

SILENCING  
WHITE  
NOISE

SIX PRACTICES TO OVERCOME  
OUR INACTION ON RACE

WILLIE DWAYNE FRANCOIS III

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**“I don’t see color. We are all the same in Christ.”**

## 1

## Cues to Color

### *Embracing Difference as Gift*

I first encountered “colorblind Christianity” during my second year of seminary. En route to Cambridge, Massachusetts, from Charlotte, my seatmate on a flight appeared more interested in engaging me than I could muster the will to reciprocate. After preaching at a couple services for a congregation in the Charlotte area, I had pulled an all-nighter with Red Bull and Doritos to submit a midterm paper. Quite familiar with last-minute intensive writing, I still experienced acute levels of fatigue that morning, perhaps due to the turnaround commute from North Carolina to Massachusetts. I can still hear Dr. Jonathan Walton reprimanding me for accepting such engagements in my middle year of seminary, when he saw it as more prudent for me to be stationary and focused on my heavy course load.

While adding some final details to my footnotes, I pulled J. Kamron Carter’s book *Race: A Theological Account* from my bag. My

seatmate asked me about it. I explained Carter's attempt to trace dominant Christianity as a cultural product of the White Western world that informs how we understand race and see and move in the world. She probed, "Why would you read something like that? That's not the gospel of Christ." After I took a few more moments to explain the project, she said, "The gospel is not about race. It's colorless, raceless." Her passion might have proven persuadable if not for an image of a White Jesus embellishing a bookmark protruding from the top of her romance novel. She took issue with a book she assumed charged certain forms of Christianity as being allied with White supremacy. But her bookmark, too, made a claim about race and Christianity. White noise permitted her to claim a raceless gospel while holding on to a White Jesus. Colorblindness typically blurs every color but White (Whiteness, to be more precise).

Colorblind Christianity (1) denies the diversities of the image of God, (2) impairs a vocation to abolish racial injustices, (3) upholds the sin of Whiteness, (4) blames the racially unprotected for their social location, and (5) exaggerates racial progress. Anthea Butler, in *White Evangelical Racism*, writes, "This color-blind gospel is how evangelicals used the biblical scripture to affirm that everyone, no matter what race, is equal and that race does not matter. The reality of the term 'color-blind,' however, was more about making Black and other ethnic evangelicals conform to whiteness and accept white leadership as the norm both religiously and socially."<sup>1</sup> This adaptation of Christian religion is the curious offspring of colorblind racism.

Colorblind Christianity first signaled for me that we practice many "Christianities" in this nation. I often refer to Christianity in the plural to dramatize the various shades, theologies, liturgical expressions, and political priorities that exist under the moniker of "Christian." Christian religion is far from monolithic and manifests in distinct ways politically, morally, and doctrinally to the point of appearing incohesive and antithetical on major truth

claims and practices. For instance, the Christian faith American slaves practiced in the brush harbors—beyond the supervision of plantation preachers—taught of a God and Jesus organically and irrevocably committed to abolition, which markedly departed from the slaveholding aims of the master class’s Christian religion wedded to the maintenance of the chattel system. Their approaches to God functioned under the same name but could not be more different. Colorblind Christianity seeks to underrate the role race and racism played in America and its religions about Jesus. There is a penchant to disremember these distinct approaches to “the faith.”

*When white noise denies the existence of racism by touting colorblindness, we must practice the cues to color—a rhythm of reparative intercession that recognizes and embraces the divinity of difference as a gift to society.* The cues to color—identifying the ways skin color matters socially, economically, religiously, and politically—start with attending to the function and meaning of race in the United States.

## **Colorblind Racism**

Colorblindness uses an idea of our biological human sameness to overlook cultural and experiential differences and negate economic and political opportunities that differ due to race. To be colorblind is to deny the structure of society. White noise cues us to feign blindness to race and skin color and how they shape real life. This “covert” racism, whether associated with a religion or not, minimizes the historical longevity of racist social arrangements and engenders substitute reasons for the lack of social and economic parity between White and Black lives. It explains inequality using nonracial calculations. Colorblind racism promotes white noise in four ways, through the myths of (1) equal opportunism, (2) cultural assimilation, (3) social naturalism, and (4) naive romanticism.<sup>2</sup>

*Equal opportunism* peddles the assumption that there is uninhibited access to jobs, housing markets, schools, and influence, and that each individual must own the responsibility of taking advantage of what America offers. I use *opportunism* here to characterize this myth as a type of flawed belief system related to opportunity, which dictates how we engage institutions and interpret the life-outcomes of others. It is White privilege to live willfully seduced by the idea that all hardworking persons approach loan officers, human resource directors, or county prosecutors on level playing fields or even with the presumption of fairness in the process. A trope of this white noise is “Minorities should not get special consideration.” One might reject programs like affirmative action on the basis of reverse discrimination against hardworking White people or unfair biases for undeserving non-White people. This approach clings to the promises of America and the values sacrificed for and championed by social struggles like abolition and the civil rights movement without accounting for the barriers faced by non-White people today. Here, impartiality moonlights as ignorance—erasing the past that makes a reparative consideration of race necessary in college admissions and employment. These ideas find a foothold in the myths of racial equality and meritocracy—an American fabrication that diligence and hard work will be rewarded regardless of race.

*Cultural assimilation* blames victims of discrimination for their social location due to behavioral and moral degeneracy. The assimilationist believes that a group can be bettered by adopting the culture of another group. Assimilation assumes one should discard one’s own culture and institutions for those of the ruling class. This type of white noise communicates that minorities live trapped at the bottom due to strained family relations and a lack of motivation.

Some non-White people amplify this white noise when they assent to stereotypes about laziness, family dysfunction, hood culture, and the like. For example, cultural racism frames Black

people as products of problematic social settings and poor personal choices without acknowledging structural and governmental practices designed to disinherit Black life. The trauma of self-blame surfaces when Black and Latinx persons rationalize their economic and employment distance from White people by saying things like, “I didn’t go to the right schools. My historically Black college/university didn’t prepare me to compete in White spaces.”

*Social naturalism* sees racial isolation as a result of personal choice. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva posits, “The word ‘natural’ or the phrase ‘that’s the way it is’ is often interjected to normalize events or actions that could otherwise be interpreted as racially motivated (residential segregation) or racist (preference for whites as friends and partners).”<sup>3</sup> Social naturalism is a frame of reference that doesn’t account for the structures that prevent people from choosing where to live. Want and preference die in the face of redlining, racial covenants,<sup>4</sup> and economic thresholds. White noise explains concentrated poverty and racial exclusion as self-segregation.

*Naive romanticism* overstates racial progress and reduces racism to heinous and overt forms of discrimination—for example, a police-killing of an unarmed Black person, warehousing Latin American children in unsanitary cages, or the use of certain epithets. It insists that things are “so much better than they were.” Colorblind racism minimizes contemporary injustices by measuring them against the experiences of previous generations. For instance, a person might reject anti-Black job discrimination—last hired but first fired—by comparing it to the Jim Crow job culture that criminalized multiracial workplaces. “But we’ve come a long way” attempts to invalidate the lived experiences of non-White people.

From my organizing experience, these forms of colorblind racism are often intertwined with each other. Racial equity in public education has dominated much of my community organizing over the last five years. In 2020, I engaged with a few school districts suffering from racial and economic segregation. In a Zoom consultation with leaders, questions about why school segregation

exists emerged. A neighboring majority-White school district had filed a petition to the state to sever a one-hundred-year send-receive relationship with a majority-Black-and-Brown district. Due to the agreement, the White district was sending one hundred high school students to the non-White district each year. However, the White families consistently found alternatives to enrolling their students in the receiving school. Their petition intended to replace their de facto segregation with de jure segregation. White flight would leave the district 100 percent non-White.

We campaigned to resist this potential state-sponsored segregation. Though the leaders of the non-White district supported our grassroots campaign, they opted to abstain from the legal fight. In that Zoom meeting, one leader remarked, “Well, it is their choice where their kids are educated. People go to school where they live.” Another retorted, “Y’all sound quite alarmist. You’re talking about this like we live in the Jim Crow South. I don’t blame them for wanting out. It’s high time we get our act together as a people.”

In an attempt to tell me why desegregation is not their fight, a school board member reiterated, “You really cannot tell people where to send their children to school. Parents decide where students live, which determines where they are schooled.” He continued, “[Our district] is majority Latino and Black because we prefer to live with each other.” These Black and Latinx district leaders saw family participation in their district and residency in their city as a choice. A false assumption about how power works sustained their white noise.

Equal opportunism, cultural assimilationism, social naturalism, and naive romanticism came together in one meeting. In a single setting, the school-district leaders blamed themselves and their constituents for inequality, evoked the myth of choice, and romanticized all the changes since Jim Crow. They merely blinked at the decades of forces that fixed residential arrangements in their town and the impacts of White and middle-class divestment and abandonment. White noise silenced the truth behind school

segregation and amplified the presumption of this powerlessness as self-inflicted, a personal choice, and unlike what we experienced as a nation prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Colorblind racism let Whiteness off the hook. And it force-fed the self-accusing reasons for non-White problems down non-White throats, which came right back up at that meeting.

### **It's Baked In**

White noise tells us that systemic and structural racism exist only in the minds of others. At times it identifies racism only as brazen discrimination and violence; however, racial discrimination ranges from individual actions to institutional practices. Racism exists as hierarchy and subjugation, not simply as hatred and slurs. As I noted earlier in my framing of white noise, mass disparities along the lines of race stem from advantages doled out to one racial group and denied to another through theological, historical, ideological, cultural, structural, and interpersonal practices. As colorblindness, racism masterfully normalizes White power and privilege while simultaneously obscuring histories of anti-Black violence and mass racial inequities baked into the fabric of our institutions.

The Alt-Right, Ku Klux Klan, Proud Boys, and other neo-Nazi groups compose a lethal fringe element of the American body politic. Events like the January 6th Capitol insurrection in 2021, instigated by the then-sitting president of the United States, egged on by some members of Congress, and praised by some Christian talking heads, unveil the national necessity to resist and abolish White supremacy in all its terrorizing and morally anemic forms. Nonetheless, when we reduce White supremacy to tiki torches, burning crosses, and lynchings, or a man suffocating under the knee of a cop, we endorse the gross fictive innocence of our republic, which works to shield the expansiveness of racism. Structural violence must incite in us the same level of righteous indignation as brazen discrimination and violence. By no means an exhaustive

list, omnipresent forms of White supremacy include underfunded urban schools, mass incarceration and Black criminalization born out of a government-manufactured war on drugs, redlining that created pockets of non-White poverty, a gendered and racialized wealth gap mirroring realities of the 1950s, hiring discrimination against the formerly incarcerated, and legalized voter suppression enabled by the Supreme Court's decision to pull the teeth out of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Reparative intercession requires more than denouncing hate groups and calling people out for racial slurs. The reach of Whiteness in our communities obligates us to name zero tolerance discipline policies in schools as racist. Poverty wages for Black women and Latinas are racist. Public policies that use identification requirements as cover for voter suppression are racist. School funding formulae largely based on segregated property taxes are racist.

## **A Doctrine of Whiteness**

To be clear, race is a social construction loaded with meanings produced by a ruling class over hundreds of years, not a definitive biological category. Racial difference and definitions grew out of manipulations of science, biased notions of beauty, and the historical emergence of Europeans as exploiters of creation. The concept of Whiteness introduced at the beginning of this book clarified that it is bigger than skin color. Whiteness refers to a structural logic and a way of being and knowing, not simply skin color or ancestry. People willfully and unknowingly defer to the baseless notion of White superiority. White supremacy is a doctrine that governs our lives, forges ways of thinking, and produces frameworks for meaning. In a sense, white noise compels us to genuflect at the shrines of Whiteness. Whiteness silences and works against the legitimacy of non-White equality and belonging. I use “non-White” throughout this book instead of “persons of color” as a way of centering Whiteness as a moral crisis, theological heresy, and public hazard for all people.

In *Prophesy Deliverance!*, Cornel West tracks the emergence and logic of White racism in the modern West.<sup>5</sup> He builds on Foucault's genealogical approach to explain why White and Black people, irrespective of racial identity, cannot escape the grip of this power. Discursive power relates to the rules and fundamental assumptions that govern practices, self-identification, and social interactions of a subject's body (and mind). Whiteness is the noise, language, and doctrine of America. White racism persists as a subjectless form of power working beneath the consciousness of human subjects regardless of racial identity.<sup>6</sup> We all consume and communicate white noise because of the stealthy, omnipresent nature of Whiteness, which shapes us and works on us outside of our awareness.

Christian discourse and identity played a significant role in the European colonial project. The demarcation between "believer" and "unbeliever" was used to justify brutalities toward peoples of Africa and the Americas.<sup>7</sup> The barbarity mapped onto these darker bodies resulted in their being seen as "heathens." Religious superiority morphed into racial superiority over time. The doctrine of Whiteness entails the belief that White people enjoy (1) an exceptional ancestry that legitimates a right to dominate and control, (2) primary ownership of the meaning of humanity and Americanness, (3) a racial hierarchy that perceives the other as inherently dangerous and inferior, (4) mythic social innocence regarding America's racial tragedy, and (5) systemic and structural advantages due utterly to skin color.

Whiteness is systemic and structural sin—a condition of being, seeing, and knowing that threatens the integrity of creation in general and humanity in particular. Whiteness is sin, not an identity, that is ours to purge from the world. Three metaphors for the sin of Whiteness emerge: it is idolatrous, demonic, and segregationist.

### ***White Sin: Idolatry***

Whiteness endures as a sin because it assumes the role of a god in society. Whiteness is an idolatrous religious tradition in the

United States marked by its own deity, public and private rituals, and symbols. Omnipresence is an attribution typically reserved for a god, but it applies here because racism is all around us—entrenched within the diverse peoples and structures of America. In 1965, theologian George Kelsey wrote, “Racism as a faith is a form of idolatry, for it elevates a human factor to the level of the ultimate. The god of racism is the race, the ultimate center of value. . . . For the racist, race is the final point of reference for decision and action, the foundation upon which he organizes his private life, public institutions and public policy, and even his religious institutions.”<sup>8</sup> The dangerous, life-foreclosing deity of Whiteness dislocates the person from God, creation, and the self, which I later unpack as the sin of segregation. The god of Whiteness bids us to do the dirty work, the iniquitous labor of covertly and deliberately enforcing a hierarchy of lives according to the doctrinal rules of race.

Whiteness persists as an American god—what Paul Tillich would call an “Ultimate Concern”<sup>9</sup>—with altars in every American school, police station, courthouse, bank, and legislative hall. An ultimate concern, in practice, becomes a person’s god. Our ultimate concern utterly grasps us with the power to destroy or heal us. Nationalism lifts the nation to the status of the ultimate. Sexism concerns itself with male power. Capitalism is ultimately consumed with production, profits, and class locations. Comparably, racism venerates Whiteness as the ultimate concern. Whiteness grounds the being of people who are psychologically and materially privileged, protected, and produced by a racist nation. Therefore, we surrender to Whiteness as a false god occupying our ideals, relationships, and souls.

Racism—a civic religious system—creates God in the image of Whiteness. Any deity fashioned out of the raw material of humanity’s social insecurity, exclusivist supremacy, or quest for power amounts to a false god. Whiteness as an idol, a symbol created in the image of its worshipers, profanes the ultimacy and

freedom of the God of love. “Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance.”<sup>10</sup> Racism projects values, characteristics, and the insecurities of White supremacy onto the divine, compromising the confessed eternity and ultimacy of its conception of God. Tragically, the idol of Whiteness marches in lockstep with many forms of Christian religion. It is hard not to become White Christian polytheists even with Black and other non-White skin because the chaplains of privilege and priests of inequality sell us the promise that we can be white as snow.

This allusion to the ultimacy of Whiteness in America underscores the heretical notion of White supremacy, which is often thinly veiled under the bloodstained banner of a Christian religion. However, the banner of this Christian religion is not stained by the blood of Jesus but by the blood of innumerable Black, Native, Asian, and Latinx bodies. Our prayers to the God who created us fail to discontinue our service as acolytes to the god of Whiteness we cling to as an idol.

### ***White Sin: Demonic***

Whiteness denies the humanity of the other, which renders it a sin. It is demonic. The tragic character of Whiteness casts non-White, particularly Black, personhood as a threatening “thing.” Whiteness hinges on the condemnation of non-White people. The growing cultural and social insecurity of Whiteness enfleshes itself as racial narcissism and racist paranoia. White power thrives on the negation of Black power, Latinx power, or Asian power. Tillich writes, “Power is real only in its actualization, in the encounter with other bearers of power and in the ever-changing balance which is the result of these encounters.”<sup>11</sup> Illegitimate power entails the projection of an image of “the enemy” that has nothing to do with reality. Said image reveals a demonic-destructive function in

persons and groups responsible for producing it. White privilege at the expense of the equality and dignity of non-White persons renders White supremacy demonic and an illegitimate form of power to be contested and countered.

White noise impacts our national gaze. Due to white noise, the American gaze affirms negative assumptions and stereotypes of non-White bodies. The Western world venerates Whiteness and devalues the other—namely, Blackness—as *something* to be managed and rejected. Shaped by the normative gaze, America maintains White culture as the ideal through political and religious practices, and all other cultures represent degenerations from the standard of Whiteness.<sup>12</sup>

By demonic, I mean any power that impairs human flourishing, autonomy, and creativity. The dehumanization of any class of people is demonic. In a society governed by Whiteness, the non-White person emerges from the social insecurity of Whiteness as the enemy of the public. America's regime of violence denies that non-White people are rights-bearing persons. No remorse is shown for punishing, marginalizing, and annihilating the subhuman other. *Thingification* is the process of mapping attributes of danger, guiltiness, and criminality on human bodies. It amounts to demonizing and dehumanizing a group or person. Likewise, the thingification of Blackness, in political-theological terms, is the creation of an enemy, a scapegoat, an other. This demonization and depersonalization of the other strips the person or group of its autonomy, "its spontaneity, of its living response."<sup>13</sup> Racism tracks onward as a divisive, dehumanizing form of power, denying non-White beauty, freedom, life, love, and creativity.

### ***White Sin: Segregation***

Whiteness promotes the politics and dogmatics of separation. Sin does not merely separate us from God and others; the separation itself is the sin. Tillich conceives, "To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation. And separation is threefold: there

is separation among individual lives, separation of a man from himself, and separation of all men from the Ground of Being [Tillich's proxy for God]."<sup>14</sup> Whiteness detaches us from our origin, self, and others, giving tragic meaning to racial group relations and lived experiences. The estrangement is a gap between the way things should be and the way things are, particularly for those on the upper side of political and economic power. Sin creates the tragic gaps reparative intercessors must occupy to abolish racism and repair its generational harms. Whiteness estranges a person from the gift of living in community, with the capacity to connect with oneself, others, and the divine. White supremacy is a form of self-exile from one's humanity, God, and other human beings.

Again, sin does not merely separate us from God and one another; the separation is itself the sin. Jim Crow era segregation was a period of forced racial separation in American history, marked by lynchings and preceded by chattel slavery. It offers a chilling symbol for White sin as separation and estrangement. Kelsey calls segregation "the principal plan of political action of racist faith."<sup>15</sup> He adds, "From a Christian viewpoint, segregation not only denies the God-given dignity of man, it also violates the human oneness which God the Creator established. [Humanity] is created for community. From the hand of God, [the human] is for [the human]. [The human] is the covenant-partner of God and [humanity]."<sup>16</sup> Diminishing the value and life of the other and banishing them to a proscribed location are inherent to the sin of Whiteness.

The segregationist nature of Whiteness disconnects our souls from our bodies, forcing us to deny the beauty of our skin as non-White people and underwrites the deadly stigmatization and demonization of our differences. White lies breach our public trust, pushing communities apart based on the ruses of race. White lies are never little in terms of the impact they have on non-White lives. White lies turn public schools into prison preparatory academies instead of institutions of human enrichment. White lies deny voting rights to millions of non-White citizens returning from prison.

White lies allow police officers to kill unarmed Black men and go home with their guns, badges, and pensions. White lies allow a mayor to convince a city that we must throw teenagers against a wall and frisk them to fix crime. White lies disembodied the historical Jesus, co-opting and converting him into a placid abstraction to support Christian Whiteness masquerading as evangelicalism.

### **The Souls of White Folks**

Whiteness forcefully persists, whether or not White people consciously espouse racist ideas or practice anti-Black, anti-Latinx, or anti-Asian behaviors. Peggy McIntosh points out that “as a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.”<sup>17</sup> The indictment of White privilege insults many White people because they hear it as ignoring their hard work to secure the current circumstances of their lives. One White person I met at a conference shared, “I think of White privilege as the absence of certain things. I may have had a tight budget when I shopped, but I’ve never had a security guard following me. When I got pulled over for speeding once in my twenties, I did get a ticket, but I did not have to fear for my life during the traffic stop.” However, White privilege ultimately fails to protect White humanity—the deep structure of the soul that makes us available to one another.

During the summer of 2020, I accepted an invitation to converse with two White evangelical pastors about race and racism for a multiracial virtual audience. The question of “White blessing versus White privilege” landed right in front of me. One of the ministers, a retired pastor and former public-school educator, rebuffed me for naming the norms of his life as unearned social privileges. “Willie, you call them privilege. I call them White blessings,” he insisted. “I grew up with two parents who loved me. I

was supported by gainfully employed family members. That’s not White privilege. It’s a blessing.”

Beyond the obvious white noise of insinuating that Black families, as a rule, lack the basic structure he named, he obscured the structural realities his Whiteness permits him to avoid. His worldview gives no account for forces like over-policing and a punitive legal system that empties some Black households of wage-earning parents. He had not overtly considered how 246 years of unpaid labor and 90 years of Jim Crow poverty wages still impact “gainful employment” for Black families. His White blessings have meant curses visited on Black people. This spiritualized thinking about being blessed allows White people to scapegoat God for the systems that benefit them and shred Black life.

White privilege forecloses the vitality of *ubuntu*—what the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu defined as the moment when “‘my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’”<sup>18</sup> Any privilege derived at the expense of the dignity and future of “an other” costs a person their humanity. Unchecked, their privilege becomes their one-way ticket into a hell, where they may lift up their eyes only to be tormented daily by the onslaught of self-hatred. Privilege and supremacy destroy the soul; they make one “hideously empty,”<sup>19</sup> and turn people into “moral monsters.”<sup>20</sup>

### **White Grief, Not (Just) White Guilt**

*The cues to color initiate the process of replacing White guilt with White grief.* Reparative intercession starts with seeing differences as gifts of creation, which banishes implicit and explicit beliefs that one race is superior to another. You should allow yourself to feel the loss of letting go of Whiteness. How can we abolish racism and its corresponding disparities if we are dishonest and Pollyannish about what race means to public life? The cues to color are a form of intentional color-consciousness that acknowledges

the divinity of difference without belittling the grotesque ways race serves as the chief indicator for how a person's life unfolds. Color-consciousness frees us to account for the massive impact race has on how we see people, where they work, education outcomes, life expectancy, and so forth. Disparities find compelling explanations in how the doctrine of Whiteness privileges some and marginalizes others. Therefore, color-consciousness unveils the extent to which Whiteness forecloses any chance to embrace the divinity of difference.

The fear of owning experiential differences and opportunity inequities related to race often leads to White guilt when we encounter ugly historical realities. In the context of racial oppression, guilt cracks open the door to healthy feelings of accountability for the other. However, a sense of guilt for past atrocities, the indignities we commit in our lifetimes, or the dereliction of our roles to advance equality only marginally impacts the entrenchment of White power and privilege today. Guilt produces defensiveness, powerlessness, and misdirected zeal. We become so layered with negative emotions that our hope for change wanes and our prospects of being the change fail to sprout. White guilt represents an earnest confrontation with race, racism, and, to some extent, racial truth-telling, but it abdicates the human contract to experiment with conversations and actions of repair. Guilt often leaves us feeling shock and horror, which produce only doubts, stress, pessimism, fear, and retreat.

When confronted by racial truths, we must probe our feelings to discern whether our guilt leads to reparative intercession or self-centered remorse. James W. Perkinson purports, "White self-confession requires more than mere self-naming or 'me too-ism.' It demands clear steps of conversion away from historical intentions and material privileges of White self-interest."<sup>21</sup> Inaction and apathy toward racism—unprocessed guilt—is White supremacy.

Even Black and Latinx individuals who "made it out" experience racial guilt—namely, survivors' remorse. By making it out,

I mean leaving neighborhoods disturbed by poverty, police over-presence, and disinvestment. Though upwardly mobile Black and Latinx folks never fully escape the reach of Whiteness and white noise, some do feel guilty for never looking and reaching back. Others feel the weight of buying into negative racial stereotypes.

White grief makes sense for processing and progressing beyond our crises of White sins. Seeing divinity in difference—racial difference as a gift—also means dying to one’s previous relationship to Whiteness and going through the healing process to cultivate a new normal. Grief includes the negative feelings associated with death and loss—denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. It also creates a path toward healing, agency, and acceptance. Racism mulls, maims, and kills everything in its path, including White people. Instead of us dying to Whiteness, Whiteness must die to us. Without the death of Whiteness as an ideology, the truth of the divinity in difference—the promise of the *imago Dei*—never sees the light of day. Whiteness takes the air out of this transcendent truth, preventing us from embracing the colors of our flesh as gifts to one another and the whole.

America needs a death of Whiteness in order to save White, Black, and Brown flesh. In my tradition, Jesus beckons his followers to save their lives by losing their lives. In a world where Whiteness operates as a god, I read Jesus’s call to death as an invitation to lose our Whiteness to save our humanity, which is sparked by the divine. This type of death leaves the body intact and creates a horizon for new life distinct from the deleterious resolve of Whiteness.

No one person will grieve the death of Whiteness the same as another. White grief, like grief after any loss of life, moves through a cycle of emotions, postures, resolutions, and actions. While I associate this form of racial healing with stages, White grief isn’t always linear. Some people quickly transition from one stage to another, while others stall at one stage or another for prolonged periods of time. For various reasons, healing from our Whiteness

may involve circumventing some steps altogether. Though frustrating, we may experience a given stage of White grief multiple times, causing us to assume we or the persons we support are not moving toward anti-racism and racial repair. We navigate the stages of grief to arrive at acceptance through several disciplines: lamentation, mapping, deference, confession, and contact.

A typical response to Whiteness and its necessary death is denial, what I call the first stage of White grief. Largely, this reflects the period when we refuse to come to terms with the scope of our racism or how we help perpetuate Whiteness. We retreat, hopefully only momentarily, from our previous “aha” moment of realizing our racial complicity. In an act of self-honesty, *lamentation* surfaces a series of authentic feelings. Fear, disappointment, and despair put us in touch with hardly explored facets of our humanity. To an extent, reparative intercession as lamentation forces us to attend to the ways Whiteness harms the host too. The ways we make space for shock and tears profoundly shape the process. Recognizing the sins of Whiteness leads us to pause, to deliberate what harms we have caused, ignored, and upheld. This emotional event essentially says something about how in touch we are with our *imago Dei*—the sacredness of our particularities. Indifference or, worse, delight in our sins of Whiteness creates a profound chasm between our life practices and our divine spark.

The second stage of White grief addresses anger. It is important to ask, “What took me so long to get here?” It is not rare to feel angry with ourselves or others as more of our personal history of discrimination and complicity come into focus. I recommend *mapping* the journey of racial awareness slowly, methodically, and faithfully. By tracing our lives back to our earliest racial memories, we start to mine our racial identity formation, a process we take up in chapter 4.

One of my earliest racial memories occurred in elementary school in La Marque, Texas. When I was a fifth grader at Simms Elementary, my class was mostly Black and Brown, which did not

reflect the racial composition of the majority-white city. During lunch one afternoon, my classmates and I criticized the cafeteria food. For some reason, the conversation turned to the cafeteria service. We expressed appreciation for one of the staff members who always gave extra juice to my group of friends. During the conversation, I referred to the Latina worker as Mexican. One of my biracial friends responded, “No, she is from El Salvador, like my mother.” “Isn’t that all the same?” I retorted. I offended my friend that day, not because of a geographical fumble but because I erased the uniqueness of her Brownness. I was undoubtedly biased by what I had heard up to that point from adults, so I lumped many distinct Latinx peoples and cultures into one group.

When I consider my own White grief, I mentally map my way back to this moment. I ask, “Why did I believe this? From where did such ideas come? Who was harmed by my thinking and actions? Did my youth let me off the hook? What would have happened if no one had corrected me?”

The third stage of White grief is bargaining, a longing for the middle ground on race. It is a posture of racial neutrality like the placid category of nonracist. In the bargaining phase, we long to hold on to the power, privilege, and benefits of Whiteness as we reach for a new life. Without wresting free of these social advantages, we see racism as being external to us, leaving our racism intact. Though we voted for Barack Obama and Kamala Harris, marched down gentrified streets yelling “Black Lives Matter!” or married a Latinx person, we remain allied with racism if we benefit from practices designed to give an advantage to White people at the expense of non-White people. When we settle into a disposition of *deference*, we pursue a divestment from this delusional neutrality. Deference to the most vulnerable and unprotected unsettles any need to uphold false neutrality. By hearing the stories of impacted persons, we adjust to the idea that merely celebrating “Black culture” or volunteering to tutor Latinx children never fully accounts for the obligation to interrogate our beneficial relationship

to Whiteness. The only way to counter our penchant to bargain our way to the middle—to a place of safety that allows us to pat ourselves on the back—is to humble ourselves at the feet of the most unprotected and violated. We either regress into Whiteness and white noise or progress into solidarity.

The fourth stage of White grief is depression, a profound sadness related to Whiteness remaining dead. We pass by the sepulchers of the status quo and ossuaries of oppressive Whiteness, resurrecting the racism we naively believed belonged to eras of old—slavery, the 1877–1923 nadir of race relations, or Jim and Jane Crow. As a condition for our humanity to live, Whiteness must not experience resurrection after we have resolved to terminate our relationship to its power and privilege. It is difficult to live without “something” we perceive to be so intimately woven into our sense of self. The bearers of White skin, eager to access a new life after Whiteness, feel the weight of this sadness as an existential crisis. White reparative intercessors carry a peculiar burden to live with White skin—the very marker of power and privilege in our nation—while saying a daily unequivocal “no” to the benefits. Pain emerges because they truly can and oftentimes want to reverse this death.

For White people specifically, healing in this stage means *confessing* what it means to be White. To be clear, Whiteness is an ideology, not an identity. Confessing Whiteness doesn’t mean that one apologizes for one’s ancestral bloodline and skin color. Whiteness operates as a system of ideas that produce, protect, and serve the interests of power and privilege that White people enjoy at the expense of non-White lives and opportunities. I identified Whiteness as sin—idolatrous, demonic, and segregationist—at work in us irrespective of our racial identities. Life is possible—we are possible—after the death of any ideology. In fact, the truly abundant life leads us past the graveside of Whiteness.

At the risk of oversimplifying, *confession*—one way of telling on ourselves—can take shape around a number of prompts

arranged in no particular order. Immensely vital to the rhythm of cuing color, confession acknowledges racial differences as a social construct. We might state clearly, “My coworker is Honduran.” “My child’s teacher is Korean American.” “That police officer is Black.” “The judge was White.” “The waiter is Black.” “My congressman is White.” “My best friends are White.” “My primary care physician is Mexican American.” After such a forthright observation, we can take a few moments to assess what their race means in the United States and what our race communicates in American public life. Then we can express how their race impacts our interactions with them. The more occasions we have for reflection, the more honest we find ourselves becoming. Confession also encompasses naming sins of Whiteness and associating them with real persons, places, and dates. This moves us out of our heads and into history. Real people carry the traumas or consequences of the sins of Whiteness irrespective of their racial identities.

These approaches to confession afford us the opportunity to interrogate how we conceptualize the *imago Dei*. We query, “What do my actions and speech reveal about how I understand human beings and the image of God?” Conceptions of the *imago Dei* link closely to our imaging of God. After a few years of practicing confession, I still find myself confronting internalized images of God as White. During these moments, I force myself to see and talk about God as something other than White (and male and imperialist and capitalist) without deracinating men who are powerful, White, and rich from the makeup of God’s inspired creation. I identify God with the most unprotected among us as an act of confessing the hazards of the doctrine of Whiteness kept alive in and through me.

I previously addressed guilt in the journey toward racial awakening. Guilt is only one stage in a larger process toward anti-racism and new life after the death of Whiteness. An immediate response to the guilt is increasing cross-racial *contact*. Isolation and internalization have abetted most of the failures in lives fixed

in Whiteness. Grief furnishes an opportunity to heal from Whiteness with the support of other people. We are wired for communication and need to work this trauma out with others. However, this community should include persons we perceive as “other.” Communities of reparative intercession aid us in racial healing, multiracial solidarity, and reconstructive action.

Finally, acceptance means we are fully alert to our racial realities even as we process the guilt, depression, anger, bargaining, and denial. Because grief is cyclical, the acceptance stage touches the previous feelings, dispositions, and challenges, but we experience them with a new resolve. Now these earlier stages validate our will to fight Whiteness within and orbiting around us. Acceptance says, “This work is exhausting, but my soul must have it.” Acceptance confirms, “I made mistakes in my past life, but I’m more than my racism.” Acceptance honors, “The Spirit of God is resident in all flesh, and I need to live that truth at all costs.” Acceptance acknowledges, “Of course I want to fall apart over this. I lived a lie for so much of my life.”

When we learn how Whiteness reduces us, we will jam the frequencies of its noise. Only by identifying how Whiteness works in us, around us, and on us can we go through the process of healing. The nudging of God’s love for humanity insists we seal the catacombs of the decaying matter of White privilege. Only by making that last visit to the cemetery for the interment of Whiteness do we dare to reinvest in a life of multiracial sustainability.

### **Oneness without Sameness**

We take the future of America for granted, as well as our own personal futures, because we fail to attend to the ways our addiction to exclusion and superiority cut us off from the living power of the Spirit resident in those barred from entry into our lives. Until people find a true north—a sense of self-direction unsullied by this history of White power—our society will not be aligned with

the reign of God. The death of Whiteness gives us permission to resist the felt need to all be the same or to use Whiteness as the template for being human.

James Baldwin ponders, “I would like us to do something unprecedented: to create ourselves without finding it necessary to create an enemy.”<sup>22</sup> People endowed with unearned, overexercised power need an enemy, a category of persons condemned by their god and controlled by their governments. The need for an enemy is sinful—demonic—because we’re all born with equal value. We actually corrupt ourselves when we use the projected deficiencies of another to feed our sense of self. No one becomes good by making someone else bad. Are you really a whole person if your self-esteem begs for someone to hate or fear? What becomes of the civil in civilization if violence and inhumanity toward other humans are needed to protect it? To the moral demise of our nation and the impairment of our democracy, a politics of prejudice and a heritage of hate upend assumptive values of human equality and universal access to justice.

A fundamental property of God’s creational design is that human beings bear the *imago Dei*—the image of God. Radically equal on an essential level, humans reflect the truth about God’s diverse presence and personality. God created human oneness—not human sameness. Our differences fill out the story of God in the world. By grieving Whiteness and electing color-consciousness, we embrace the divinity of difference and find God in the face of the other.

Multiracial solidarity opens new horizons for ontological intimacy that allows humans to see, affirm, and advance racial difference in the work of racial repair. “Ontological intimacy,” according to James Samuel Logan, “is the Christian confession that all things participate in the power of God’s being through bonds of radical communion.”<sup>23</sup> Ontological intimacy is not human sameness. Reparative intercession—namely, cues to color—upholds our rootedness in a single ground of being, God, and honors our

difference as God-given. Spirituality and democracy clear space for the other to appear as they are. The future of civilization requires that people of faith participate in “the appearing acts” of those who are unseen in our midst—the dispossessed, disinherited, and disaffected. Using cues to color—seeing and embracing racial difference—is holy, divine, and sacred.

Emmanuel Levinas’s understanding of face-to-face relationships helps to articulate the reparative rhythm of seeing color. According to the prominent French philosopher, we know God—the sacred—when we encounter the face of the other. Levinas purports, “The face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death.”<sup>24</sup> This notion signifies that people are responsible for one another face-to-face. When we understand the face of the other as the face of God, the face demands that we do more and be more for the ones who are not us. God invites us into a binding community of love through the face of the other. And we are prepared for reparative intercession when we see God, holiness, sacredness, and transcendence in the “not me.” Life-enhancing beauty emanates from the faces of others. The degenerating moral health of America depends on our courage to see the other, stare exhaustively at the face of the other, and find transcendence in difference. We know and love God only to the extent that we consistently seek out personal encounters with the other.

No one leverages moral authority by reducing others to unfounded labels of immorality. We cease to journey toward full selfhood when we build ourselves up by breaking down others with labels like dangerous, uncivilized, and undeserving. The perception of the other as an enemy only proves the incompatibility of religious claims for human sameness and social practices of human hierarchy. We need to do the unprecedented thing: create ourselves without needing to create an enemy out of our siblings of different social identities—race, citizenship, class, gender, and sexuality.