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RACE

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DIALOGUES ON RACE

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SAY IT LOUD: I'M BLACK AND I'M PROUD

ANTI-BLACKNESS, OPPRESSION, AND
DEHUMANIZATION OF BLACK BODIES

BY ROZELLA HAYDÉE WHITE

I grew up in an unapologetically Black¹ household, the daughter of Black American parents. My mother is the descendant of Afro-Caribbeans with ancestry rooted in Panama, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and St. Croix. Her parents were both of Puerto Rican descent and embodied the both/and of Black Americanism and the distinctly flavored Latin@² culture that was a product of La Isla del Encanto. Puerto Ricans are a multifaceted people, a product of colonial Spaniards, Black Africans, and the indigenous tribe of Taino Indians. This mix of histories, cultures, and identities comes together to create a population that is proud, resilient, and full of joy.

My father is the direct descendant of enslaved Black Americans—those who were forced onto boats off the coast of western Africa and who survived the Middle Passage: the death-dealing journey that

packed Black bodies on ships to be bought, sold, used, and abused as they built the country we now know as the United States. His ancestors were dropped off along the southeastern coast of the United States, enslaved to work plantations throughout Georgia and the Carolinas. My father's mother is the granddaughter of sharecroppers, only two generations removed from chattel slavery.

Both of my parents' families migrated to New York, which is where my story began. Knowing who I am, along with the stories of my ancestors, was a critical part of my upbringing. My Blackness was and continues to be an inextricable aspect of my identity. The skin that I inhabit is not just a color or a race. It holds the story of generations of those who have come before me. Blackness is an all-encompassing concept—one that takes into account skin color, history, and culture. While originating on the continent of Africa, Blackness extends to other parts of the world. Afro-Caribbeans and those from Central and South America who are Black have a different experience than those from Africa, but they are also a part of the Black diaspora.

American Blackness has an additional dimension: to be a Black American means that the culture and identity you claim are directly linked to an experience of enslavement, oppression, systemic dehumanization, and the constant attack on your personhood and body. American Blackness is informed by Jim Crow, the period of US history when segregation and discrimination were legal.

This experience of discrimination and the resilience of my people led to the creation of language, ways of being and knowing (epistemologies), faith practices, familial traditions, art, food, and attitudes—in short, culture—that defines what it means to be Black and American. Our identity as Americans was not recognized in ways that afforded us the same access as white people to opportunities and resources. The fact that we were American did not count for anything. But to be Black? This provided us a foundation for understanding the *who* and *why* of our people in the face of ongoing dehumanization and a system that threatened our

lives daily. The ingenuity of our Blackness, which was informed by ancestral lineage and generational stories, led to an identity that represented all of who we are and provided us with strength and resilience.

As a Black American who identifies as Christian, an important part of my faith formation was uncovering the ways in which my ancestors made sense of a religion that was used as the foundation of their subjugation. I have also wondered how followers of the Jesus I profess interpreted their faith in ways that allowed them to take part in widespread oppression.

CHRISTIANITY AND ANTI-BLACKNESS

Whether we like it or not, Christianity as an ideology and practice has been used to justify the dehumanization of Black people throughout history. In countless ways, Christianity has perpetuated anti-Blackness. Anti-Blackness as a concept did not just appear. A confluence of ideologies, philosophies, and histories has perpetuated the notion that Blackness is bad, that Blackness represents evil, and that Blackness is subhuman.

In this country, the most often quoted scriptural example used to justify the oppression of Black people was the “curse of Ham” in Genesis. In this story, Noah was drunk and naked. His youngest son, Ham, saw him naked and told his older brothers, Shem and Japheth. The older two brothers looked away from their father’s nakedness as they covered him. When Noah awoke, he is said to have known what Ham did and to curse him:

“Cursed be Canaan [Ham]; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” He also said, “Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.” (Genesis 9:25-27)

This text is explored in detail in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*:

This text is a passage with one of the most notorious histories of interpretation in all of the Hebrew scriptures. . . . [This] passage was revived and reinterpreted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Euro-Americans and leveled against a new target of oppression. In this instance, Africana peoples were deemed the “Sons of Ham” and this curse of perpetual servitude was leveled against our ancestors as theological justification for their enslavement. . . . This text establishes a theological precedent for the abuse of an “Other” by a favored group and can easily be adopted as proof text by subsequent groups seeking to legitimate theologically their superiority over or oppression of another “othered” group.³

This is why our hermeneutics—the means and methods of interpretation—are critical. The implications of how meaning is made from a source can have dire consequences. This text’s use as a proof text for the oppression of people based on the color of their skin—on their bodies—is an example of how careless or malicious handling of sacred texts can do irreparable harm. Because I am a person of faith who was formed theologically and professes a particular version of Christianity known as Lutheranism, the style of my interpretation informs my belief and my behaviors. Because I believe in a God who creates, liberates, and sustains, I cannot imagine engaging in behaviors, systems, or structures that destroy, oppress, or divide. The ways in which I interpret Scripture flow through a belief in a God of liberation. Even when Scripture is problematic and seems outdated, I have to struggle with it through the lens of a life-giving God.

The Christian Bible in its entirety has been used to justify division, oppression, and the creation of hierarchies within humanity. Whether subjugation of people is based on race, ethnicity, gender, ability, or sexuality, any use of Scripture that dehumanizes and demeans another is problematic. We must interrogate our beliefs

and our behaviors if they do not view every person as a child of God, fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of the Divine. Beliefs that do not affirm this reality are antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we read Scripture in isolation and without clarity about the context, misinterpretation and mal-interpretation are bound to happen. In the words of Martin Luther, the Bible is “the cradle wherein Christ is laid.”⁴ For Lutherans, this means that Scripture holds the Christ-child, and the ways we interpret Scripture cannot be separate and apart from the Word of God in human form—Jesus.

Theologies and perspectives that misinterpret Scripture are responsible for the ways in which this religious tradition has been used to condemn Blackness. Thinking about my ancestors who gathered in Hush Harbors and created space to worship a God of liberation reminds me that the gospel is more powerful than any force of enslavement.⁵ While enslaved and abused people had every reason to turn their backs on this religion, they did not. I believe it was their experience of Blackness—their intrinsic understanding of their worth and their formation in the *imago Dei*, the image of God—that superseded their lived reality. If they could claim Christianity as their own, reimagined in ways that gave life rather than dealing death, then I can trust that the faith of my ancestors is a faith worth believing and keeping.

BELIEFS INFORM BEHAVIORS

When a person or population believes that they are superior, their actions will reflect this belief. They will do things to preserve their superiority. If those beliefs represents the majority population, then systems and structures will be created that maintain their interests. Norms and standards that reflect their lived experience will become *the* norms and standards by which everything and everyone else is judged. They will see things solely through the lens of their lives—their culture, their beliefs, and their bodies. When we talk about

ENDNOTES

- 1 Writers have various preferences regarding how to represent their identity in print. Several authors in this book choose to capitalize Black and Blackness.
- 2 Latin@ is a gender-neutral shorthand for Latino/Latina. Learn more at: <https://www.noodle.com/articles/latin-what-it-means-and-how-to-say-it>.
- 3 Hugh R. Page Jr., *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 73.
- 4 Betsy Karkan, "The Cradle of Christ in Every Home: Reformation Translations of the Bible," *Lutheran Reformation*, October 25, 2017, https://lutheranreformation.org/history/cradle-christ-every-home-reformation-translations-bible/#_ftn1.
- 5 "During antebellum America, a hush harbor (or hush arbor, brush harbor or brush arbor) was a place where slaves would gather in secret to practice religious traditions." "Hush Harbor," Wikipedia, last edited August 17, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hush_harbor.