Something in the Water

A 21st Century Civil Rights Odyssey

Michael W. Waters

Foreword by Beto O'Rourke

Saint Louis, Missouri

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For the Martyrs and the Ancestors

And with Kingian hope that my own children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

Till justice flows like waters, and righteousness
like a mighty stream …

Table of Contents

Foreword 1

Introduction 3

Poems and Petitions 25

God Grieves: Contemplations amid Tragedy 26
A Prayer for Holy Soles 27
The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me 29
I Resist: A Prayer for the Nation 32
1619–Until 33
Today 34
I Believe. 36
Where Hope Is Found 37

Dallas: America's Capital of Functional White Supremacy 39

Laments and Public Liturgies 57

Something in the Water! 58
Why We March 64
Get Away, Jordan: A Eulogy for Jordan Edwards 67
A Brief Translation of What Folk Actually Mean When They Oppose Our Resistance 69
Wake Up and Stay Woke! 71
To Hell with H.U.G.S.! 78

You Gonna Learn Today! 84
The Valley 90
Where Do We Go from Here? 96
Show Up! 102
How Much is Malcolm X's Legacy Worth to You? 109
Wakanda Forever! 112
I'm All the Way Up! 122
If These Walls Could Talk 128

Prophetic Proclamations 133

Can I Live? 134
Reconcile or Resist? 139
Hands Up! 142
Mourning Mothers, White Flowers, and Steep Steps to Justice 146
It's Time to Resurrect the Radical King! 148
A Radical Dream 152
Why We Can't Wait … to Tear Down Confederate Monuments 155
The Fire This Time 158
An Empty Warrior 161
Thank God for African Angels! 166
Conclusion: Can a Virus Heal America? 172

Epilogue 186

Foreword

Themes flow together to produce ideas, much like tributaries converge to form rivers, in Michael Waters' latest book, *Something in the Water: A 21st Century Civil Rights Odyssey*. The poems, speeches, reflections, and essays read together like the "mighty stream" he often invokes at the end of a eulogy or sermon.

One of the powerful ideas that Waters surges to the surface is that progress isn't inevitable. In raising Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s oft-quoted line about the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice, Waters reminds us that it bends only when we have the courage to bend it. And when the courage leaves us, when complacency sets in, when we sleep through the revolution and the oppressor rides free of accountability, not only do we stop moving forward, we lose ground and give up much of what so many before us fought and died to gain.

It helps to explain how there are fewer Black homeowners today than in 1968, the year of Dr. King's murder.

How incarceration rates—driven by a war on drugs that is really a war on people, and especially people of color—have increased by 700 percent.

How our public schools are today more segregated in many communities than at any time since 1954.

And how there is now ten times more wealth in white America than there is in Black America.

Through anecdote and data, story and facts, as well as his own lived experiences, Waters gives the lie to the idea that Dr. King believed in the inevitability of justice—an idea that often is invoked to comfort the powerful as well as the powerless. This twisting of King's intent has allowed some to preach a promise that without work or sacrifice we somehow will arrive at justice; and, when swallowed whole, that promise lulls us into self-defeating complacency and complicity.

No, Dr. King certainly didn't believe that. As Waters reminds us, he was the man who shared this truth in "Letter from Birmingham Jail," that "freedom is never given voluntarily by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

Rev. Waters, this man of faith, brings us to the conclusion that it's not enough to simply believe. "Faith without works is dead," he reminds us as he shares the story of Botham Jean's family, here in the United States to recover his body and seek justice for his murder at the hands of a white police officer. After a meditation on the stunning act of grace and mercy shown by Botham's brother at the officer's sentencing, Waters brings in Jean's mother, who updates James's first-century letter in her own words. "I want to see change," she says. "Talk but no action means nothing."

If America is indeed stuck, as Waters contends, between its foundational promise and the realization of that promise; between progress and reaction; between hope and resignation, then the answer must be action.

That's where his flow of ideas and stories, martyrs and heroes, and family members and perfect strangers delivers the reader. Action is the antidote to despair, the answer to our prayers, and the key to victory.

So, we must move, take action, and put our faith in motion. "Lord," Waters implores, "teach me to pray with my feet."

Beto O'Rourke
El Paso, Texas

Introduction

On Saturday, August 3, 2019, I was sitting quietly in my office amid a buzz of activity across our church campus. Our church was preparing to burn our mortgage the following day. Our youth were rehearsing their dance performance for the service. We were eagerly anticipating the arrival of our bishop and other special invited guests to help us celebrate this important milestone, and, as their pastor, I was beaming with excitement and anticipation. I leaned back in my chair and picked up my phone to peruse social media.

There was a breaking news alert notification.
There had been another mass shooting.
This time it was in El Paso.
My heart sank.

Over the next hours and days, we learned that a young white supremacist and domestic terrorist had driven some six hundred and fifty miles from Allen, Texas, just north of Dallas, to unleash hell upon unsuspecting back-to-school shoppers at an El Paso Walmart superstore. When the melee was over, forty-six people were shot and twenty-two were dead. The twenty-third person died after several months in the hospital.

El Paso, Texas, is an American border city, the nation's twenty-second largest with almost seven hundred thousand residents. It sits along the Rio Grande across the Mexico-United States border from Cuidad Juarez (the City of Juarez), a metropolis of 1.4 million residents.

El Paso is a beloved American city with a unique history, culture, and composition. The Sun Bowl played annually in El Paso is the second-oldest NCAA football bowl game in America. In 1966, the Texas Western College of the University of Texas (now University of Texas at El Paso) men's basketball team became the first to start five Black players in a championship game as they defeated the University of Kentucky for the national championship. El Paso is home to Fort Bliss, one of the largest army military bases in America, and was named America's safest city twice in the 2010s. Over 80 percent of El Paso's residents are Latinx, the highest percentage for any American city.

For me, El Paso is the repository of some of my happiest and most formative childhood memories. As a youth, I made annual odysseys to El Paso to spend a portion of my summer vacation with my paternal grandparents, Ollie and Marie Waters. I learned to swim at the local YMCA in El Paso.

My grandmother possessed only a third-grade education because her labor often was needed to help the family bring in the East Texas harvest. She was a consummate chef who seemed to live her days in the kitchen, pulling a steady stream of delectables off her stove and out of her oven. Pancakes, eggs, and bacon for breakfast; fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans for lunch (yes, lunch); and what felt like a Thanksgiving meal each night for dinner. She cooked each day as though she was still cooking for her family of six. She even found time to bake fresh gingerbread and cookies.

I did not mind any of this.

My grandfather, an expert mechanic who worked for years on the base, was a jolly character. I would curl up in bed with him every Sunday night to read the Sunday morning paper "funnies." One of my great joys was riding along with him across El Paso to visit friends and run errands. My grandparents have long since departed, but the memory of their compassion and generosity remains with me.

My fond and loving memories of El Paso were invaded that Saturday morning by the murderous impulse of this young terrorist. Before carrying out his heinous deed, he had posted a manifesto on the Internet about protecting the state from the so-called "Hispanic invasion," words he'd heard uttered by the forty-fifth president of the United States.

The El Paso shooter is not the only terrorist who has been motivated to act on the forty-fifth president's rhetoric, so the attack there should have been anticipated. Researchers already had noted a dramatic increase in racially motivated violence in the regions where President Donald Trump had held a rally. It could have happened in any American city, but this time it hit close to home for me.

It's amazing how strangers find their lives colliding at the axis of tragedy. The victims' stories are gripping in that each of them was engaged in routine activity. Nothing seemed especially different about the day. It was just another Saturday to pick up a few items at Walmart.

Andre and Jordan Anchondo had gone shopping with their two-month-old son, Paul, after dropping off their six-year-old daughter at cheerleading practice. Andre, just twenty-three years old, jumped in front of the terrorist to shield his wife, Jordan, twenty-five, who shielded their baby with her body. When their bodies were recovered, Andre's body was covering Jordan, and she was covering her infant's tiny body. The baby's clothing was soaked in his parents' blood. He'd suffered broken fingers, but neither parent survived.

Margie Reckard, sixty-three, had gone to the Walmart superstore to do grocery shopping, leaving her husband, Antonio Basco, at home to do maintenance on their SUV. For several hours after the massacre, Basco drove to hospitals across the region searching for his wife. He ultimately received the heartbreaking news that she was among the dead.

The shooting victims ranged in age from two to eighty. Those who didn't survive were as young as age fifteen and as old as

ninety. They were Americans, Mexicans, and one German. All created in the image of God.

May God bless the dead.

* * * * *

I did not watch the news coverage as it aired live on the scene, but the week following the massacre, I was perusing social media when I stumbled upon an MSNBC video segment featuring commentator and Princeton University professor Eddie Glaude. I knew of Dr. Glaude's work and recently had made his controversial 2013 *Huffington Post* article, "The Black Church Is Dead," required reading for the Ministry in the Black Church course I had taught at the SMU Perkins School of Theology, my alma mater, earlier that summer. During the segment, Dr. Glaude masterfully, passionately, and even poetically expanded the narrative of racial violence in America well beyond El Paso and the era of Donald Trump:

> America's not unique in its sins. As a country, we're not unique in our evils. I think where we may be singular is our refusal to acknowledge them. And the legends and myths we tell about our inherent goodness, to hide and cover and conceal so that we can maintain a kind of willful ignorance that protects our innocence.

Dr. Glaude continued,

> It's easy for us to place it all on Donald Trump's shoulders. It's easy for us to place Pittsburgh on his shoulders. It's easy for me to place Charlottesville on his shoulders. It's easy for us to place El Paso on his shoulders. *This is us*. And if we're going to get past this, we can't blame it on him.

He went on,

> He's a manifestation of the ugliness that's in us. Either we're going to change … or we're going to do

> this again and again, and babies are going to have to grow up without mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts, friends, while we're trying to convince white folk to finally leave behind a history that will maybe, maybe—or embrace a history that might set them free from being white. Finally.

Dr. Glaude's words had gone viral. As they did with many people across America, his words resonated with me. The ugliness being perpetuated across America was much bigger than Donald Trump, its roots far deeper.

Although it is without debate that Donald Trump both inspired and gave cover to acts of hate and racial violence, Trump was at best a by-product of this American ugliness—a symptom but not the source. As Dr. Glaude pointed out, "This is us!" And as rapper Childish Gambino had announced in song over a year prior, "This is America!"

White supremacy comes with a body count, and the bodies bear witness against our national mythology. Violence and hate are not apart from us. It has always been closer to our core as Americans than we have cared to acknowledge. There is something troubled, even tainted, in the waters of America that we must explore, and until our nation fully has a reckoning with these realities, we will revisit these atrocities and brutalities in each generation.

* * * * *

In truth, my travels throughout 2019, both before and after the El Paso massacre, had confirmed for me that there is something in the water of America with which we must fully contend. I began the year on the West Coast near the calm waters of the Pacific Ocean, preaching and lecturing near and around the Los Angeles area at various Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday commemorations on the ninetieth anniversary of his birth.

After preaching in South Central the Sunday morning before the holiday, we left the church and headed to Watts Towers in

the city of Watts. A half century ago, Watts had been ablaze—the result of an uprising among young Black Americans after yet another act of police brutality against a brother in the community. Amid these uprisings, Dr. King had traveled to the area to promote a nonviolent direct action response to the horrors that Los Angeles' Black community had faced. His efforts failed; there was nothing he could do to quell the fires that burned without and within.

During an interview on September 27, 1966, with *CBS News*'s Mike Wallace, Dr. King offered a stunning articulation of the meaning of violent protests and uprisings. Wallace questioned Dr. King concerning the "increasingly vocal minority" who, like the young people of Watts, disagreed with his calls for nonviolence.

Dr. King responded, "I contend that the cry of 'Black power' is, at bottom, a reaction to the reluctance of white power to make the kind of changes necessary to make justice a reality for the Negro. I think that we've got to see that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the economic plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years."

Following our visit to the Watts Towers, we journeyed south to have dinner in Long Beach, a city perched on the beautiful blue ocean water. The picturesque view of this city was yet another reminder that a pollutant in our waters has infected a people. *Pacific* is derived from the Latin word associated with peace; yet beneath this seemingly placid blue water is a long and disturbing history overflowing with acts of racism and injustice that have extended beyond people with Black and Brown skin.

In 1942, two months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the relocation of all people deemed a threat to national security from the West Coast to internment camps farther inland. Japanese Americans, like Jews in Europe during the Third Reich, were systematically corralled to

containment facilities like criminals. These camps operated on American soil for as many as four years, holding innocent American citizens behind barbed wire-fenced encampments without the right to due process. The US government eventually disbursed more than $1.6 billion in reparations to 82,219 Japanese Americans who had been interned. Although reparations are at least an acknowledgement that harm was done, the racist, xenophobic hatred toward Americans that produced these camps resulted in losses that cannot be measured in dollars alone. Financial compensation cannot account for the loss of livelihood, loss of trust, and loss of dignity—crimes against humanity for which no one was ever convicted.

These crimes of injustice run deep in the tumultuous waters of American history.

Since 2005, I have led groups to visit cities and sites that are significant to the American civil rights movement to meet and dialogue with persons—some well-known, others not—who made invaluable contributions to the cause of justice. In February 2019, I led such a pilgrimage through the Deep South. Our first stop was in Glendora, Mississippi. Guided by the city's mayor, Johnny B. Thomas, we visited the place where fourteen-year-old Emmett Till's mutilated body was pulled from the water.

I was struck by the fact that these waters were adjacent to the rich soil of plantation grounds where generations of Black workers toiled in the hot Mississippi sun to harvest cotton. Between the water's edge and the road that ran past the old plantation grounds stood a memorial marker commemorating young Till. And just like Till, the sign has been ravaged repeatedly, riddled with bullets, and discarded into the water as rubbish; so many times, in fact, that an updated sign was made from bulletproof material. Our visit, however, came before the sign had been replaced, and we bore witness to the bullet holes that were present in the defaced sign. The entire experience caused me to ponder how racial hated could be so intense and so pervasive that later generations desired to harm the very

memory of this child who lost his life for a deed that his accuser later admitted was a lie.

I grabbed some remnants from the cotton field that already had been harvested. For the remainder of the day, I pondered Mayor Thomas' words, who explained that what had happened to Emmett Till was not out of the ordinary. The people who lived there during that era accepted that "they were always pulling up Black bodies from these waters," as the mayor explained rather matter-of-factly.

In April, I made two visits to Virginia, home of the first permanent European settlement that ultimately led to the establishment of the United States of America. The first visit was to accompany my wife as she gave a presentation at a conference in Charlottesville. While there, we paid our respects at a narrow pass where Heather Heyer—a young white woman killed by a white supremacist while giving public witness and service to the mattering of Black lives—became the Viola Liuzzo of her generation. We also paused to gaze upon the Confederate monument that had drawn young white supremacists there from across the nation in August 2017. Their mission was to terrorize the city as they marched through Charlottesville streets into the night, wielding torches and chanting, "You will not replace us!" Their mantra was extracted from a white supremacist conspiracy theory called "the Great Replacement," which also was present in the El Paso terrorist's manifesto.

In between my visits to Virginia, I led another civil rights pilgrimage in April. We crossed the Alabama River, a major water thoroughfare for transporting the kidnapped Africans who had been forced into slavery. In Montgomery, we visited the stunning National Memorial for Peace and Justice, referred to by some as the "National Lynching Memorial," and the EJI Legacy Museum, which had served as a holding pen where enslaved Blacks sat in bonds as they waited to be sold on the auction block. The city of Montgomery, the first capital of the Confederate States of America and seat of its national government, was one of

the most prominent domestic slave trading posts in America. Commerce Street—which today runs directly behind the Legacy Museum and makes a direct line between the Alabama River and the main slave auction site—was the route where Black human captives were paraded in chains.

I returned to Virginia a few weeks later to speak for internationally renowned music producer/artist Pharrell Williams' inaugural Something in the Water Festival in Virginia Beach. One of his executives had heard me speak in Los Angeles earlier in the year, so I was invited to bring a message during Sunday's pop-up church service on the beach. The crowd of more than five thousand participants was impressive, but I was more awed by the location where I was standing than by the size of the audience to whom I was speaking. I was struck by the massive sight of primarily Black bodies situated upon the very shores of the Atlantic Ocean where my kidnapped forebears had entered forced bondage four hundred years prior. I was standing less than an hour from the location where they docked.

As I looked out upon a sea of people, then upon the sea of water, I saw more than an ocean. I saw a watery mass grave. From my study of history, in the moment I was painfully aware that the slave insurance purchased by slave traffickers did not cover infirmed bodies brought ashore who were too sick to work. Only bodies that died while in transit were eligible for a claim. Therefore, sick Africans often were thrown overboard to drown so that the traffickers could collect their insurance money. On at least one noted occasion, white locals complained against this practice, not because of the sheer disregard for human life, but rather because those bodies later washed ashore, bringing a great stench from their decomposition.

In June, as my wife attended a Columbia University conference on criminal justice reform, I sat in MSNBC's New York studio with the Reverend Sharon Risher. The winter prior, I was honored to write the foreword to Rev. Risher's book, *For Such a Time as This: Hope and Forgiveness after the Charleston*

Massacre. On June 17, 2015, Rev. Risher's mother, Ethel Lance, and eight others were murdered by a young white supremacist domestic terrorist at the close of the Wednesday night Bible study at Emanuel AME Church. A month after the tragedy, I traveled to Charleston, where I personally bore witness to bullet holes in the church—bullets that missed or went through the bodies of church members and lodged in the walls and floors.

Her book had been featured on *The Today Show* earlier that morning, and we were in the greenroom of MSNBC's studio, where she was waiting to discuss the book with Craig Melvin. Interestingly, I had been interviewed by Mr. Melvin three summers prior in Dallas after five police officers were killed by an assailant after a peaceful protest and march that bore witness to the brutal police killings of Alton Sterling in New Orleans and Philando Castile near Minneapolis.

In one of the most gripping portions of her book, Rev. Risher wrote, "As Americans and as citizens of the country, we continue to address racism and gun violence only cosmetically." In her foreword, I wrote, "It is painful to note that we can mark time in America by who has been shot and when."

As we visited there on Manhattan Island, surrounded by the waters of the East River, the Hudson River, the Harlem River, and the Atlantic Ocean, I reflected on Seneca Village, the nineteenth-century settlement of Black landowners—the first of its kind in the city of New York. Established in 1825 by free Blacks, Seneca Village once boasted 264 residents, three churches, a school, and two cemeteries. In 1857, New York claimed the land by eminent domain, tore down the homes, and created Central Park. I could not help but link the harms done to this Black community in 1857 to the harms done when five Black teenagers were falsely accused of assaulting a white woman in Central Park, wherein they conceded to confessions coerced by the police. These five young men collectively served forty years in prison for a crime they did not commit. On May 1, 1989, Donald Trump, at the time earning millions as a New York real estate magnate, took out