

**UNLEARNING  
WHITE  
SUPREMACY**

*A Spirituality for Racial Liberation*

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## Preface

The genesis of this book finds its primary inspiration in Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Destruction*. It is perhaps Merton's most underappreciated work both because of the moral and spiritual challenge it directs to "white liberals" and because of the way it witnesses to an anti-racist life that integrates contemplation with prophetic action with and for Black Americans. As soon as I opened *Seeds*, the kernel of wisdom that inspires this book initially puzzled and later struck me with clarity. Its epilogue draws from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans:

What if God, desiring to show His wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction? (Rom 9:22)

Saint Paul's phrasing sounds deliberately provocative. Indeed, Paul asks rhetorically in 9:14, "Is there injustice on God's part?" It sounds as if Paul assumes that the God of Israel and Jesus Christ is wrathful. Paul immediately answers in 9:14, "By no means!" He emphasizes throughout Romans, "Neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38). So why does Paul, and more importantly Merton, seemingly taunt us with God "desiring to show his wrath" for "vessels of wrath made for destruction"?

Paul contextualizes Romans 9 within God's salvific history through Israel. God's mercy and compassion (9:15) reveal themselves consistently, even in and through Pharaoh's opposition and oppression. Ultimately, Pharaoh's "hard-heartedness" (9:18) fails to derail God's desire to show mercy and liberate an oppressed people. While Paul celebrates God's goodness, compassion, and mercy, at the same time he warns his readers that we, too, may be just as obstinate as Pharaoh. Drawing upon the archetypal figure of the potter and the potter's wheel (see Is 29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:6; and Wis 15:7), Paul imagines God as a potter who molds human beings at God's will. In other words, like a potter, God can crush the clay to bits or shape it into something beautiful. Although God may have been angered

at Pharaoh's recalcitrance and "desired" to demonstrate divine power, God "endured with much patience the vessels of wrath," that is, vessels of obstinacy like Pharaoh. Paul essentially says to his readers that if God shows loving-kindness to Pharaoh and gives him time to repent, imagine how much time God offers the people of Israel and of Christ to repent. God's loving-kindness is immeasurable.

Interestingly, Merton never discusses his deployment of Romans 9:22 anywhere in *Seeds of Destruction*. He does, however, make three points abundantly clear throughout *Seeds* that may help us understand the epilogue. First, Merton warns White people of faith who profess to be racially innocent that we are the source of anti-black violence in the United States. We White folks need to begin by rooting out our own violence and stubborn insistence that we set the terms of change. Although Merton does not extend the metaphor explicitly, I suggest that we who cleave to the social position and privilege of whiteness in the United States see ourselves as a kind of Pharaoh—an oppressive, dominating power who obstinately opposes the liberating will of Jesus Christ and the freedom of God's people. Part I of this book invites readers who benefit from white privilege and power to learn how we have assumed roles akin to Pharaoh's foot soldiers over the past five hundred years.

Second, drawing upon the deep wells of biblical wisdom and Catholic contemplative traditions, Merton's *Seeds of Destruction* invites White people of faith to place our body, mind, and spirit on the side of Black people in order to practice the primary commandments to love both God and neighbor. I argue that loving Black people in the fullness of their humanity is a prerequisite of the gospel and of cocreating *basileia tou theou*, the new reality fulfilling God's loving desire for the whole of creation.

Merton's third and decisive point, wholly consistent with Romans 9:22 and Christian doctrine, is that God's grace alone makes love and liberation possible. The roots of authentic protest and liberation are rooted in divinely inspired contemplative prayer and action that reshapes us in and through God's grace. Merton's religious vows of obedience call him to be so deeply oriented to God's grace that he welcomes the disintegration of his false egotistical self in order to allow transformation to a true self oriented to truth and love. I extend his prayerful, contemplative orientation to God's grace in Part II of this book in two ways.

First, beyond Merton, I draw upon African American religious experience and Black Catholic womanist and liberation theology as sources of God's liberating love and transformation in the world. Womanist and liberation theologies are oriented to the experience and wisdom of enslaved Africans who "applied the Exodus story, whose end they knew, to their own experience of slavery, which had not ended. The sacred history of God's liberation

of his people would be or was being repeated in the American south.”<sup>1</sup> In this particular repetition of God’s sacred history, predominantly White people of faith and churches have played roles much more akin to Pharaoh than of the prophetic gospel witness of Black Americans. People who believe they are white, a felicitous phrase I draw from James Baldwin, need to become humble and orient ourselves to the wisdom of the African American religious experience.

Second, although Merton does not say it, the insight of Romans 9:22 for Americans who maintain position at the summit of racial hierarchy and oppress Black and Brown folks is that we must work through our own idolatry of the lie of whiteness. How do we even begin to do that? Left to our own devices, we can’t. So how might God, like a potter, be breaking up white preoccupations with a false self with its disordered attachments to power, privilege, innocence, position, and control? I contend that a condition of the possibility of transformation in contemplative wisdom is engaging societal “impasse and dark night.”<sup>2</sup> The Carmelite tradition of “dark night” grounds and orients the path of transformation of the book’s second part. Only through the affliction of dark night—that is, the loss of everything that gave us meaning and satisfaction, including disintegration all of the emotional, intellectual, moral, and spiritual attachments of whiteness—does Wisdom draw us into the transformative intimacy of participatory love, mutuality, and belonging. It is to this intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual work that I now turn.

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<sup>1</sup>Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1978), 311.

<sup>2</sup>Constance FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” in *Living with Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*, ed. Tilden Edwards (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 93–116.

# Introduction

I write as a partner, parent, scholar, and activist who longs to see my children and my children’s children free to thrive as human beings, unfettered by the pain and suffering of death-dealing white supremacy and racism. I address these essays to and for White<sup>1</sup> people of faith who share a deep longing for racial liberation and who are willing to work through our shared complicity in the sin of white innocence and supremacy. My primary purpose is to offer a contemplative way of unlearning white complicity in anti-blackness and of living as followers of Christ who are authentically committed to act in love by “enfleshing freedom” with and for all our brothers and sisters.<sup>2</sup>

Although *Unlearning White Supremacy* is not an autobiography, my essays are inspired primarily by my personal, spiritual, and political experience of parenting biracial, African American children and being members of Black Catholic parishes in San Francisco, California; Hartford, Connecticut; and New Orleans, Louisiana. While this work is informed by my training in Catholic theology and ethics, the gut-level passion I share is shaped by interracial relationships of my family and our membership in these three parishes. I write in loving thankfulness for brother and sister Black Catholics whose uncommon faithful witness to the gospel endures in the face of death-dealing racism in church and society.

Having served as a lay pastoral associate at a dynamic Black parish in San Francisco in the early 1990s, Kara and I were deeply blessed by the uncommon hospitality, love, and joy of our Black brothers and sisters. Our experience at Sacred Heart drew us into the intimate embrace of Black Catholics and transformed our lives forever. Sacred Heart parishioners literally opened their arms to us—the entire congregation, all together, gathered around us

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<sup>1</sup>I am following the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) style guide for use of upper or lower case when referencing Black and White people and Black, Brown, Indigenous, or White communities. Not all Black people are African Americans so I use a person’s preference or specific identity where possible. Otherwise, I try to be as specific as possible in referencing, for example, Haitian American or Jamaican American. The NABJ does not capitalize “white” when referencing racist terms or actions, so I do not capitalize white supremacy, white settlers, or anti-black supremacy. I do not change upper or lower case where sources whom I quote use another style. See <https://www.nabj.org/page/styleguideA>.

<sup>2</sup>M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 128.

and physically hugged us as members of their parish on the first three successive Sunday Masses we attended at Sacred Heart in 1992. We have never experienced that kind of communal physical hug anywhere else. Sacred Heart members made the gospel real in their passionate and intimate embrace of us throughout the years we lived and worshipped in San Francisco. Our own inherited bias and stereotypes were dissolved by people who cared for us as their own. Their intimate embrace brought us into unimagined depths of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Their authentic witness to the gospel and the Sacred Heart of Jesus endures in my memory, heart, and soul.

I will never forget serving Sacred Heart as a lay pastoral associate. My primary mentors in ministry were eight to twelve Black women who met weekly for Bible study, prayer, and reflection. While I did my best to provide some insights from biblical scholarship into particular passages and books of Scripture, I was really a student to an exceptionally wise group of mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters who ran the parish and who embodied Christ in the neighborhood community in how they cared for every single person from the youngest toddlers, to teen youth, young adults, and the infirm and elderly. Their joyful embodiment of the Beloved Community, especially in the midst of pain and suffering, provided living witness to their faith that “God makes a Way where there is no way.”

On one occasion, when the Bible study group planned a parish retreat, they organized the retreat around one of the most powerful spiritual symbols I have ever experienced. The retreat was centered on remembering our ancestors through the African Tree of Life. While one can find many renditions of this image, the one at this gathering looms large in my memory. It was about two feet tall and equally wide. It depicts ebony human figures literally supporting one another and holding on to each other as they ascend the tree. The figures were carved out of African ebony wood in Tanzania. The image conveys a deep sense of intimacy both with nature and with ancestors who make life possible for the living today. The retreat facilitated reflection upon the African Tree of Life in relationship to each person’s individual journey, to their shared journey as a faith community, and to Catholic teaching about the unity of all members in and through the Body of Christ.

That retreat remains one of the most powerful experiences of my life because the women shared without reservation their deepest sufferings and joys in the midst of personal and public struggles. One woman’s story is seared into my memory. Tears ran down her face as she gathered herself before she spoke. The African Tree of Life, she said, gave her inspiration to share memory of her own ancestors. She told us how her family was originally rooted in Arkansas but moved to San Francisco because they were terrorized by a lynching that made it impossible to stay. She and her family were still grieving long after they made the move to the Bay Area. I began to learn in that moment

how lynching is not something in our past, limited to particular localities or regions. Lynching leaves trails of terror and trauma that tear families and communities apart all over the nation. Yet even in the wake of the bloodshed in Charlottesville and the protests in numerous other communities that are removing Confederate monuments, few White people are listening for ways to memorialize the victims of lynching and to find ways to heal these broken parts of the Body of Christ. Such forgetfulness and ignorance of the traumatic toll of history disregards our Eucharistic bond to each other and is a denial of our baptismal vows to repent for our participation in social sin.

Sacred Heart bestowed many deep blessings upon us, including the opportunity to learn from the great African American scholar and contemplative (I believe mystic) Rev. Cyprian Davis. I met Father Cyprian when he was visiting San Francisco to promote his recently published book titled *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*. In his book, Father Cyprian lifts up powerful stories about the courage of Black Catholics. One example is that of Catholic Hill Church in Ritter, South Carolina, where the Catholic community, led by former slave Vincent de Paul Davis, stayed together without priest, church, or sacraments for nearly forty years after the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> This is only one of countless stories in which Black Catholics nurtured their faith and community against seemingly insurmountable obstacles. When Father Cyprian visited Sacred Heart Parish, I asked him if the history of Black Catholics might be a “best-kept secret” even greater than that of Catholic social teaching, and if he thought that history might offer the broader church a source of spiritual and moral renewal. He responded positively that Black Catholic history provides great sources of hope and added, “Why don’t you take up that work yourself?” I felt like Father Cyprian was Christ, personally inviting me into an entirely new way of looking at the world.

Sacred Heart Parish opened our hearts, minds, and spirits to a whole new way of viewing the world. It also opened us to the possibility of adopting Black children. We were humbled by the people at Sacred Heart whose joyful faithfulness to the gospel was forged in resilience to racism within the church and in society. Thus, when Kara and I were exploring and then preparing to adopt cross-racially in Chicago in the late 1990s, we consulted interracial families led by White and biracial parents. Parishioners from Sacred Heart and parents of interracial parents both underscored the profound need for us to take up anti-racism as a way of life so that we would care appropriately for our children.

Throughout our preparation we confronted our own white ignorance of how to raise Black children in a society that idolizes whiteness as it loathes

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<sup>3</sup>Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 209–10.

Blackness. While I began to learn about the sting of racism through service to and participation in a Black parish, I felt that sting in a new way when I attended a Catholic Charities gathering designed to introduce parents to adoption. At one point in the session the leader presented a hierarchy of “preferred children” based upon statistics of whom white parents chose to adopt. Healthy White babies were at the top. Eastern European, Asian, Central American, and Hispanic American backgrounds filled out the middle. At the bottom of preferred children were disabled children of all races and Black babies. The leader presented this information without any historical or cultural context and without any reflection about how it related to, much less conflicted with, our Catholic faith and values. I left with a piercing sense of violence of how this unquestioned racial hierarchy feels for our Black brothers and sisters and a desire to be faithful to their love and care.

### **Truth-Telling in the Age of White Nationalist Rage**

Informed by this experience, I write primarily for White people of faith who share a deep longing for working through the racial contradictions of our way of life. If you believe you are innocent or see no need to work through the contradictions of the lie of white supremacy, this book may not be for you. Yet in the post-Charlottesville and post-George Floyd conversation, too many White people of faith took the easy road of condemning overt white supremacists without addressing the more pervasive and pernicious reality of how good White people of faith, including Catholics, maintain conditions of white Eurocentrism that elected an explicitly white-nationalist president in 2016—the first since the Jim Crow era. This book is for people of faith willing to work through our own complicity in the idolatry of whiteness.

While there is a growing academic literature addressing white supremacy and racism from multiple theological, pastoral, and moral perspectives, there are limited resources for White people of faith and justice who are not professional scholars. Nearly sixty years ago the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton wrote a series of “Letters to a White Liberal” that still ring true today. I am inspired by Merton’s contemplative vision and practice as I attempt to understand and articulate how whiteness works. For Merton this meant unraveling the roots of assumptions of white innocence and superiority.

Drawing upon Merton, I invite White people of faith to take shared responsibility for the sin and idolatry of white privilege and racism. This is no easy task, for it involves the deepest core of our hearts, lives, and souls. Indeed, it will involve individual and collective transformation from arrogant racial ignorance to unlearning the roles we play in perpetuating the social sin of



anti-black white supremacy. By “unlearning,” I mean beginning the work of acknowledging, gaining consciousness of, and undoing the many ways we have been malformed and deformed by a society that idolizes whiteness. More than that, as I explain, unlearning white privilege and superiority means becoming accountable to ourselves and others and taking responsibility for the roles we play in perpetuating unearned privilege and conferred white dominance.

### Embracing God’s Intimate Love, Mutual Care, and Belonging

God’s gift of creation draws all of us into an intimate embrace of love, mutuality, and belonging. In the contemplative tradition, Thomas Merton notices in the sound of a frog hopping into water, in the fluttering of a hummingbird, in a gentle breeze, and in all of the people he encounters at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky, the loving and intimate dance of God with and in the whole of creation. It is that intimate dance of God’s loving embrace to which we are called as beings made in the image and likeness of One who offers intimate communion in absolute openness and vulnerability.

The divine call to sensitively embrace the whole of creation is universal. This is why the Roman Catholic Church opens Vatican II’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*), with these enduring words:

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.<sup>4</sup>

The Catholic Church celebrates how “Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history. This deep sense of solidarity with the whole humanity calls the church and the people of God to read “the signs of the times,” “interpreting them in light of the gospel if it is to carry out its task.”<sup>5</sup> Vatican II calls people of faith to deepen historical consciousness as a way of witnessing to Christ’s intimate love for every creature throughout creation. Sadly, in terms of building racial solidarity, White Americans tend to be unaware of how the long history of white supremacy endures in the present. Part of the work of unlearning white superiority is becoming histori-

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<sup>4</sup>“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*,” in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello, 1987), 903.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 904.

cally conscious of how our past shapes who we are in the present.

I elucidate in this book how the US Catholic Church and people of faith have failed to live up to the gift and task of God's love. As I explain, drawing upon the theological anthropology of Saint John of the Cross and contemporary womanist and feminist theologies, "intimacy" denotes a deeper level of solidarity. Intimacy expresses the deepest theological, spiritual, and moral issues at stake in the work for racial liberation in a way that solidarity language easily elides. Too often, solidarity language neglects how the responsibility of being with and for other human beings is rooted in God's gratuitous love. Precisely because "solidarity" is used so widely and frequently in abstract ways that miss its deeper theological, spiritual, and moral meaning of struggling for racial liberation, I use the term "intimacy" as a way to articulate how God draws all people into deeper levels of loving mutuality, care, and belonging.

White people and institutions often use the term "solidarity" without taking the real risks involved in the emotional, spiritual, political, and practical work of racial liberation. The most salient risks of racial solidarity that I address in this text include White people gaining self-knowledge of our participation in persistent racism and relinquishing the emotional, spiritual, political, and economic advantages and security we obtain to the detriment of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, and other peoples of color. My point is not to jettison the use of the word "solidarity"; rather, it is to invite people of faith to think, reflect, act, and communicate in self-critical ways that notice how social justice language may become co-opted by euphemisms, abstractions, and interests that shield us from the real risks such work entails.

Solidarity raises difficult questions for White people and the Catholic Church in the US context. Where have we White folks been in the struggles of Black Catholics for full recognition as citizens and members of the Body of Christ? Our faith tradition is clear that people of faith are called to be in "vulnerable communion"<sup>6</sup> with and for people who are in any way oppressed, despised, or denigrated. The acid test of the practice of solidarity is whether and how it is practiced in the midst of social conflict. Bryan Massingale explains that cross-racial solidarity "is based upon the deep-seated conviction that the concerns of the despised other are intimately bound up with our own," in such a way that victims and beneficiaries of systemic injustice both realize that their full humanity and freedom are inextricably interwoven.<sup>7</sup>

In his articulation of a mystical political theology, German theologian Johann Baptist Metz (1928–2019) states,

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<sup>6</sup>Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup>Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 116–17.

A practical fundamental theology tries to hold on to solidarity in its indissoluble mystical-universal and political-particular dual structure, with the goal of protecting universalism from apathy and partial solidarity from forgetfulness and hatred. . . . In its mystical-political structure solidarity emerges as a category of the salvation of the subject at those points where it is being threatened: by being forgotten, by oppression, by death. It arises as a category of engagement so that men and women might become and continue to be subjects.<sup>8</sup>

Too often social justice and ecclesial leaders speak of solidarity in universal terms that miss Metz's concern with the Christian witness as the "partiality of discipleship"<sup>9</sup> and Massingale's call to practice conflictual solidarity in a specific, practical way in which "our sense of connection and commitment"<sup>10</sup> with despised others is unmistakably clear in the struggle to enact freedom and justice. In the spirit of Metz and Massingale, I suggest that mystical political intimacy means taking up sides in multiple forms of ritual, prayer, protest, and lament by being in vulnerable communion with Black and Brown brothers and sisters. I elucidate these ways of taking up sides in Part II as a way of embracing a deeper level of humanity that is not based upon White people purchasing an illusion of wholeness and autonomous self-sufficiency through wealth, education, and self-segregation. Rather, drawing upon the reality of mutual human dependence and divine giftedness of every person, the depth of our humanity is found in shared suffering, in what theologian Thomas E. Reynolds calls "vulnerable communion."<sup>11</sup> Being in vulnerable communion means becoming open to and being transformed by the fullness of other people, including their beauty and giftedness as well as their woundedness and suffering. Vulnerable communion means entering into enduring relationship with people such that brothers and sisters fully share the joys and hopes, grief and suffering, on the way of life and the gospel.

### "For the Trumpet Shall Sound"

I do not share these reflections to gather praise or earn a pass for my privilege; rather, through this book I suggest a way of unlearning white superiority as a way of becoming fully human and creating the conditions for possibly healing the wound that is racism in church and society. Real healing requires

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<sup>8</sup>Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, A New Translation by J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Herder and Herder, 2007), 210–11.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>10</sup>Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 117.

<sup>11</sup>Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 108.

the humility to let go of power and control and to become vulnerable and intimately connected with the entire Body of Christ. I offer these reflections about ways to unlearn unearned white privilege and power, including my own, in the hope that our church and White brothers and sisters in Christ will seek a more authentic way of life by working through our shared complicity in the evil of white innocence, supremacy, and terror.

In the context of US empire, colonialism, and white supremacy, I believe that it is a prerequisite for people like me, from dominant social locations, to be explicit about their commitment to antidomination. Too often White people take for granted our dominant status within the most powerful nation in the world. We tend to forget the history of how we gained this privileged position in society and we like to flatter ourselves with the myth that our own individual effort got us here. If we are honest, we know that we are born into a world that normalizes white privilege and confers a dominance that is undeserved and inhuman. As I elucidate in the chapters ahead, we tend to live under illusions of superiority and forgetfulness of our past that blind us to our own role in systemic racial injustice. We assume innocence and superiority even in the simple, necessary process of breathing. The chant “I can’t breathe” evokes the memory of the police killings of Eric Garner and George Floyd, and ought to remind us how the taking of one life takes life from all of us.<sup>12</sup> This means that I must continually be unlearning how I am complicit in multiple forms of oppression in every sphere of life, a reality that Patricia Hill Collins names the “matrix of domination.”<sup>13</sup>

Too often, the Catholic Church and people of faith have been focused on economic success and status whereby we foster ignorance of our responsibility with and for all members of the Body of Christ who are suffering within our cities, towns, and dioceses. I grew up in a relatively affluent family in a Midwestern university town where we had little concern about the interlocking violence of poverty and racism. While the founder of our Catholic parish faced Protestant resistance to the formation of a Catholic faith community in the 1950s, our parish enjoyed many benefits of affluence and connections to the local university that benefitted the parish elementary school, and we really had no self-reflective awareness of being a predominantly White community. As I look back, I also see how we assumed a certain racial innocence even as we failed to criticize the racial epithets used by various family members and in the community at large.

Our privilege was also evident in how my parents, extended family, and local community viewed the living Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a threat

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<sup>12</sup>I wrote about the theological and spiritual implications of the “I can’t breathe” chant in “Jesuit Institutions Must Do More to Undo Racism,” *America*, October 13, 2015, [www.americamagazine.org](http://www.americamagazine.org).

<sup>13</sup>Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221–38.

rather than a prophet. More personally, while my parents celebrated my father's service in World War II and the graduate degree he attained with the aid of the GI Bill, there was no awareness or discussion of how that benefit was denied to African American men and women who served. When Black Americans expressed their anger in Detroit in 1967 and 1968, my family talked about the violence as if we had no connection with our brothers and sisters who were suffering racial and economic injustice. We and our Catholic parish unreflectively enjoyed our safe distance from Detroit's strife.

This work of unlearning white, male, heterosexual privilege is necessarily a lifelong task. Contrary to popular white practice and custom, I claim neither innocence nor achievement. This work does not inoculate me from privilege or from the responsibility to continue to unlearn and subvert white domination. Rather, I address myself as one who remains complicit and must take up the work anew every day, throughout my entire life. Conversion, like the sacraments, is a process into the always-transforming love of God and neighbor, not a passing event. My hope is that this book contributes to a larger conversation and shared struggle to become more deeply human and to find new ways of living whereby all people and creatures may fully thrive.

### Mystical and Political Intimacy

God's gift of transformation in the intimate unity of love of God and neighbor is mystical and political because it expresses God's desire that we embody a "witness" for others in their trauma and woundedness.<sup>14</sup> By mystical I do not mean some kind of special knowledge, extraordinary vision, or Gnosticism. I look to the contemplative Trappist monk Thomas Merton as a helpful guide for understanding how and why the mystical and political are intimately interwoven. As noted in my preface, I am focusing particularly on Merton's *Seeds of Destruction*, his pathbreaking work addressing white complicity. My argument draws heavily from both Merton's *Seeds of Destruction* and his *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which I believe offer enduring insight into how White people of faith might integrate contemplation with the work of racial liberation. Toward the end of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton invites people of faith into the "general dance"<sup>15</sup> of God's luring, gentle, loving presence in the entire cosmos and throughout the whole of existence. We are called to forget "ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join the general dance."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>See Flora A. Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 190–98, here 194.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 1972), 290 and 296.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 297.

This “general dance,” along with everyday mysticism, encompasses the human longing for sacredness and union with God. That desire itself is God’s presence within us, drawing us into a more intimate dance with the whole of creation. This is the giftedness of God’s creative love always already present in every being and in the entirety of Being. This is what the great twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner called the “mysticism of everyday life.” For Rahner, the gift of God’s love involves the most fundamental invitation of the divine to the human: love of God and neighbor in the midst of everyday, ordinary life. The mystical is not something extraordinary reserved only for the rare visionary mystic; rather, in the most mundane moments of everyday life, the divine is present within us and all around us.

This call to intimate love with the whole of God’s creation goes to the very core, purpose, and meaning of the Christian faith tradition. Too often, however, at least in North American culture, we have reduced mysticism to an otherworldly spirituality disconnected from human pain, suffering, and struggle. White people must confront the reality that we have been socially and historically constructed as the pinnacle of humanity for at least the past five hundred years. By the term “intimacy,” I begin to articulate in Part I a deeper level of solidarity that includes White people becoming contemplatively aware and critical of the ways we have been humanly, morally, and spiritually deformed by anti-black white supremacy. Part I is an extensive reflection on the ways White people need to become critically aware of the ways that the worldly reality of white supremacy and anti-black oppression is *inside of us*. Thus Part I challenges White people to confront our historical amnesia (chapter 1), unlearn modernity’s deceptive “white habitus”<sup>17</sup> (chapter 2), and trace the historical origins of anti-blackness in the Roman Catholic papacy’s initiation of the Atlantic slave trade (chapter 3).

I use the term “mystical political intimacy” to highlight three interconnected Catholic theological and spiritual claims: that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and endowed with the capacity for relationship with God, that human beings have a unique place within God’s creation, and that human beings are made for communion with our human and nonhuman kin. Yet too often White people appeal to solidarity through these theological claims without any historical deconstruction of anti-black white supremacy. Thomas Merton’s call to White people to develop critical

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<sup>17</sup>Eduardo Bonilla-Silva develops the concept of “white habitus” as “a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters.” See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 103. Chapter 2 in this book utilizes white habitus as a way of interrogating and understanding how White people are shaped within and contribute to a separate residential life that fosters a White culture of solidarity and negative views about Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.

self-awareness of our egotism and authentically embrace Black people as an expression of the unity of love of God and neighbor is, I argue, a call to enduring transformation and liberation.

I use the term “intimacy” in Part II as a gospel way of lived conversion of minds, bodies, hearts, and souls that is both transformation in God and transformation with and for racially oppressed peoples. Mystical-political conversion is rooted in God’s grace and compassionate living and loving with and for racially oppressed neighbors. This is why I am proposing “intimacy” as a deeper way of nurturing solidarity as a gospel encounter of Jesus’s way of healing and repair, connection in table fellowship, and transformation in walking the way of the cross with oppressed peoples and the earth. Ultimately, my argument is oriented to a mystical-political sensitivity, transformation, and liberation with and for Black people and the whole of God’s creation.

However, the term “mystical political intimacy” may sound quaint, even oppressively naïve, to people who have suffered racial violence. This sensibility is not unfounded in the face of white supremacy, terror, and violence. People of color have endured slavery and every form of violence—including rape, torture, lynching, and imprisonment—and to this day have been continually denied fundamental humanity in every sphere of US social, political, and economic life. Yet throughout colonial and US history, many people of diverse racial and class backgrounds have crossed racial lines to create loving families and communities of resistance. These loving interracial relationships<sup>18</sup> witness to alternative ways of life that profoundly imitate God’s intention for tender and caring relationships in the Lord’s Prayer.

In North American culture, the word “intimacy” also tends to conjure up an exclusively erotic, sexual, reductively physical meaning. As Lisa Lowe demonstrates in her examination of imperialism across four continents, the “intimacies of desire, sexuality, marriage, and family are inseparable from the imperial projects of conquest, slavery, labor, and government.”<sup>19</sup> Too often, US culture reduces and flattens the meaning and purpose of human desire to nothing more than self-pleasuring physical attraction, voyeurism, and possession. We miss how this demented desire corrodes racialized sexuality and identities, and drives white supremacy and imperialism. Even more deeply, moral theologian Bryan Massingale exposes the multiple ways sexual racism is a tool of racial domination and humiliation. The race-based sexual violence prevalent in law enforcement, pornography, and assaults upon women of color, he explains, finds its roots in the history of slavery, Jim Crow, and

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<sup>18</sup>Sheryll Cashin, *Loving: Interracial Intimacy in America and the Threat to White Supremacy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 5–6.

<sup>19</sup>Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 17–18.

lynching.<sup>20</sup> I thus employ the term “mystical political intimacy” to articulate a deeper level of transformation to which we are called as coworkers in God’s vineyard (Mt 20:1–16) for racial and ecological liberation.

My own encounter with Thomas Merton and the contemplative life began after I survived a bone marrow transplant for leukemia that nearly took my life in 1984. Looking the reality of death in the face prepared me to engage Merton’s call to encounter reality as it is. Little did I know that his writing would draw me into the calling I attempt to live today. It was in the hospital facing death that I first began to notice that the condition of the possibility of my life rested so much on white racial privilege and power. I began to understand that being alive itself—including breathing—is an instance both of divine presence and conferred racial dominance. Our African American brothers and sisters do not enjoy the same health-care benefits that saved my life. According to the American Cancer Society, African Americans have “the highest death rate and shortest survival of any racial group for most cancers.”<sup>21</sup>

Later, when I was in divinity school studying both Thomas Merton and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I attended a conference held in late 1988 at the Aquinas Center for Roman Catholic Studies at Emory University. That conference, titled “For the Trumpet Shall Sound: Protest, Prayer, and Prophecy,” addressed the legacies of both Merton and King and featured, among many other famous scholars’ presentations, Albert Raboteau’s reflection on “The Hidden Wholeness” of Merton and King. A variation of that talk is published in Raboteau’s book *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History*. His scholarship on slave religion inspired new generations of scholars who have emphasized two critical facts of the history of African slaves in America: that they were full of agency in the midst of slavery, and that they revolutionized our understanding of the meaning of Christianity and democracy itself. Like many others, I was also inspired by Raboteau’s reflection on how King was planning to join Merton for a retreat at his Kentucky abbey (Our Lady of Gethsemani) that was in the planning stages before King’s assassination.

The possibilities of joining the contemplative and prophetic, which Merton and King were not able to explore together, stand before us today. Most importantly, by taking up Raboteau’s challenge to attempt to walk the path of contemplation and prophecy, I embarked upon an unexpected journey of confronting both my own complicity and the deep complicity of my faith,

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<sup>20</sup>Bryan N. Massingale, “The Erotic Life of Anti-Blackness: Police Sexual Violation of Black Bodies,” in *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, ed. Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 173–94.

<sup>21</sup>American Cancer Society, “Cancer Facts and Figures for African Americans 2019–2021,” [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).



Roman Catholicism, in US racism. Rev. James Forbes, who contributed a passionate sermon on the intersections of race and class at the 1988 Emory conference, also nurtured fire in my belly for racial justice. More importantly, it was Sister Antona Ebo, a Franciscan nun from St. Louis who had walked with King from Selma to Montgomery, who personally challenged me to risk my life for racial justice. “For the Trumpet Shall Sound” was more than just another conference; it was a rare, life-changing experience that shaped my deep sense of calling to address racial injustice in the United States.

Merton begins *Seeds of Destruction* by noting that the contemplative life is not an abstraction or a flight from the world. “The contemplative life is not, and cannot be,” Merton begins, “a mere withdrawal, a pure negation, a turning of one’s back on the world with its sufferings, its crises, its confusions and errors.”<sup>22</sup> Monastic communities are fully implicated in the sinfulness of the world, Merton explains, and must witness to baptismal conversion into God’s love in the midst of worldly egoism and injustice. To forget or ignore one’s implication in the sin and injustice of the world, continues Merton, “does not absolve the monk (or any contemplative) from responsibility in events in which his very silence and ‘not knowing’ may constitute a form of complicity.”<sup>23</sup>

Practicing silence does not disconnect one from time and place. On the contrary, silence connects us with the whole of reality, including the time and place in which we live. At the very outset of *Seeds*, Merton recalls that when monastic communities remained silent in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, too often they were “publicly giv[ing] support to totalitarian movements.”<sup>24</sup> Such otherworldly recollection and renunciation itself becomes complicit in the evil of the world.

On the other hand, Merton does not join any partisan political cause, and is clear that “monks should be free of the confusions and falsities of partisan dispute.”<sup>25</sup> The last thing he would want, exclaims Merton, is a monastic movement in politics. However, the monk, the contemplative, and persons and communities of faith ought not concentrate only upon “ideal essences, upon absolutes, upon eternity alone.”<sup>26</sup>

Even today, when spirituality becomes overly concerned with making individuals feel better with themselves and comfortable with the social status quo, Merton’s warning endures. This is especially true when White people tend to be more concerned with personal “wholeness” while we remain ignorant

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<sup>22</sup>Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), xiii.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

or complacent about racial violence. Unfortunately, religion and spirituality have become deeply privatized in Western European and American culture, with disastrous consequences for the public good.<sup>27</sup>

These conditions result in much of spiritual life becoming overly individualistic. As religion focuses too much on individuals—providing them with a therapeutic spirituality that assuages guilt, pacifies anxiety, and accommodates disquiet with social injustice—we become blind to social suffering and begin to believe that social injustice is inevitable. As our economic system has become dominated by corporate capitalist practice, spirituality has become merely another commodity to be sold.<sup>28</sup> In America, this includes justification of the so-called prosperity gospel, a profit-driven and self-interested spirituality, at the expense of real concern for people who are suffering and excluded in society. Worse, the prosperity gospel rhetoric tends to blame people who are poor for their plight, and its adherents, many of whom are white and affluent, disavow responsibility for racism because they do not see color or claim to be “color-blind,” a perspective that I discuss in depth in chapter 2.

Merton’s contemplative practice and theological perspective offer a different approach. He does not acquiesce to a spirituality that justifies the status quo as the way things should be. Rather, he articulates how Christians must engage with the social injustices of our time. Christianity, he writes, cannot reject history. In fact, Christianity is centered upon a historical event that changes the entire meaning of time and history. The freedom of the Christian contemplative is not freedom *from* time; rather, the freedom of the Christian contemplative is freedom *in* time. Merton writes,

It is the freedom to go out and meet God in the inscrutable mystery of His will here and now, in this precise moment in which He asks man’s cooperation in shaping the course of history according to the demands of divine truth, mercy, and fidelity.<sup>29</sup>

Contemplatives, lay and monastic, are called to witness to God’s mercy, truth, and justice in the midst of earthly conflict. The adversary is neither time nor history. The adversary is evil will and the accumulated inheritance of untruth and past sin. Merton recognizes how we are individually and collectively shaped by society as well as the history of sin that precedes us.

Although Merton does not advocate political partisanship, he states, “I

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<sup>27</sup>Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>28</sup>Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13–22.

<sup>29</sup>Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, xiv.

speak not only as a monk but also as a responsible citizen of a very powerful nation.” His point is not that the secular nation-state ought to be guided by an eschatological church. However, he continues, it is “a solemn obligation of conscience at this moment of history to take the positions”<sup>30</sup> that he affirms in *Seeds of Destruction*. That solemn obligation of conscience is now ours, in a nation that is retreating from its democratic and faith commitment to live up to the creed that all people are created equal.

If he is to live a vow of poverty, Merton reflected in 1964,

It seems illusory if I do not in some way identify myself with the cause of people who are denied their rights and forced, for the most part, to live in abject misery. To have a vow of obedience seems to me absurd if it does not imply a deep concern for the most fundamental of all expressions in God’s will: the love of His truth and of our neighbor.<sup>31</sup>

### Followers of the Way of Jesus

The premise and purpose of this book concern the heart of the gospel. It is easily communicated through the clarity of the Lord’s Prayer. When Jesus offers his prayer that has become the primary prayer of Christianity, he prays that God’s loving presence may be fully real, right now, right here. He invites followers to address God in the same intimate way he does. I take the Lord’s Prayer as a way that Jesus draws us into his aching passion to transform our numb absence and lust to dominate others into God’s desire to expand the caverns of our being into eternal love with and for every creature in the web of life. The Lord’s Prayer is Jesus’s invitation to us to orient our entire lives to intimacy with God and neighbor in the way we shape every dimension of our lives with and for one another. The Lord’s Prayer calls people of faith to create God’s Beloved Community among all of our human and nonhuman kin here and now.

Even when we acknowledge human finitude, too often we forget that God created the human person with an infinite capacity for God in the “caverns”—the “soul’s most subtle rooms”—of the intellect, will, and memory, as the Carmelite Constance FitzGerald describes the theological anthropology of Saint John of the Cross.<sup>32</sup> She quotes John of the Cross’s commentary on

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., xv–xvi.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., xvi.

<sup>32</sup>Constance FitzGerald, “Transformation in Wisdom: The Subversive Character and Educative Power of Sophia in Contemplation,” in *Carmel and Contemplation: Transforming Human Consciousness*, ed. Kevin Culligan, OCD, and Regis Jordan, OCD (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2000), 351, note 46.

*The Living Flame of Love*, where he explains that because the object of these caverns, namely God, “is profound and infinite,” it follows that “in a certain fashion their thirst is infinite, their hunger is also deep and infinite, and their languishing and suffering are infinite death.”<sup>33</sup> As long as we fill the caverns of the intellect, will, and memory with “human knowledge, loves, dreams, and memories that seem or promise to satisfy completely,” FitzGerald explains, “the person is unable to feel or imagine the depths of capacity that is there.”<sup>34</sup>

Paradoxically, FitzGerald writes, only when we become aware of our human emptiness, especially now in the midst of our fragility and breakdowns of all in which we have invested our lives, “the limitation of our life project and life love, and the shattering of our own dreams and meanings, can the depths of thirst and hunger that exist in the human person, the infinite capacity, really be felt.”<sup>35</sup> Even as we seem to be falling into an abyss of sinfulness and idolatry of whiteness, God draws us into an infinite capacity for mystical sensitivity to the interdependence and bondedness of the whole of creation, to paraphrase Beverly Lanzetta’s *Radical Wisdom*.<sup>36</sup> I explore this paradoxical insight in the beginning of Part II because it interrelates God’s work and ours in the struggle for racial liberation.

Merton’s concern for following God’s will through God’s truth and love of our neighbor is rooted in Jesus’s intimate love for His Father (Abba) and his prophetic practice of compassion.<sup>37</sup> When Jesus calls his disciples to be compassionate as God is compassionate (Lk 6:36), he presents his listeners with a radically different vision of God than that offered by the religious elites of his time. During the historical life of Jesus, the religious and economic elites apply the Law of Moses legalistically to maintain the power and status of those same elites, while the great majority of people suffer grinding poverty. Due to their economic conditions, most people could not follow the purity rules of the Temple and could not pay taxes (i.e., the tithe) to the Temple.

In contrast, Jesus presents his followers and listeners with a much more compassionate vision of God and practice of the Law. The Hebrew and Aramaic roots of the word that Jesus uses for “compassion” are plural forms of a noun that means a woman’s womb.<sup>38</sup> Rather than stressing external

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid. FitzGerald quotes Saint John of the Cross, commentary on *The Living Flame of Love*, in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, DC: Institute for Carmelite Studies, 1991), 681, no. 22.

<sup>34</sup>FitzGerald, “Transformation in Wisdom,” 303.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 197.

<sup>37</sup>Maureen H. O’Connell, *Compassion: Loving Our Neighbor in an Age of Globalization* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

<sup>38</sup>Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 47–48.

laws or rules, Jesus's word thus evokes a vision of the wholeness of creation and of God as "womblike," an experience in which God feels for the whole of creation the way a mother feels intimate care with and for the new life in her womb. For men, this means feeling with and for others deep in our gut. While the text in Luke 6:36 is often translated as "Be merciful as God is Merciful," biblical scholar Marcus Borg contends that the English word "compassion" better expresses the vision and practice of love expressed by the historical Jesus. His womblike term for compassion invites people both to feel with others and to put that feeling into practice. By calling his followers to practice compassion, Jesus calls them both to feel passionate care for others and to act in a way consistent with that feeling God nurtures within us. Practicing God's compassion intimately interweaves our lives together in love, freedom, and justice.

Jesus's practice of compassion—as we find in the stories that he told—his practice of healing by gentle touching, and his critique of unjust wealth and power meant that Jesus chose to suffer with the despised, the forgotten, and the poor. Suffering with and for the oppressed, articulated as preferential solidarity in Catholic social teaching, defines Jesus's practice of compassion. A truly contemplative and human solidarity means that we are "pierced to the core" of our souls so intimately by the suffering of others that we feel the depth of another's wound within the very depth of our being.<sup>39</sup> This is where Christ's presence and ours are joined in the work of healing a wounded world. When we "feel and identify with the depth of another's wound," contemplative Beverly Lanzetta explains, this connection "generates an ethic of mutuality and compassion, a desire to share in and bring healing to the sorrows of others."<sup>40</sup>

In political and prophetic terms, Jesus's practice of preferential solidarity sets a radical example of resistance to the relationship between the privileged and the oppressed. Jesus clearly did not practice the elite norms of his day, such as piety and respectability; on the contrary, his practice of compassion threatened the economic, political, and religious elites. Indeed, his practice of preferential love and justice ultimately led to his crucifixion. The Catholic Church recognizes this reality today when it states that those who "stand up against [racial] repression by certain powers" will "face scorn and imprisonment."<sup>41</sup> Jesus's ministry and his suffering and death fundamentally witness to God's gratuitous, preferential love for the despised, and shape the transformative heart of Catholic social teaching. The way of preferential solidarity invites intellectual, moral, and religious

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<sup>39</sup>Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 200.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>The Vatican, Pontifical Commission on Peace and Justice, "The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society," no. 26.

transformation to realize full human dignity and flourishing for all in human community. White liberation is intimately interwoven with Black liberation. The conditions of the possibility of shared liberation, I argue, are built through the narrow path of practicing the contemplative ethic of the intimate compassion of Jesus.

### A Complicit Church

Work for racial liberation is both mystical and political precisely because of the unity of love of God and neighbor. It is political because US democratic and faith institutions and people have used all forms of power to oppress many diverse peoples of color. It is political because creating the conditions for the possibility of full human thriving for African Americans, Latinx, and First Peoples must involve complete transformation of the social, political, economic, and cultural levers of power that keep people oppressed. It is political precisely because Jesus Christ was executed for his witness to divine love and justice.

Violence against Black, Brown, and First Peoples continues unabated throughout the United States. For example, in the wake of the brutal murder of nine members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, do we perceive the intimate connections between care for the whole of creation and care for Black lives?

Our African American brothers and sisters can't breathe (Eric Garner and George Floyd), can't eat Skittles or wear a hoodie (Trayvon Martin), can't play loud music (Jordan Davis), can't play as a child in a park (Tamir Rice), can't seek help after an accident (Renisha McBride), can't walk to a store with a friend (Rekia Boyd), can't move to a new city and job (Sandra Bland), and can't pray in their own church (Cynthia Hurd, the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, Sharonda Coleman Singleton, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lee Lance, Susie Jackson, the Reverend DePayne Middleton-Doctor, the Reverend Daniel Lee Simmons, and Myra Thompson).

In this context, poet Claudia Rankine shares how a Black mother told her, "The condition of Black life is one of mourning."<sup>42</sup> This is the reality in which a mother incessantly mourns the fact that she might lose her son at any moment. Rankine understands that while white liberals might feel temporarily bad about Black suffering, she explains,

There is really no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing as a Black person you can be killed for simply being Black:

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<sup>42</sup>Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning," *New York Times*, June 22, 2015.

no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning on to this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while Black.<sup>43</sup>

She continues by noticing that eleven days after she was born on September 15, 1963, four Black girls were killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Now, fifty-two years later, upon the deadly shootings at the Charleston AME church, Rankine stresses that Black suffering means perpetual mourning. If predominantly White churches value Black lives, indeed all lives, then we would share in that mourning and work to end the conditions that cause such mourning.

Two things about the witness of the nine AME church members are especially troubling to theologian Willie James Jennings. First, Jennings is haunted by the fact that Dylann Roof was present

in the intimate space of that bible study, sitting there at a table with these saints of God who were seeking to hear a holy word just for them, just for this moment. I would feel less pain if he simply walked into the church and started shooting; then I could live with the fact that this young man did not give God's voice the chance to penetrate his contorted heart.<sup>44</sup>

The pain is that Roof "did hear the sound of grace and communion. God's voice was sounding in Emanuel. He simply resisted it."

Second, Jennings is haunted by the forgiveness that the families of victims offered Roof. He calls us to remember the words of Rev. Daniel Lee Simmons's granddaughter, who said, "We are here to combat hate-filled actions with love-filled actions."<sup>45</sup>

Jennings struggles to understand how Black folks are called upon throughout the centuries "in tortuous repetition to forgive those who kill us, and we do it. The only way I can fathom this grace of forgiveness is if the very life of God flows through people like these Black families."<sup>46</sup> Yet Jennings also struggles with how forgiveness is interpreted. Too often, it is used to avoid dealing with whiteness and the state of war it creates in America. Forgiveness can become a soothing high that does not address the lie that is white supremacy. I believe White people ought to be haunted too. We ought to be

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Willie James Jennings, "Dylann Roof Was Wrong: The Race War Isn't Coming, It's Here," *Religion Dispatches*, June 26, 2015, [www.religiondispatches.org](http://www.religiondispatches.org).

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

haunted by the connection we have with White people who foment racial terror. We ought to be haunted by the fact that the same society that creates people like Dylann Roof is the same society that forms us.

Consider the odd conversation that ensued in the wake of the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which was organized to protect a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and resulted in the murder of Heather Heyer, who lived her life in passionate embrace of people who are in any way oppressed. Donald Trump, then the president of the United States, said that there were people on many sides who committed violence. He asked, “George Washington was a slave owner. . . . How about Thomas Jefferson? Because he was a major slave owner. Now are we going to take down his statue?”<sup>47</sup>

There were many who came to the defense of the Founding Fathers. While we can recognize a false equivalency between Confederate leaders who threw the nation into war to defend slavery and the Founding Fathers, too many commentators, including US Catholic bishops, missed a more critical reality: they failed to help people of faith understand the historical roots of white racism in the legacy of slavery and how it implicates all of us today.

The gaping wound that is racism has only festered to a point that is humanly unbearable. Yet too many White people of faith remain blind and ignorant, consciously and unconsciously, of this pernicious reality. Our consciences ought to be stung about how this wound bleeds daily for victims of deadly violence. That the US Conference of Catholic Bishops hesitates to claim that “Black lives matter” only underscores the church’s estrangement from Black people and its witness to Eucharistic intimacy. #BlackLivesMatter is far more than a social movement; it is a struggle for full human dignity and sociality that the Catholic Church ought to be embracing intimately and passionately. The Body of Christ in the United States is in profound need of the Catholic Church’s leadership to help and protect people and communities torn apart by white supremacy and anti-blackness.

Yet the church’s historical complicity in white supremacy sets it in a profound theological, moral, and pastoral bind. If the Catholic Church maintains silence in relationship to its enduring complicity in white supremacy, it denies God’s grace, hope, and healing in the Eucharistic memory of Jesus Christ. Through continued silence, the church risks, as theologian M. Shawn Copeland warns, the blasphemy of continued “contempt for Black creatures who share the glory, beauty, and image of the Divine.”<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, practicing love with and for Black people means tak-

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<sup>47</sup>Kristine Phillips, “Historians: No, Mr. President, Washington and Jefferson Are Not the Same as Confederate Generals,” *Washington Post*, August 16, 2017.

<sup>48</sup>M. Shawn Copeland, “Anti-Blackness and White Supremacy in the Making of American Catholicism,” *American Catholic Studies* 127, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 6–8.



ing the risk of losing privilege and power, a risk that will alienate people who are comfortable with the status quo. It will involve loss of status and privilege—and, if work for racial liberation seeks reparation for the harms from which White people grotesquely benefit, it will entail real loss of wealth and economic entitlement. If the Catholic Church takes up this risk for the gospel, it likely will lead to loss of funding sources from people who cherish their social standing. It will involve the difficult work of understanding our own inhumanity, blindness, and callousness toward other human beings who also share in the glory of being created in God’s likeness. It will mean losing our sense of innocence and taking up the work of becoming authentically responsible for the entire Body of Christ.

The point is not that White sacrifice will lead to Black liberation—that is part of the lie of white supremacy. Rather, people who believe in the myth of whiteness need to recognize and address the plentitude of ways that whiteness is literally killing us.<sup>49</sup> This includes White people supporting politicians whose policies directly harm their own well-being. A case in point is the fact that from 2009 to 2015, “non-Hispanic white men accounted for nearly 80 percent of all gun suicides in the United States, despite representing less than 35 percent of the total population.”<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the American public remains “largely unaware of the prevalence of white gun suicide” and “the links between gun ownership and gun suicide at all.”<sup>51</sup> Michael Eric Dyson laments that the politics of whiteness is “killing us, and, quiet as it is kept, it’s killing you too.”<sup>52</sup>

That the church hesitates to proclaim that Black lives matter<sup>53</sup> only seems to reveal a certain lack of courage and affirm a blind attachment to a status quo that leaves sinful assumptions of white innocence unacknowledged and unaddressed. And that the church remains largely mute in the face of repeated public acts of racial violence on behalf of public officials and citizens alike only admits deeper internal contradictions between the Catholic Church’s public proclamations and where it actually stands in relationship to its members. Perhaps a more frightening and insidious form of violence is that perpetrated by the church in its cowardice to name its own complicity. Blind, cowardly attachment to the racial status quo perpetuates death-dealing racism.

Even nonbelievers like Ta-Nehisi Coates see the profound theological and moral evil of American Christians who “have never betrayed their God,”

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<sup>49</sup>Jonathan M. Metz, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America’s Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>52</sup>Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017), 44. Metz quotes these words of Dyson in *Dying of Whiteness*, 17.

<sup>53</sup>See Olga M. Segura, *Birth of a Movement: Black Lives Matter and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021).

that is, the god of white supremacy.<sup>54</sup> In his recent work *We Were Eight Years in Power*, Coates reflects deeply upon the unending war America has waged against Black Americans. There were only eight years when African Americans gained power in the halls of state legislatures and Congress—the eight years immediately after the Civil War that ended with white backlash to Emancipation and “slavery by another name” that merged with Jim Crow and lynching. Of course, he also means the eight years President Barack Obama served with extraordinary intellect, patience, and courage in the face of repeated attacks on his character and that of his family. Coates argues that racism is deeper than simple hatred, and more often, is expressed with sympathy for White people and deep skepticism toward others.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps ironically, the deepest fear of White Americans is not that Black people will fail (and thereby fulfill white bias), but that African Americans will practice good governance. By exemplifying good governance African Americans will prove that white superiority and associated black inferiority is plain wrong. Due to the deep racist white skepticism many held of the Obamas, they were admonished “to be twice as good.”<sup>56</sup> However, the fact that President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama were “twice as good” was insufficient, in Coates’s analysis, “to cultivate the best” in White Americans. In other words, “acceptance depends not just on being twice as good but on being half as black. And even then, full acceptance is still withheld.”<sup>57</sup>

Coates indicts US democracy and Christianity for bone-crushing violence against African Americans and First Peoples in the name of the human values of dignity and equality for all. Some commentators criticize Coates for his atheism. But to blame his atheism is precisely to miss our own atheism, as evidenced by the fact that White Americans have never taken the side of African Americans for dignity and equality against the idolatry of white supremacy. Plainly put, the US Catholic Church and Euro-American Catholics have yet to practice preferential solidarity with and for African Americans and First Peoples. We who claim the benefits of whiteness have never become fully accountable for our idolatry of white supremacy.

### Birth of a Colonial Nation

This nation was founded amid the genocide of the First Peoples of the Americas, and it was built on the backs of millions of Africans, stolen from

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<sup>54</sup>Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 6.

<sup>55</sup>Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World Press, 2017), 123–24.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

their place of birth to create unimaginable wealth for White Americans. We have never fully confronted the colonialist roots of white supremacy. We need to confront the ways in which US democracy is built upon anti-black coloniality. Although white supremacy has constantly morphed throughout US history, the fact remains that the nation was built upon the slave labor of Africans and many peoples of color, and people of color have never fully enjoyed freedom and equality.

By white supremacy I do not primarily mean the KKK variety. A fuller understanding and analysis of white supremacy must include the history and historical legacy of colonialism and commodification that endures in at least four dimensions of culture and society.<sup>58</sup> These include how white supremacy functions as a historical mode of white racial class formation and economic ascendancy, constitutes a symbolic hierarchical order of white superiority that feeds upon anti-black bias, serves as a primary socialization process of individual and group white racial identity formation, and organizes a segregated society through “white habitus” that entails a dynamic interplay between both “position—the social geography, location, and power of whiteness—and practice—the ways whites are socialized to perceive and act within the world.”<sup>59</sup>

The church tells a story of innocence when it decries racism in society as something separate from its own practice and renders the most basic questioning of white privilege invisible for critical reflection. Whites tend to live by a fantasy of Christian innocence. It strains credulity to claim that the church resists this assumption of white Christian innocence in any meaningful way. Even when the church may affirm universal human dignity, white racial bias is shaped by Christian imagery of good and evil in which white is “innocent” and black is “guilty.”<sup>60</sup>

Theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher explains how “good” White people are complicit in racism even in acts of charity. Relating her experience teaching in a Catholic university in a US urban context, she notices how “good White Christians involved in service work” may do so because they really do want to help people who are less fortunate and struggling. “It is Christlike to help

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<sup>58</sup>Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 305–6.

<sup>59</sup>Alex Mikulich, “Where Y’at Race, Whiteness, and Economic Justice? A Map of White Complicity in the Economic Oppression of People of Color,” in *The Almighty and the Dollar: Reflections on Economic Justice for All*, ed. Mark J. Allman (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2012), 210. Chapter 2 of the present volume is an extended development of how “white habitus,” a racialized socialization process, tends to create conditions that reinforce white ignorance, self-segregation, power, and superiority.

<sup>60</sup>Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy, and Margaret Pfeil, *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (New York: Palgrave, 2013, reissued in paper 2015), 11–12.

those in need,” she writes, but after we have completed our service hours “I return to the comforts of my White life. After all, it’s *their* problem; I tried to help, but I can’t do everything.”<sup>61</sup> Fletcher’s example points to a subtle and pervasive way in which acts of charity may actually thwart justice while allowing White people to maintain their innocence and position within the status quo.

## Overview of the Book

The entire book is organized around two parts that frame unlearning anti-black supremacy in its historical context of modernity/coloniality. We need to understand the historical roots of anti-black racism in modernity/coloniality in order to initiate other ways of living. The central themes of coloniality and decoloniality run throughout the book because, as Walter Mignolo so eloquently wrote, “Coloniality is far from over, so must be decoloniality.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, quite frankly, our brains are not designed to respond quickly enough to the epochal racial and ecological challenges we now face; we need to focus our attention.<sup>63</sup>

Part I, on coloniality, situates anti-black white supremacy within the broader context of modernity. Chapter 1 focuses on understanding how our historical past endures in the present. Unlearning whiteness is not as simple as turning a switch and becoming human. We need the cold water of history to work through white racial amnesia and denial. Unlearning histories of oppression and resistance is integral to uprooting the deep historical legacies of white supremacy and coloniality. We need to learn how mythologies of individualism, modern progress, and white superiority deform us morally, spiritually, and humanly.

Chapter 2 explores the *where* and *how* of white supremacy. White supremacy thrives in a separate and unequal residential life that fosters a white culture of solidarity and negative views of racialized others. This chapter unpacks the social scientific term “white habitus,” which examines Whites’ tendency to inhabit the world in a way that normalizes control, possession, and superiority. White habitus reveals how biases of white racial innocence and black criminality are “baked” into American culture and thrive under conditions of white racial segregation.

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<sup>61</sup>Jeanine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), ix.

<sup>62</sup>Walter D. Mignolo, “Coloniality Is Far from Over, So Must Be Decoloniality,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 43 (Spring/Summer 2017): 39–45.

<sup>63</sup>Brian Merchant, “Apocalypse Neuro: Why Our Brains Don’t Process the Gravest Threats to Humanity,” *Vice*, June 10, 2015, [www.vice.com](http://www.vice.com).

Chapter 3 investigates the Roman Catholic origins of anti-black supremacy and coloniality. W. E. B. Du Bois's critique of whiteness rightfully relates the dynamic of white supremacy to a nexus of domination structured within colonialism. Christendom itself was an imperial formation that constituted the so-called age of discovery, and, despite the Roman Catholic Church's theological opposition to slavery, helped to facilitate colonial rule of peoples in Africa and the Americas. Roman Catholic theology and papal teaching, I contend, form a primary source of the darker side of Western modernity and the "coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom,"<sup>64</sup> to borrow Sylvia Wynter's enveloping phrase. Assumptions of white innocence and superiority are deeply rooted in Catholic theology, spirituality, and religious practice.

Part II, on decoloniality, comprises chapters 4 through 6 and develops a spirituality for racial liberation. I argue in chapter 4 that one of the ways to unlearn whiteness is to take up the work W. E. B. Du Bois invites through "double consciousness." White engagement of Du Boisian double consciousness suggests a self-critical and compassionate asceticism. An asceticism grounded in double consciousness, I argue, means engaging societal impasse, the reality in which there seems to be no rational way out of multiple, converging breakdowns. I draw upon Carmelite Constance FitzGerald's embrace of impasse as a spiritual path of white disintegration and transformation. Disintegration of white values (superiority, innocence, privilege, and control, among others) through impasse, I argue, is a critical condition of the possibility of unlearning anti-black white supremacy and modernity/coloniality.

Before the Catholic Church can authentically facilitate repair and repent for its role in the historical and cultural evil of white supremacy, it first needs to become a listening community that bends its collective ear to the voices, wisdom, and experience of people who suffer the deadly sting of racism. Chapter 5 discusses the uncanny convergence between decolonial approaches to love and repair with the mystical-political praxis of Black and womanist liberation theologies, especially that of Copeland and Massingale. Second, I suggest a mystical-political praxis as a decolonial process of "p/reparations."<sup>65</sup> A process of p/reparations in the American Catholic ecclesial context begins with becoming a listening church that prioritizes the diverse perspectives of the *damnés*. A listening community of faith that embraces a decolonial p/reparations framework, finally, discerns concrete policies and actions that facilitate decolonial reparations.

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<sup>64</sup>Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337.

<sup>65</sup>Cecilia Cissell Lucas, "Decolonizing the White Colonizer?" (doctoral dissertation, University of California–Berkeley, Fall 2013), 35 and 45. I draw upon Lucas's elucidation of a "philosophy and praxis of p/reparations" to articulate a decolonial, Christian mystical-political praxis.

Chapter 6 concludes with a call for ecological intimacy. If “there is a way where there is no way” to draw upon African American spiritual wisdom, I believe communities of resistance will need to be formed that reinterpret and reapply ancient spiritual practices of contemplation in new ways that are deeply sensitive to the interpenetrating woundedness of the earth and all people. Drawing upon the encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* and engaging cultural dialogue with Indigenous perspectives, I argue that we need to move away from the neoliberal paradigm of incessant growth to alternative ways of living in harmony with all of our human and nonhuman kin. Then, perhaps, there may be real possibility and hope for a turn to the ecological intimacy that interconnects and invites authentic inclusiveness and intimate belonging.