REPARATIONS
A CHRISTIAN CALL FOR REPTENTANCE AND REPAIR

DUKE L. KWON and GREGORY THOMPSON
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An Overdue Response

On August 7, 1865, former slave Jourdon Anderson sat at a table in his Dayton, Ohio, home and dictated a letter to his former owner, Colonel Patrick Anderson. Jourdon was purchased as a boy by the colonel’s father, General Paulding Anderson, to be a personal slave and playmate for the general’s young son Patrick. It was a good investment: Years later, as the Civil War approached, Patrick owned not only Jourdon but also his wife Amanda and their children. But like many slaves, Jourdon Anderson saw himself and his family not as resources to be exploited but as human beings to be honored. And so, in 1864, with the help of Union soldiers, and after some thirty years of bondage, Jourdon Anderson and his family escaped to freedom.

One year later, shortly after the end of the Civil War, learning of his former slave’s whereabouts, Colonel Anderson wrote to Jourdon and requested his return. Lamenting that his thousand-acre estate was faltering and confessing his desperate need for Jourdon’s help with the coming harvest, Colonel Anderson promised that if Jourdon returned, he would treat him kindly. The request of the former master was audacious. The reply by the former slave was masterful.
Dayton, Ohio
August 7, 1865
To My Old Master, Colonel P. H. Anderson, Big Spring, Tennessee

Sir: I got your letter, and was glad to find that you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this, for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Colonel Martin’s to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again, and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green, and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville Hospital, but one of the neighbors told me that Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here. I get twenty-five dollars a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy,—the folks call her Mrs. Anderson,—and the children—Milly, Jane, and Grundy—go to school and are learning well. The teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday school, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated. Sometimes we overhear others saying, “Them colored people were slaves” down in Tennessee. The children feel hurt when they hear such remarks; but I tell them it was no disgrace in Tennessee to belong to Colonel Anderson. Many darkeys would have been proud, as I used to be, to call you master. Now if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free papers in 1864 from the Provost-Marshal-General of the Department of Nashville. Mandy
saying she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you were disposed to treat us justly and kindly; and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty-two years, and Mandy twenty years. At twenty-five dollars a month for me, and two dollars a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to eleven thousand six hundred and eighty dollars. Add to this the interest for the time our wages have been kept back, and deduct what you paid for our clothing, and three doctor’s visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams’s Express, in care of V. Winters, Esq., Dayton, Ohio. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past, we can have little faith in your promises in the future. We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night; but in Tennessee there was never any pay-day for the negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.

In answering this letter, please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up, and both good-looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve—and die, if it come to that—than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters. You will also please state if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighborhood. The great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.

Say bowdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.

From your old servant,
Jourdon Anderson
Thanks to the efforts of abolitionist Valentine Winters, Jourdon Anderson’s letter was reprinted in the Cincinnati Commercial, the New York Daily Tribune, and Lydia Maria Child’s The Freedmen’s Book, and became something of a national sensation. Rightly so. It is at once satirical and serious, compassionate and candid, vulnerable and shrewd, personal and prophetic. Indeed, it is difficult to read this letter without being led, in the span of but a few sentences, to both laughter and tears. But perhaps the most important aspect of this letter is the light it sheds on what is, at heart, its essential theme: reparations. Jourdon Anderson’s letter was, fundamentally, a call for his former master, one who had long benefited from Anderson’s unrequited labor, to begin the work of repair. This book is a long overdue response to Jourdon Anderson’s letter, a response that seeks to engage seriously with his essential theme.

**Constitutions**

Our response is framed by seven core convictions that we believe are foundational to a constructive engagement with the work of reparations. The first regards the nature of racism itself (the subject of chapter 1). Before proceeding, we should briefly state that racism, as used in this book, has three elements to it. First, classifying human beings into distinct “races” due to presumably fixed and hereditary physical characteristics. Second, assigning notions of inferior mental or moral capacities correlated to those physical characteristics. Third, pushing people who are seen to have those physical, mental, and moral qualities to the margins of a given social order. Over the course of preparing this work, we have come to see that when people look at racism, they often see very different things and, further, that these various ways of seeing racism elicit varying responses to it. Some, for example, view racism personally, as a form of personal prejudice whose remedy is personal repentance. Others view it socially, as a form of relational estrangement that requires racial reconciliation. Still others view it institutionally, in terms of discrete institutional injustice whose redress lies in institutional reform. Each of these accounts holds important truths about the nature of racism and what it means to respond faithfully to it. Even so, we believe that none of these capture the whole truth, that still another view of racism is required.
Our conviction is that racism is best understood *culturally*, as a force that shapes the entire ecosystem of meanings, values, ideas, institutions, and practices of American culture. Seeing racism in this way—as embedded in an entire cultural order—is important not only because it reminds us that each of us, simply by virtue of living in this culture, is implicated in and affected by the reality of American racism but also because it reminds us just how expansive the work of repairing racism ultimately will be.

Our second conviction, addressed in chapter 2, is that the best way to understand the cultural order of racism is through the lens of *White supremacy*. White supremacy has been present since the founding of America, pervasive across all of its institutions and enduring throughout its history. Because we understand the difficulty of this claim for many of our readers, a difficulty we ourselves feel, we want to take a moment to elaborate on just what we mean.

There is a certain revulsion in hearing this word *supremacy*, and even more so the phrase *White supremacy*. It is a difficult phrase, and this is important to acknowledge. But it is also important to ask why it is so difficult for many of us to speak of White supremacy. Part of the difficulty lies in how we understand its meaning. For many, White supremacy is understood in fairly narrow terms: as hooded riders in the forest, torch-bearing marchers in the streets, or trolls on the dark web, promoting open, active animus against people who are not White. This is understandable. Since the early twentieth century, these images of White supremacy have been deeply and deliberately etched into the popular American imagination. And they are real. When understood in these terms, it is reductive at best and cynical at worst to describe America in this way. But this is, in our view, an overly narrow account, one that obscures more than it illumines by mistaking the periphery of White supremacy for its essence. As we will see, the truth is that White supremacy is much broader than these occasional spasms of violence, much more ordinary and mundane than these moments of dark spectacle suggest.

Another difficulty some might have with the language of *White supremacy* regards not necessarily what it means but how it feels. Even if one grasps this more comprehensive meaning of White supremacy, and even if one sees something of the fullness of its historical reality, it is nonetheless
possible to object to this language simply on the grounds that it is offensive. Indeed, we have met more than a few sympathetic people who have suggested that we use different language precisely on these grounds: “I agree with what you’re trying to say. But can’t you just find a different way to say it?” In considering these suggestions, two things have become clear to us. First, to cease to use the language of White supremacy, even though it is historically accurate and broadly used in minority communities, simply because it offends the sensibilities of White people is, in our view, to perpetuate the logic of White supremacy itself. We see no way around this. Second, if, as we will demonstrate, the American social order disproportionately (and deliberately) benefits those deemed to be White, even as those who are not deemed White are enslaved, degraded, and marginalized, what other term does honesty permit us to use?

But perhaps the most important obstacle to the language of White supremacy comes from those who, often in good faith, doubt its reality, who ask whether it really is the case that American society is one in which Whites have been at the top of the social hierarchy and have had virtually exclusive access to its benefits. This seems to us to be a fair and important question. The work of chapter 2 is to show that the unequivocal answer is yes.

The third conviction, developed in chapter 3, is that White supremacy’s most enduring effect, indeed its very essence, is theft. We believe White supremacy to be a multigenerational campaign of cultural theft, in which the identities, agency, and prosperity of African Americans are systematically stolen and given to others. As we will show, we believe that while this theft took many forms, its most significant and enduring forms are the theft of truth, the theft of power, and the theft of wealth.

Our fourth conviction is that the Christian church in America, a church that emerged and has endured in the context of White supremacy, has a fundamental responsibility to respond to this theft, for several reasons. The first reason derives from the church’s complex history, at times embracing and justifying White supremacy and at times resisting it. The church in America is not and never has been an innocent bystander to White supremacy. It has, to the contrary, been present—as both friend and foe—every step of the way. This reality entails the obligation to own this history and to take public responsibility for addressing it. This responsibility also
comes from the church’s inner life. One of the glories of the Christian church is that, even in the midst of its deep brokenness, it takes the work of love seriously. Indeed, it is a community constituted by an act of love and committed to the work of love in the midst of the world. This love expresses itself as the burden, in the words of Jesus, to “proclaim good news to the poor” and “liberty to the captives” (Luke 4:18). The church is a community that, by its very nature, exists to address harms like those done by White supremacy. Last, the church’s responsibility derives from its need for missional integrity. It is easy to forget that the Christian church in America carries out its mission in one of the longest-standing White supremacist social orders in the history of the world. For this mission to have integrity, the church has to take this context seriously. If the church in America carries out its work of engaging culture, transforming cities, bringing the kingdom of God, and making all things new, without deliberately engaging the reality of White supremacy, both the integrity and the efficacy of its mission are diminished. This is the subject of chapter 4.

Our fifth conviction is that one of the most important contributions of the church to the work of reparations is its historic ethic of culpability and restitution. As we will show, there is a long scriptural and deep theological tradition in the Christian church that teaches, very simply, that when you take something that does not belong to you, love requires you to return it. This ethic of culpability and restitution, embodied most clearly in the story of Zacchaeus, is a crucial element of any Christian vision of reparations. Related, our sixth conviction is that, in addition to restitution, the Christian tradition also teaches another response to theft: restoration. Even when not culpable for a theft, the Christian still has the obligation to restore what was lost. This ethic of restoration, seen clearly in the story of the good Samaritan, is a crucial element of the Christian vision of reparations. These two ethical responses to theft—restitution where we are culpable and restoration even where we are not—provide a broad foundation for a Christian account of reparations. In this account—and this is critical for our argument—reparations is best understood as the deliberate repair of White supremacy’s cultural theft through restitution (returning what one wrongfully took) and restoration (restoring the wronged to wholeness). We discuss these two elements in chapters 5 and 6, respectively.
Our final conviction (developed in chapter 7) is that as the church undertakes this work of reparations it must mirror the threefold theft wrought by White supremacy: not only the theft of wealth (as is generally understood) but the theft of truth and the theft of power as well.

**Approach**

In writing this book, we are painfully aware not only of the many approaches to these convictions but also of the frustrating limitations inherent in adopting a single approach. However, the nature of such a book requires embracing these limitations. As a way of setting expectations for our readers, we want to foreground our approach to clarify what we are, and are not, trying to do in this book.

As the subtitle of this book suggests, our book is *Christian*. We orient our discussion of reparations both from and to the Christian church, broadly conceived. In saying this, we do not intend to suggest that other communities cannot benefit from these reflections. Indeed, we very much hope that they will. Likewise, we do not intend to suggest that the church alone is responsible for (or indeed capable of) the work of reparations. When the work of reparations comes to fruition in America, it will be a collaborative effort, just as White supremacy was. Nor do we intend to suggest that all expressions of the church are identical in their need for a work such as this. To the contrary, some Christian communities—especially African American churches—have long labored toward the work of reparations, even as other churches have labored against it. We simply want to acknowledge candidly that our reflections on this issue are deeply informed by our own formation in the Christian tradition and that our specific exhortations are oriented primarily toward those who embrace this tradition as their own.

Our book is also *focused*. Reparations is an extraordinarily complex subject, one that by its very nature addresses issues of human identity, social history, political economy, and moral obligation. In order to provide focus, both for ourselves and for our readers, this book explores reparations in the fairly specific context of anti-Black racism in the United States. We realize that this decision leaves other historically marginalized
communities—both nationally and internationally—beyond the scope of our consideration. The most obvious of these, of course, are the various communities of Native peoples within the borders of the United States. As with African Americans, the history of the United States with respect to these communities is one of virtually unbroken theft. The only hope for any type of healing from these enduring harms is reparations. Our hope is that others will take what we have done here and, insofar as it is useful, apply it to reparations in those contexts as well.

Even with this relatively narrow focus, however, a comprehensive treatment of reparations to African Americans is also beyond the capacity of a single volume. Because of this, we intend for this book to be introductory. Many of our readers will not only have little familiarity with the topic of reparations but also have significant questions about its basic historical and theological foundations. Because of this, our modest ambition is simply to introduce a broad audience to the historical and cultural context, moral logic, and potential trajectory of the work of reparations, providing the reader with the necessary foundation for further exploration.

Finally, our approach to this work is synthetic. While it addresses matters of history, theology, economics, and politics, it is not strictly speaking a work of history, theology, economics, or politics. Rather, it is an attempt to synthesize some important insights from each of these into a coherent whole. In doing this, we run the risk of producing a book that is at once too much and too little. Indeed, at times we ourselves have felt it to be each of these. Insofar as our readers share this sentiment, we can only offer you the consolation that in this respect you are not alone.

**Contributions**

Though we intend for this book to be introductory, we also hope that it will make substantive contributions to larger conversations regarding reparations both inside and outside of communities of faith. Even as we introduce some of our readers to the topic of reparations, we also hope to engage with scholars, theorists, and practitioners of reparations in a constructive manner. Some of our readers may be surprised to learn that a robust conversation around reparations exists at all, and even more surprised to
learn that it exists outside and inside the Christian church, both today and throughout history. Part of the purpose of this book is to orient our readers to that conversation. It is also our purpose to shape that conversation and to contribute to its maturation. Though the extent of our contribution will only be seen in time, we believe that our work contributes to this conversation in several important ways.

The first of these is that we set our treatment of reparations not simply against the backdrop of slavery but against the much larger backdrop of White supremacy. As will be abundantly clear, in doing this we do not intend to diminish the significance of slavery. To the contrary, we seek to embed it in a much larger and more enduring context that illumines both its essential meaning and its enduring effect. Nor do we intend to critique organizations or movements such as the American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) who, as their name indicates, largely center the descendants of those enslaved in America in their account of reparations. Even so, we deliberately join others in taking a broader approach. Doing so provides a more accurate historical picture of both the character and the duration of White supremacy’s cultural theft, a theft that preceded American chattel slavery and endures beyond it. In our view, it is only as we set reparations in the context of the entire history of American White supremacy, a history that includes but is not confined to slavery, that the full picture of reparations can come into view.

Our second contribution lies in our characterization of White supremacy as theft. While this is central to our argument, we also confess that it is a point in which our argument is vulnerable. After all, White supremacy expressed itself as a symphony of vices: not least idolatry, covetousness, lying, adultery, and murder. Even so, the simple fact is that American White supremacy originated in the theft of Black bodies, sustained itself through the theft of Black wealth, and justifies itself through the theft, the erasure, of truths that expose its lies. Theft is, therefore, not simply an expression of White supremacy; it is, rather, both its most elemental impulse and its most enduring effect. We believe that characterizing it in this way helps not only to clarify its essential logic but also to chart a clearer path toward reparations.

We also contend that this theft is best understood not merely in terms of wealth but in the more comprehensive terms of truth and power. This
is an important feature of this work that distinguishes it from most of the literature on reparations. A great deal of the literature frames reparations in largely economic terms, as a form of redress for the incalculable wealth lost to African Americans caused both by slavery and by subsequent decades of continued inequality. As we will show in chapters 3 and 7, we are in deep sympathy with this view and fundamentally agree that there is a critical monetary horizon of reparations. Even so, we resist reducing reparations to this horizon. To view White supremacy as a theft of not only wealth but also truth and power provides important insights regarding White supremacy’s inner logic. It is also a more accurate account of White supremacy’s devastating cultural reach. To frame the harm done by American White supremacy in exclusively economic terms is actually to obscure the nature and magnitude of that harm. In our view, this broadened perspective opens up new horizons for reparations by reminding us that the true imperative of reparations is not simply for a debt to be repaid but for an entire world to be repaired.

Another contribution of this work is its focus on the church. We hope that this book will introduce Christian readers to the reparations conversation, to the role of Christian thought in those conversations, and to the incredible potential of the church to bring those conversations to the forefront of the national imagination and to enact them in their local contexts. In doing this, however, we have subtly shifted the institutional backdrop of this conversation. Most treatments situate reparations against the institutional backdrop of the federal government. Even as these treatments differ from one another in their accounts of history and their elaboration of debt, most believe that reparations is, finally, the work of the government. We, too, believe that the United States government is morally responsible for the work of reparations—both for the ways that it sheltered White supremacy and the ways in which it benefited from that sheltering. Indeed, throughout its history the government has paid reparations to Native peoples, to Japanese Americans interned during World War II, and most relevantly, to slave owners following emancipation. The United States government has already demonstrated its capacity to enact reparations when it finds the moral and political will to do so. And, pragmatically speaking, we believe that the scale of reparations is
such that the resources of the United States government, combined with the governments of other nations, are necessary. That said, given the history of our government’s indifference to reparations to Black Americans, and given the profound divisiveness of our political moment, we are not sanguine that the United States government will take up the work of reparations with any real intentionality or efficacy in the foreseeable future. And yet the need for reparations remains.

Because of this, we believe that churches can and should play an important role in catalyzing and demonstrating the power of reparations in our communities. Indeed, the church’s complicated history, moral tradition, committed membership, considerable resources, local knowledge, collaborative potential, and divine power render it the perfect context for the work of reparations. As with all civil organizations, the church’s efforts will, structurally speaking, be smaller in scale than those made possible through governmental resources. But they will be a beginning, which with labor and time may yet amount to the whole.

Our final intended contribution is our insistence that reparations requires what the Christian community refers to as repentance. Which is to say, the work of reparations requires us to become different kinds of people. The sad, though understandable, truth is that conversations over social change, especially those surrounding racial redress, are fraught with self-righteousness and venomous recrimination. Rarely are these conversations characterized by the presumption that perhaps we are wrong, that we are the problem, and that our social goals require our personal repentance. Indeed, there is a discernible vanity in both religious conservative “patriots” and secular liberal elites that presumes that social change can somehow bypass personal repentance, that the world can change while we remain the same. This false presumption obstructs the work of reparations because it inevitably focuses our attention on defending our rightness rather than on repairing the wrong before us. This tendency is evident everywhere around us, but perhaps its greatest expression lies in the almost total unwillingness of many Americans and of our collective government to stand before our African American citizens and before the world and say, “We did this, it was wrong, and we want to repair what we have done.” But if we are to heal the wounds of White supremacy, this is precisely what we must do.
Though reparations will not be accomplished simply by changing who we are, they cannot be accomplished without it.

**Concerns**

One reality of writing a book on reparations is that, with a consistency that borders on the comic, people’s first response upon hearing about the book is concern. Some of these concerns are personal and typically sound something like this: “Why are you doing this to yourself?” “Delete your Twitter account.” “Don’t expect to be invited to any Christmas parties.” Though offered tongue-in-cheek, they indicate what most of us already know: the topic of reparations bears on some of the most vulnerable, painful, and heavily fortified elements of our common life. Talking about it is just not going to be easy for anyone.

Much more important than these personal concerns, however, are concerns about the substance of the work itself. Over the course of writing this book, we have benefited greatly from people around the country who have taken the time to raise these concerns. In what follows, we want to foreground some of the most consistent and important concerns that we heard. In doing this, we do not intend to suggest that we have either comprehensively seen or fully resolved these concerns. We simply want to be transparent about them and to invite the reader into them with us.

The first and, perhaps, most obvious of these is, very simply, why us? Why is a book on reparations being written by two men, one White and the other Korean American? This important question, understandably, seeks to safeguard African Americans from yet again having the voices of others—rather than their own voices—tell their story and shape their experience. In many conversations, both before beginning this project and throughout its production, we engaged with one another and with African American friends and colleagues about this concern. In so doing, we have come to believe that the conversation around reparations is, by its very nature, a conversation between two parties: those who owe reparations and those to whom reparations are owed. In our view, each of these parties have important things to say—and not to say. We are writing from the vantage of those who owe reparations and who have benefited from the thefts of White
Introduction

supremacy. We believe that our role is to tell the truth about this theft, to own the complex ways in which we are implicated in it, and to struggle toward the work of repair. Further, we have the responsibility to exhort others who are similarly implicated to do the same. We believe, in other words, that we have to say these things, that reparations itself requires it.

That said, there are also things that we believe we should not say. We should not, for example, speak as authoritative interpreters of African American experience. These experiences are most faithfully articulated by African Americans themselves. Because of this, we have been careful to anchor our account and interpretation of American history in those given by African American theorists and writers. In like manner, we should not decide the ultimate shape that reparations should take. This shape should be determined—and overseen—by African Americans. Chapter 7, which illustrates potential trajectories for reparations, is based not exclusively on our own ideas but on both the work and the advice of African Americans around the country. We have tried to say what we believe we ought to say, and, having done that, to let others speak.

The second concern is that of paternalism and its correlate, victimization. This important concern raises questions about power and power’s diminishment. The concern with paternalism is that this work—in both its motivation and its substance—is yet another manifestation of the broadly held presumption that people other than African Americans are more equipped to solve the problems affecting African Americans than are African Americans themselves. Likewise, the concern with victimization is that this work simply reinforces tropes of African American helplessness and, thereby, rather than empowering African Americans, actually serves the forces of their disempowerment. In response to this concern, we would like to say two things. First, it is a point of historical fact that African Americans have been wronged—profoundly, devastatingly, and perpetually—by the culture of White supremacy. Reparations is predicated upon our collective acknowledgment and ownership of this fact. In this sense, and this sense alone, we may objectively speak of African Americans as victims. This is not to say, as some suggest, that African Americans are the psychologically defeated and passive pawns of historical forces. To the contrary, history itself bears witness to the undeniability of African
American power and exposes this caricatured account of victimization to be little more than an ignorant trope of White supremacist self-justification. Second, we wish simply to say that we have labored to write this book not from the perspective of the paternalist or from a spirit of messianic presumption. It is, rather, written from the perspective of the perpetrator and the penitent.

Another frequently heard concern regards entitlements, and whether reparations might contribute to a culture of entitlement among African Americans. We will limit ourselves to two responses. First, this concern fundamentally mischaracterizes the issue at hand. The implication is that reparations are primarily to be evaluated in terms of their potential effects. But this is mistaken: reparations are not primarily given in light of a hoped-for future; they are given in light of an actual past. Consider an analogy. Imagine that someone steals your car and, one year later, the thief is caught and a judge orders your car returned. Now, imagine that the thief protests this return on the grounds that walking seems to have done you good and, further, that you might get into an accident if you begin to drive again. You would, of course, realize that the thief’s concerns about the potential consequences of returning the stolen car are completely beside the point. The point is that the car is not his, that it never was his, and that his role is simply to return what he stole and let you get on with your life. The terms of the return, in other words, are not his to dictate. The concern regarding entitlement often falls into the thief’s error, and in this respect gets the matter exactly backward.

Second, this concern often entails the barely concealed assumption that entitlement is the particular affliction of the African American community and that the desire for outside economic support entails a form of civic vice. The truth, however, is that the history of American economic policy is a history of government subsidization of White Americans. As we will show in chapter 3, from the very beginning of the republic, the economic well-being of White Americans has been the fruit not simply of their personal initiative but also of critical entitlement instruments such as land grants, homestead acts, wage standardization, mortgage subsidies, education grants, and tax deductions—almost all of which, for the majority of American history, have excluded African Americans from their benefits.
The simple truth, historically speaking, is that the White middle class was created by entitlements. The fact that those who have themselves most benefited from entitlement tools are also those who most frequently raise concerns about the bestowal of those tools upon African Americans is a fact that warrants serious moral reflection.

A fourth concern is whether, by talking about White supremacy and employing the racialized language of “White” and “Black,” we are perpetuating racial divisions in our communities and obstructing the type of healing to which we aspire. This concern seems largely born of weariness, of a desire to simply move past the trauma of race in America and on to other things. We understand this desire, and we are empathetic with this weariness, but this concern misunderstands the nature of our collective racial trauma. The trauma of racism, as we see it, comes not from the continued deployment of racial categories but from the continued existence of the destructive social realities from which those categories emerged and to which they refer. The way to heal from American racism is not to change our words but to change the social order that put those words in our mouths in the first place. Until we do this, no matter what language we use, our racial divisions will remain.

Finally, there is a more academic concern regarding our conception of human identity and history. The Christian tradition understands human identity not fundamentally in terms of race but in terms of the image of God. This unspeakable glory, bestowed on all human beings, is the ultimate anchor of human identity. Likewise, the Christian tradition understands history not primarily as the unfolding of ideological or material forces in the world, but as the unfolding of God’s mysterious and redemptive love, made known in Jesus and expressed by the Spirit in the world. We ourselves view the nature of identity and the meaning of history in just this way.

That said, like many writers on race in America, we also speak of human identity in racial terms, and of history, especially American history, as subject to and shaped by the forces of White supremacy. This might lead some to ask whether, in so doing, we have bestowed upon each of these an essential quality and have thereby embraced notions of identity and history that are divergent from the Christian tradition. We recognize in this concern a desire to take theological categories seriously and to ensure
that they are deployed faithfully, and we honor this desire. This is all the more the case given that some prominent writers on race and White supremacy explicitly repudiate Christian accounts of both identity and history. However, we believe that with respect to our work this concern is doubly misplaced. First, we believe it to be perfectly reasonable to speak of the power of historical realities like race and White supremacy without thereby ascribing to those realities some sort of metaphysical essence or eschatological force. We are not, in other words, confused about the difference between the historically contingent and the theologically normative. Second, we sense in this concern a lurking tendency toward ecclesial self-interest, a subtle shift of focus away from a concern for historical injustice and toward a concern for theological self-preservation. We wish to resist this tendency at all costs. It gives the impression that the real issue before us, the real battle to be fought, is the battle to preserve the integrity of the church and its theological formulations. But this issue, while important, is not ours. Our concern is not to defend the Christian church from its alleged ideological victimization but to defend our neighbors from their actual victimization by repairing the harm done by White supremacy in our communities. Indeed, we believe that this work, rather than being a threat to our theology, is, to the contrary, its proper fruit.

**Hopes**

This leads us to our hopes for this work. We honestly don’t know what the impact of this project might be. At times, the harm done by White supremacy, the work required to repair it, and the comparative smallness of our own labors seem overwhelming. But, if we may be vulnerable, here is what we hope.

Our hope for ourselves is that the call to reparations will continue to change us, to shape our imaginations, our loves, and our labors. We hope to become people whose lives are inexorably bound to the vocation of repair. Our hope for our children is that each of you will renounce the beguiling myths that tempt us and instead see the truth about the world. And not only that you will see the truth, but that in seeing it you will give yourselves, in your own ways, to the work of repairing the world. We know this means
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that your lives will often be marked by grief, anger, and struggle. We grieve this for you. But this also means that your lives will be marked by the truth and by the faith, hope, and love that true lives require. As you labor to live the truth, remember that you are crowned with light.

Our hope for the church is that the work of reparations, the work to repair our communities from the ravages of White supremacy, will become central to its mission. Our hope is that the language of White supremacy and reparations, now so unfamiliar and awkward, will one day become as fixed in the church’s imagination and fundamental to its vocation as the language of repentance and reconciliation is today. This is the only way that the church can fully live with integrity, and the only path to beholding the joy of redemptive love made flesh in the streets of this world. Our hope for our nation is that we will renounce our willful blindness to our history, confess, and give ourselves collectively and collaboratively to the work of repairing what we have done. Until we do this, we will never embody the meaning of our creeds, never escape the secret shame and uneasy conscience that shadows our national identity, never know peace in our cities.

Most of all, however, our hopes are for our African American friends and neighbors. Our hope is that the singular harm wrought by White supremacy, the theft it has visited upon you and those you love, will broadly be seen for what it is. Our hope is that when it is seen, it will be confessed. Our hope is that when it is confessed, it will be renounced. Our hope is that when it is renounced, the world that it made will pass away, and its weight will fall from your shoulders. Our hope is reparation. We labor toward this hope. This work is for you.
The Call to See

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.
—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

The Call to See

On the rainy afternoon of February 1, 1968, two young African American men stepped out from the back of a city garbage truck and onto the suburban Memphis street. Hearing the truck pull up in front of her home, a White woman watched absentmindedly from her kitchen window as they loaded the trash inside the giant compactor. Suddenly she was startled to attention by the sound of screams and banging from outside, and she watched in horror as the two men—first one, and then the other—were pulled into the compactor and crushed to death in front of her eyes. In an interview with authorities later that night, she said, “It looked like the big thing just swallowed him.”

The two men, Robert Walker, 29, and Echol Cole, 35, were part of an unseen generation of African American men who, fleeing the perpetual poverty and foreclosed opportunity of the farms of the Deep South, had come to Memphis in search of work. Their hope was that Memphis, the swinging city built on the bluffs of the Mississippi River, would provide the opportunity for a different sort of life than that offered by the endless
expanse of the surrounding Delta. When they arrived in Memphis, how-
however, most of these men found their conditions little changed. As in the
Delta, the jobs typically available to African American men were the most
physically difficult—storm and drainage work, street and asphalt repair,
and trash pickup. And these jobs provided the least economic security.
Almost all of these African American men were contract employees who
started at $1.27 per hour, unpaid on days when weather prevented their
work, and without any form of protection from the caprice of the super-
visors who oversaw them. In spite of their hopes and labor, the poverty
and diminished opportunity of the farms they fled were waiting for them
in the city.

This was the lot of Robert Walker and Echol Cole, and also of the
nearly 1,500 other men who worked alongside them in the city’s sanita-
tion department. On an average morning, in heat and in cold, these men
would wake before dawn and walk or catch a ride to the lot where the
city’s garbage trucks were parked. As White supervisors slid behind the
wheel of the truck, the African American men held on to the sides or, in
the event of rain or snow, sat in the back with the trash. Stopping in front
of homes, the African Americans would climb out and begin to pick up the
bins of trash. These bins, typically lidless cans sitting open in the rain or
sun, were filled with rotting, liquefying trash. Shouldering the bins, water
and filth would spill over the sides or out of holes in the bottom and drip
into their hair and down their backs as the men dumped the trash into the
truck. At day’s end, because the sanitation department provided neither
uniforms nor showers, the men left for home in the same filthy clothing in
which they had worked all day. Because of this, they were unable to ride in
cars or to take public transportation. They walked, in heat and in cold, to
their homes where they would wait on their porches while family members
hosed them down and picked maggots from their hair.2

No one knows exactly how Robert Walker and Echol Cole were pulled
into the trash compactor that day. The most likely account is that after
dumping the trash into the back of the truck, they sought shelter from the
rain and climbed in as well. Somehow the internal wires short-circuited,
starting the compactor with the men inside. But these are speculations. So
much about that day was, as the witness said, simply swallowed.
What is clear, however, is that at the news of their deaths the anger of
the sanitation workers—long simmering over their poor working condi-
tions, poverty wages, and lack of negotiating power—began to boil over.
In a matter of days, 1,300 sanitation workers went on strike. Every day for
nearly two months they gathered at Clayborn Temple, the historic African
Methodist Episcopal church in downtown Memphis. There they listened to
the Reverend James Lawson, one of the architects of nonviolent resistance
in the civil rights movement, remind them of their ineradicable dignity, the
rightness of demanding civic recognition of that dignity, the necessity of
nonviolence, and the transformative power of love. Then they rose from
the pews, stepped through Clayborn Temple’s arched doorways, lined up,
and made their way up Beale Street and down Main Street to city hall, just
over a mile away.3

As in many cities marked by protest, the leaders of Memphis sought to
obscure the nature of this cause. Some characterized the protest as simply
a ploy launched by Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders to
stir up trouble and gain attention. Others characterized it as a movement
of violence launched by Black nationalists aiming to seize control of the
city. Still others characterized it as a strategy of northern union leaders
to extend their reach and enrich their organizations by establishing new
labor unions in the South. But for the protestors themselves, the meaning
of the cause was very simple: the truth of their own humanity. They came
together, in defiance of American racism, and demanded to be seen and
treated as human beings. Proof could be found in the signs that the protes-
tors printed in the basement of Clayborn Temple and carried with them as
they marched: a plain white background with four simple words in black:

I AM A MAN

These signs immediately became icons of the long African American strug-
gle against racism4 in America, and remain so to this day.5 These signs
were both a confrontation and a calling. With devastating simplicity, they
confronted American racism, its multigenerational refusal to recognize
the full humanity of enslaved Africans and their descendants, and the
ways in which this racist refusal takes social and economic form.6 And yet
in another respect, these signs called to America; they called America to
renounce its racist blindness and to view African Americans in terms of their full humanity. They were, in other words, a call to see.

**Ways of Seeing Racism**

We have encountered many people struggling to answer this call, laboring daily to see the truth about American racism and the way it shapes both our individual and common lives. This is not true of everyone, of course. In every community, some are deeply resistant to seeing the truth about American racism and resistant to the vulnerability that this seeing entails. Even so, all across the United States—in churches in Memphis, college campuses in Georgia, auditoriums in Pennsylvania, dinner tables in Washington, DC, and cocktail bars in Charlottesville—we have encountered people who want both to see the truth about American racism and to respond redemptively.

Over time, however, we have noticed that while many people are concerned with racism in America and are committed to engaging it, few have thought deeply about the role of reparations. While many Americans see the reality of racism, they see it in ways that—while substantively true and ethically important—are not yet robust enough to lead to the work of reparations. Many of us need a different way of seeing race in America, one that makes reparations not only plausible but inevitable. The task of what follows is twofold: First, we explore three dominant ways of seeing American racism and the responses to which each of them inclines. Second, we gesture toward a different way of seeing American racism—to be more fully developed in chapters 2 and 3—that serves as the foundation of this work.

**Racism as Personal Prejudice**

In 2016, African American social commentator Heather McGhee was a guest on C-SPAN’s *Washington Journal*. McGhee, then president of Demos, a “think-and-do” tank that focuses on equitable democratic reform, was invited to discuss the role of progressive politics in the 2016 presidential election, then underway. During the call-in portion of the show, a White man from North Carolina spoke to McGhee with unusual candor
about his own racism. Introducing himself, he simply said, “I’m a White male and I am prejudiced.” Given our cultural moment, upon hearing these words one might have expected either for this man to launch a fleet of justifications for his racism or for McGhee to shame him for it. However, neither did so. For his part, the man began simply to talk about his fears. For her part, rather than rolling her eyes or turning away, McGhee looked directly into the camera and gave this man her full attention. As she did so, he said something almost wholly unexpected: “What can I do to change, you know, to be a better American?” Upon hearing these words, she closed her eyes, gathered herself in kindness, and spoke directly to the camera:

Thank you, so much, for being honest, and for opening up this conversation because it’s simply one of the most important ones we have to have in this country. You know, we are not a country that is united because we are all one racial group that descended from one tribe and one community. That is actually, I think, what makes this country beautiful, but it is our challenge. We are the most multi-racial, multi-ethnic, wealthy democracy in the world. And so, asking the question you asked, “How do I get over my fears and my prejudices?” is the question that all of us—and I will say people of all races and ethnicities and backgrounds hold these fears and prejudices. Most of them are actually unconscious, right? You’ll say to yourself, “I’m not prejudiced” but of course we all have them. And so your ability to just say, “This is what I have, I have these fears and prejudices and I want to get over them” is one of the most powerful things that we can do right now at this moment in our history. So thank you.  

In the following days a video of the exchange began to show up on Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and other media outlets. Some viewers responded with contempt for the man, the ignorant southern racist who had the gall to ask an African American woman to help him with his racism. Others responded with criticism of McGhee, accusing her of coddling a fragile White man who should have been confronted instead. But many responded with something like gratitude—thanking both of them for showing us something that we rarely see: the willingness to have a painful conversation with both honesty and mutual care.

Embedded in this man’s question is a particular way of seeing American racism. Specifically, seeing racism as a form of personal prejudice, as a
disposition of the heart and mind. In this view, racism is largely understood as a set of individual perspectives, attitudes, and biases that shape how we value—or devalue—human beings. As McGhee noted, one of the common humiliations of our inheritance is that each of us bears prejudicial judgments against other people because of the color of their skin and the cultural heritage that this color suggests.  

But if racism is a heart issue, then what must we do to address it? Throughout American history, the answer to this question has been relatively straightforward: change the heart. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, anti-racist activists and abolitionists developed strategies aimed at just this sort of change. Through tracts, multiracial speaking tours, and other literature, they sought to reshape the racist heart of Americans. During the early twentieth century, the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance continued this work by creating works designed to confront the racist blindness of White America and to help America, in the words of Langston Hughes, “see how beautiful I am and be ashamed.”

In our own time, this work of dispositional change continues in families, churches, and schools. In each of these initiatives, across the centuries, the goal has in many respects been the same: to weaken the malignant power of American racism by transforming the dispositions of the heart and mind.

In the Christian tradition, the language for this deep internal change is personal repentance, a sacred dimension of the Christian vision of the moral life. We have seen many Christians—including ourselves—take up this work of repentance with respect to racism. And rightly so. In the Christian tradition, personal prejudice is a form of violence that harms the other by denying their God-given dignity. Seeing these prejudicial dispositions in the heart, the Christian begins the long, renunciative work of uprooting them from the heart and rebuilding new dispositions in their place. This is essential work, and we ourselves are deeply committed to it. Even so, this particular way of seeing racism as a personal prejudice that chiefly requires the work of personal repentance is not the complete picture.

**Racism as Relational Division**

Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel, was an extended treatment of both the necessity and practicality of living in cross-racial relationships as a way of bearing witness to the reconciling power of God. Perkins, the son of legendary African American civil rights activist John Perkins, and Rice, a northern White Mennonite who lived in an intentional interracial community in Jackson, Mississippi, stood side by side on the cover, and the book was heralded as “living proof that white and black Christians can live together.” At the heart of their argument was the claim that the Christian church in America desperately needed to transcend a debilitating contradiction in its life: being a community of reconciliation that contributes to a culture of social estrangement.

Writing in the early 1990s, they recognized a phenomenon that is easily recognizable in our own day. Though America has legally renounced segregation, we nonetheless remain profoundly segregated along racial lines. And the church itself—the community created to bear witness to the reconciling power of God—remains deeply segregated. For Rice and Perkins, the work of developing cross-racial or multiethnic friendships—what they call “racial reconciliation”—is at the heart of the work of the Christian church in America. This book had a considerable impact on the Christian church. Membership grew tremendously in the Christian Community Development Association, a Christian ministry founded by John Perkins and devoted to the work of racial reconciliation. Duke Divinity School created a Center for Reconciliation, led by Perkins and Rice, to train pastors and congregants in the work of reconciliation. In communities across America, deliberately multiethnic churches began to emerge to embody and bear witness to the reconciling power of God. And in our own time this work of raising up multiracial Christian communities continues to grow.

Embedded in More Than Equals, and the various endeavors to which it gave rise, is a particular way of seeing American racism. They describe American racism not primarily in terms of personal prejudice but in terms of relational division. And rightly so—this is surely part of our racial inheritance. It could hardly be otherwise. From the very beginning, American culture was both rooted in and dependent on an inviolable form of racial distance between White Europeans and the Africans they enslaved. Over time, as Americans chose to become more dependent on slave labor, this
division was formalized into highly choreographed rituals of intimacy and distance that characterized the system of slavery that persisted in America from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

For a brief moment in the mid-nineteenth century, emancipation and the process of Reconstruction offered the promise of a different sort of America, but it was not to be. Even the most sweeping legislative changes were ultimately powerless to overcome America’s racial division. This division was so deeply entrenched that many Americans—both Black and White—believed that the only possibility for Black freedom lay in colonization: send African Americans back to Africa.

In the face of the abandonment of Reconstruction and the failure of various colonization movements, Americans—especially, though not exclusively, in the South—inaugurated a new era of racial division by means of the Black Codes and, in time, the Jim Crow system of segregation. This comprehensive system of racial apartheid enshrined the principle of racial division in virtually every area of American life: families, schools, businesses, hospitals, political institutions, and even the church itself. And the effects of this system are broadly visible among us today.

What is to be done in the face of this relational division? With surprising consistency, an answer to this question has emerged again and again across American history: the healing of American racism requires the deliberate cultivation of integrated communities. Indeed, from Revolutionary-era movements for abolition, to nineteenth-century radical movements, to twentieth-century civil rights campaigns, to the twenty-first-century movement to birth multiethnic churches, the impulse has been the same: we can overcome racism by closing the relational divisions between White and Black Americans.

The Christian tradition calls this type of relational work reconciliation. However, reconciliation is not simply the cessation of hostilities or the willingness to coexist. It is, rather, about the cultivation of friendship and the creation of a community that bears witness to the reality of life beyond estrangement. In the Christian tradition, this relational estrangement is a broken form of human existence. It obscures the truth of the Triune unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the power of Christ to reconcile all things to himself, and the credibility of the church as an expression of a renewed
humanity. From the earliest days of the Christian church, the law of love has required Christians not simply to repent of their personal prejudices but also to labor toward relational reconciliation—to live lives not of exclusion but of embrace. In the past several years, we have seen this work of embrace taking shape in Christian communities around the country, and we continue to labor toward it—however falteringly—in our own lives. And yet we are conscious that this way of seeing American racism, as a relational division that demands the work of racial reconciliation, is incomplete.

Racism as Institutional Injustice

In March 2012 an African American defense attorney named Bryan Stevenson gave a TED Talk called “We Need to Talk about an Injustice.” While not yet the household name he has become today, within the legal defense world Stevenson was a deeply admired figure for his work—especially with inmates on death row—through his organization the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). Wearing a blue blazer and a white, open-collared shirt, and carrying himself with a warmth that both reflected a native kindness and masked a native strength, he stepped onto the stage and began to speak. In the following days multiple friends forwarded us a link to the talk with subject lines such as “Must see” or “Please take time to watch this.” In watching, we—like so many others—began to learn of the profound racial injustice at the heart of our criminal justice system.

The statistics Stevenson presents are startling: In 1972, America had roughly 300,000 people in prison, but we now have over 2.3 million—the highest incarceration rate in the world. One-third of African American men in this country between the ages of 18 and 30 are either in jail, on probation, in prison, or on parole (and the rate is 50 to 60 percent in some major cities in America). African American defendants are eleven times more likely than White defendants to receive the death penalty, and twenty-two times more likely if the victim of the crime is White. In many states, these criminal convictions have led to permanent disenfranchisement—the loss of the right to vote. In Alabama, for instance, 34 percent of African Americans have lost this right to vote. By the year 2022, the percentage of disenfranchised African Americans without the right to vote will be higher than before the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Stevenson paints
a picture of a profound racial injustice in our midst. Appealing explicitly to hope, Stevenson reminds us that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done, and that we as a people will be judged not by our capacity for technological innovation but by our capacity to care for the poor, the marginalized, and the incarcerated. He invites us to join him in this work of telling the truth about the shadow side of our national history, acknowledging the injustice of it, and laboring toward a criminal justice system that is, well, just.14

As he concluded his remarks and began to walk off stage, the crowd stood and gave Stevenson an ovation that lasted nearly two minutes. It was a sign of things to come. Over the next few years, this man and this message emerged with greater force in the American imagination. In 2014, Stevenson released his book, Just Mercy, a moving personal account of his work to defend the rights of men, women, and children trapped in our national correctional system. In 2016, Ava DuVernay released her award-winning documentary 13th—a reflection on race, mass incarceration, and the Thirteenth Amendment—and featured Stevenson prominently in its story. In 2018, Stevenson’s EJI opened the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, which memorializes and honors the victims of lynching in America. It is estimated that nearly ten thousand people attended the opening ceremonies of the memorial, and the New York Times named it as a top tourism destination in 2018. In 2019, Just Mercy, a feature film starring Michael B. Jordan and Jamie Foxx and based on Stevenson’s book, became a national sensation. Stevenson’s rise was astonishing. Wherever we went—churches, colleges, conferences, family reunions—we heard people talking not only about Bryan Stevenson but also about the racial injustice at the heart of our legal system and how it could change. And not only talking but doing. Both of us have friends who enrolled in law school or who changed the course of their existing legal careers in order to respond to Stevenson’s call.

This response indicates a powerful awareness that racism in America expresses itself not merely as personal prejudice or as relational division but as institutional injustice. The same prejudices and estrangement that mark our individual and relational lives are encoded—often invisibly—in the institutions that shape our common life. As we will explore in the fol-
lowing chapters, racism in America has never been merely personal or even relational—it has always had an institutional shape. Look no further than slavery itself. This system was never just about the prejudices in the heart of the masters or their broken relationships with the slaves (though both were real). It was, rather, a system that aspired to comprehensive control of the person—bodily, economically, educationally, and politically.

Even after emancipation, the racist impulses of slavery were encoded in virtually every American institution. American culture not only maintained but intensified the racist patterns of American slavery in institutions related to law, education, health care, banking, housing, labor, and criminal justice. And—as Stevenson points out—in our own time, some 160 years after emancipation and 70 years after the legal end of Jim Crow, many of these patterns remain.

Across the centuries Americans have responded to these various forms of institutional injustice with extraordinary consistency, courage, and creativity. At the heart of these responses has been the work of not simply repentance or reconciliation but reform—seeking to right specific institutional wrongs. This work of reform has addressed itself to a range of institutional injustices: to abolish slavery, to secure African Americans the right to vote, to provide equal educational opportunities, to abolish prejudicial lending and housing practices, and to reform the practices of criminal justice—to name only a few. This history of reform has inspired our own work to address injustices in each of the discrete institutions in which we ourselves have served. And yet we remain aware of the fact that this, too, is the product of a particular way of seeing racism in America—as a form of institutional injustice that calls forth the work of reform.

Each of these ways of seeing and responding to race in America is probably familiar to the reader. Each of them is, in its own way, a crucial part of truly understanding the dynamics of race in America. We do carry personal prejudices that call for the work of repentance. We do have broken relationships that call for the work of reconciliation. And we do have institutional injustices that call for the work of reform. Even so, as important as these perspectives are, both individually and in aggregate, they fail to offer the full picture of race in America. More importantly, they fail to act in the way that a fuller picture would demand. Because of
this, we wish—here and in the chapters to follow—to suggest a fourth way of seeing race in America that, though including the others, overcomes their limitations, leading us not simply to repentance, reconciliation, and reform but beyond them to repair.

**Racism as Cultural (Dis)Order**

In 2015, journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates published a book entitled *Between the World and Me*.16 This book, framed as a letter to his son about the experience of being Black in America, was part autobiography, part social history, part fatherly exhortation, and part lament. But it was all fire. At the time, Coates was already well known because of his memoir *The Beautiful Struggle* and the articles he published in *The Atlantic*—most notably, “The Case for Reparations.”17 But *Between the World and Me* amplified his voice to an international audience. His book renders a poet’s eye, a theorist’s mind, and a father’s heart in language that is, at times, equal in beauty and power to any in American letters. But in the years since its publication, something else—something more fundamental to the work than even these things—has captured the imaginations of his readers. In private interviews and in public town halls across the world, it seems that his audiences want to hear him talk almost exclusively about one thing: his view of racism.

For many of us, the notion that we would need to write a letter to our children to guide them through the perils of American racism seems remote, perhaps even unimaginable. But for Coates it is essential. For him and for his son, this is the work of survival. He offers his child not a philosophical but what might best be described as a visceral account of American racism. He struggles to take the chaotic and bewildering phenomena of his body, of his streets, of his life—and of his son’s life—and make them visible, intelligible, and actionable. He does so in hopes that his son might, in the fullest sense, live. His account of American racism is, in other words, not the academic musing of the social theorist but the guidance of a desperate, loving father.

To understand this account, it is important to understand three important ideas embedded within it. The first of these is that American society inextricably creates and promotes White people through violence against
Black and brown people. America as we know it is impossible apart from this violence. As Coates puts it, America “was not achieved through wine tastings and ice-cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land, through the flaying of backs, the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children.”

The cultural miracle of a free and prosperous White America—a foundational element of the American dream—depended on the creation of an enduring cultural nightmare of bondage and poverty for African Americans.

The second of his core ideas is that even as America kidnaps, enslaves, tortures, and exploits, it needs to see itself as innocent—to believe, in the very face of this bondage, that it is the land of the free. Again Coates:

America believes itself exceptional, the greatest and noblest nation ever to exist, a lone champion standing between the white city of democracy and the terrorists, despots, barbarians, and other enemies of civilization. . . . There exists, all around us, an apparatus urging us to accept American innocence at face value and not to inquire too much.

Much like the sanitation workers in Memphis, Coates accuses White America of a form of willful blindness, a sustained commitment to shelter its own brutality under the cloak of myth—what Coates refers to as “the Dream.”

His third core claim is that the only way to live with integrity is to wake from this dream, to resist its manifold forms of temptation, and to take our place in the midst of the struggle for our own humanity against the forces of this history. As he tells his son,

I did not want to raise you in fear or false memory. I did not want you forced to mask your joys and blind your eyes. What I wanted for you was to grow into consciousness. . . . If my life ended today, I would tell you it was a happy life—that I drew great joy from the study, from the struggle toward which I now urge you. . . . The changes have awarded me a rapture that comes only when you can no longer be lied to, when you have rejected the Dream.

This, for Coates, is the only path to a life of freedom—to strip away the vanities embedded in our mythological cultural identities and to struggle as free people against the terror of our inheritance.