reveals what it is to be truly human.<sup>41</sup> Just as “God is not more divine than he is in this humanity,” so also can we conclude that our humanity cannot be more than that of the *Ecce Homo.*<sup>42</sup>

What does this mean in the face of systemic hatred that defines our world today?

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<sup>38</sup> Angela Schwendiman, *Readings In African American Culture: Resistance, Liberation And Identity From The 1600s To The 21st Century*, first ed. (San Diego: Cognella Academic, 2017), 10-11.

<sup>39</sup> Downey, *Hope Begins*, 104.

<sup>40</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 295.

<sup>41</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 295.

<sup>42</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 295.

The humanity of the *Ecce Homo!* is not a static humanity. It is a humanity that is becoming. It is this becomingness of the God-human that allows for the possibility of the gift of shattering the chains of evil, and thus lead us into the dawn of freedom and solidarity with all of creation. Similarly, embodied blackness in a world of hate is not a helpless or static humanity. If it is an ongoing epiphany of the divinized *Ecce Homo!*, it must necessarily lead to the dawn of freedom and solidarity with all others. To do this, it cannot use the same systems and structures that have held it in bondage. Blackness, in as much it is divinized humanity, must necessarily reveal a new way of being human. The urge to want to hate those who cause us harm is strong and must not be trivialized. Our society is defined by empire ethic, one that presents forgiveness as weakness. We often see this play out when institutions, persons, or nations perform acts that go against our national interest. Our usual response is to clamor for war. A corrective ethic to the empire ethic we are used to can be found in the work of the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah. In the novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Armah reflects on the realities of post-colonial Ghana.<sup>43</sup> The protagonist, to whom he simply refers as “The Man,” is offered a bribe which he turns down. Everyone in his life is angry at him for not taking the bribe. For Armah, through the eyes of The Man, the question ought to be asked: How can independent Ghana birth forth a new vision after the trauma of exploitative colonial rule by the British if the new reality is no different from the old? Similarly, Christians must now ask themselves how they can birth forth the new humanity they have been given in Christ if all they are faced with is the old nature of Adam. This is the temptation we must resist with all our being.

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<sup>43</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (London: Heinemann, 1969).



There is nothing passive about Christian hope. It is as prophetic as it can get. It is grounded in a refusal to settle for the unjust status quo that dehumanizes the other. Speaking of the liberational core of Christian hope, Metz writes:

The faith in a messianic God, a God of the resurrection of the dead and of judgment, a God before whom even the past is not safe, before whom the past sufferings do not disappear subjectless in the abyss of an anonymous and infinite dispassionate evolution, this faith is not an opiate in the histories of liberation of humanity. Rather it guarantees the non-negotiable standards in the unabating struggle for the dignity of all human beings as subjects in the struggle for a universal liberation.<sup>44</sup>

Blackness, in an era of hate, is incarnational and liberational theology. In the words of Cone, Unless the future can become present, thereby forcing blacks to make changes in this world, what significance could eschatology have for those who believe that their self-determination must become a reality *now*? White missionaries have always encouraged blacks to forget about present injustice and look forward to heavenly justice. But Black theology says no, insisting that we either put new meaning into Christian hope by relating it to our liberation or drop it altogether.<sup>45</sup>

Cone asks a question in response to Rudolf Bultmann's limited view of eschatology, one that demands a response: "How is eschatology related to *protest* against injustice and the need for revolutionary change?"<sup>46</sup> The response to this question is everything. To hear the promise of God

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<sup>44</sup> As cited in Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000), 152.

<sup>45</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed, 146.

<sup>46</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., 147.

contained in Christian hope, Cone writes, “means that the church cannot accept the present reality of things as God’s intention for humanity.”<sup>47</sup> This promise of God contained in Christian hope, Moltmann argues, “does not give rise to powers of accommodation, but sets loose powers that are critical of being.”<sup>48</sup> Leonardo Boff articulates this insight clearly when he writes that “human forms of liberation acquire a sacramental function. They have a weight of their own, but they also point toward, and embody in anticipation, what God has definitively prepared for human being”<sup>49</sup> When we protest injustices, demand that minoritized communities be given their dignities and freedoms, we are actively working to bring about the reign of God in God’s world.

Again, a theology of hope in an era of hate is a theology of liberation. It is embodied theology that speaks truth to all dehumanizing systems put and kept in place via the bodies, histories, and memories of those the system erases from the records of our collective memory. Such a theology of hope cannot allow racism, sexism, tribalism, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, White supremacy, alt-right movements, and all the structures that promote biases to have the last word. The last word must be that which makes us fully and truly human.

In the words of bell hooks, “communities sustain life—not nuclear families, or the ‘couple,’ and certainly not the rugged individualist. There is no better place to learn the art of loving than in community.”<sup>50</sup> This truth is becoming clearer to all in our country as we repeatedly see young men being radicalized by communities of hate. Quoting M. Scott Peck,

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<sup>47</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., 148.

<sup>48</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. J. W. Leitch (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1967), 118, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 152.

<sup>50</sup> bell hooks, *All About Love* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 129.

hooks reminds us that only “in and through community lies the salvation of the world.”<sup>51</sup> As oppressed people in the world, Black bodies have become a community in Christ, whose suffering unites them to himself.

### Conclusion

At this point in this work, it is important I ask the questions: Why should we care about these issues? Why disturb our peace and comfort with talk of social justice? Why should we be driven to stand up for those who suffer from structures of injustice in our world? If I may use civil rights activist and U.S. Congressman John Lewis’s words, have we not been called “to care for God’s chosen creatures”? Is it not the case that the benefactors of structures of injustice regard their victims as “stupid, smelly nuisances, awkward, comical birds who are good for nothing”?<sup>52</sup> Yet it is with these good-for-nothing victims of injustice that God took sides when God chose to become one with God’s creatures. Each time the rituals of forgiveness are enacted in our world by the victims of our sinful actions and systems, who are defined by such systems of erasure as “stupid, smelly, nuisances, awkward, comical creatures who are good for nothing,” a dangerous memory is brought to be in the nowness of our social and individual lives. We are led by a graced gift of friendship by God to enter into the domain of powerlessness. We experience all our illogicalities, shadows, traumas, and inhumanities in that place where we are no longer the receptors of power to dominate. This is a place of grace for all who are led there and also allow themselves to be led there. It is the place we can find our true humanity, a humanity that can only become what it ought to be when we are fully in friendship with others. I

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<sup>51</sup> hooks, *All About Love*, 129.

<sup>52</sup> John Lewis and Michael D’Orso, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harvest/Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 24.

become human only when I affirm your humanity. Only in that place of *kenosis* can the new dawn of our humanity be forged, one that is always rooted in *catharsis*. Again, forgiveness is not just for the offender. In fact, all rituals of forgiveness must always begin with the victim and end with the victim. It is the ritual process by which God comes to take the side of the victim and as a neighbor in dialogue, offers a new life to one whose life has been shattered by the hands of evil. Only when this encounter and companionship have occurred can the victim be able to become the prophetic voice of lament to the larger society. Their lament becomes the pathway for others in society to discover their sinfulness and need to embrace a new way of being human.

To speak of salvation is to evoke solidarity. In other words, there is no passivity in the salvific relationship God has with us. The theology of sacramental baptism speaks of the baptized becoming children of God, and as such, the face of God's gift of salvation in the world. If one is called to become the epiphany of a gift that evokes solidarity, it means then that the recipients of that solidarity must necessarily be invited to a response that authentically leads them to conversion. The Gospel of Mark (Mk 1:15) uses the Greek word *metanoia* to represent the correct response to the gift of the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims. Tertullian should be celebrated for his resistance against the early Christian translation of this word to mean *poenitentia* (confession of sin). For Tertullian, the Greek understanding of the word ought to be preserved, one that points to a change in behavior.<sup>53</sup> In the spirit of Tertullian, I must also call out a dualistic way of understanding this word in the contemporary era. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word as "spiritual conversion."<sup>54</sup> May I ask, what does this phrase even

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<sup>53</sup> Edward J. Anton, *Repentance: A Cosmic Shift of Mind and Heart* (Waltham, MA: Discipleship Publications International, 2005), 32-33.

<sup>54</sup> "Metanoia," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metanoia>.

mean? Humans are embodied creatures. Conversion must always be an embodied transformation. A theology of hope in a time of hate is grounded in the belief that those held captive by the vice of hate can be transformed holistically if they encounter the content of Christian hope.

Forgiveness, mercy, and love are mediated through activism. When victims of systemic injustice demand that all persons be treated with dignity, that our communities reflect the very best of our moral ideals, that structures of injustice be done away with, their activism becomes the very medium by which all experience the gift of authentic humanity. To love others means that one believes in the transformative ability of the human person. In other words, to love implies hope—the dawning of a new way of being. Hooks articulates this beautifully when she writes:

Love heals. When we are wounded in the place where we would know love, it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything. No matter what has happened in our past, when we open our hearts to love we can live as if born again, not forgetting the past but seeing it in a new way, letting it live inside us in a new way. We go forward with the fresh insight that the past can no longer hurt us. Or if our past was one in which we were loved, we know that no matter the occasional presence of suffering in our lives we will return always to remembered calm and bliss. Mindful remembering lets us put the broken bits and pieces of our hearts together again. This is the way healing begins.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> hooks, *All About Love*, 209.

White fragility is a mindset that demands existential, hermeneutic, discursive, economic, and political comfort of White people. With such a mindset, any form of suffering must be avoided or at best delegitimized. In a country whose history, identity, cultural worldview and political, economic, and religious positioning are radically defined by racism, it is not shocking that such a nation finds it uncomfortable to engage honestly with its own original sin. Perhaps the admonition given by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* can be helpful to address this sad reality: “I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.”<sup>56</sup> In line with Baldwin’s admonition, hooks writes, “Growing up is, at heart, the process of learning to take responsibility for whatever happens in your life. To choose growth is to embrace a love that heals.”<sup>57</sup> Again, when we march on the streets and demand justice, we inherently give to our oppressors the gift of growth that is grounded in love.

Finally, let me allow the reflection given by Katherine Fugate on her experience during a visit to the National Museum of African American History and Culture to explain what I mean by Black bodies being the incarnation of Christian forgiveness to all who benefit from oppressive empire dynamics:

Standing in front of Emmett [Till]’s coffin, I felt such rage, such anger at what happened to him that I could not contain it. Like a broken vase, water started seeping out of my eyes. My entire body started shaking, cracking. I can’t explain it other than, I’d left that room for a moment and went somewhere else.

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<sup>56</sup> As cited in hooks, *All About Love*, 210.

<sup>57</sup> hooks, *All About Love*, 210.

Our ancestors hand down to us physical and emotional traits, talents and personality. Do they also hand down their pain? Generations of pain from oppressing or being oppressed? When I returned to my body again, I felt warmth all around me. Hands of all ages were on my back, on my shoulders, holding me upright. I looked down. The hands were all black. To be held up and witnessed like that—it was one of the most profound moments of my life.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Fugate, “White People Are Broken.”