Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York

The Meaning of White Flesh:
Personhood, Solidarity and Evil as White-Embodied-Being

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by

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<u>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</u>

This thesis paper grows out of many conversations, many of them tense or difficult, many loving, many both; many seemingly dead-ends or wastes of time; conversations at a low simmer or a searing broil. The idea that theological work is done in isolation by a single mind is its own kind of white and male supremacy; in my case the failure to acknowledge, so far as possible, these debts this thesis owes would be its own kind of racialized and gendered theft. Therefore, where specific conversation and persons have helped to shape the argument, they are indicated in footnotes; conscious of the ways in which the labor of person who are women and/or people of color are elided, co-opted, and colonized, I hope to pay them the debt of credit they are owed even when there is not a published or even a written record of the conversation.

There have been particular persons whose encouragement and conversation who have shaped the central argument of this thesis more generally: In particular, I want to thank Casey Donahue, Sadie Lansdale, Keshia Pendigrast, Jorge Juan Rodriguez V, Rosie Russo, Candace Simpson and Elaina Taze Smith, all of whom, in one way or another, encouraged and helped me to first articulate, from a long-simmering gut feeling, the central argument of this thesis. Professor Sarah Azaransky's feedback on the course paper that first tested that argument was very helpful. Most of all, I thank my partner Melissa McCrumb, whose challenges have pushed my thinking and whose daily labor has supported not only the writing of this thesis, but every paper leading up to it, and every Pit and Pub conversation that honed it.

The urgency of the questions I ask here is animated above all by the pressing demands of wondering, how, at this time and in this place, to be a white parent to a white son. He and I share this white flesh. He arrived in a moment at which the violence of my white flesh was for the first time coming into my field of vision. Wanting to do right by him drives my reflection about the meaning of the flesh we share. To Simon, my white son, this thesis is dedicated.

Introduction

My Missing Flesh

Two kinds of contradictions have arisen in my experience that suggest that the white body—the white person in and as a body—is more problematic than I was taught as a child. When we were in elementary school, my mother matter-of-factly announced to my little sister and me that she hoped that each of us would have sex with at least five people before getting married. Otherwise, we wouldn't know what we were doing—and that wouldn't be good for us or our partners. A few years later, growing up in a Unitarian Universalist church, the closest thing we had to catechism class was my participation, as an 8th grader, in a year-long class called AYS (About Your Sexuality). Like its better-known contemporary successor OWL (Our Whole Lives), AYS was a "comprehensive, scientifically accurate, values-based, developmentally appropriate, queer- and trans-inclusive sexuality education curriculum."[1] The point of Unitarian Universalist doctrine that "human bodies, all of them, are good" was at the heart of my early theological formation.[2]

In retrospect, like many teachings of churches, this point was honored mainly in the breach. I remember no active efforts to attach shame to the body, but in most other ways we were creatures of the mind (and occasionally the soul). Our worship was staid, the sermons intellectual, the heroes thinkers and sages. The stories we told rendered the body strange and irrelevant: Christmas was about the coming of someone who would have world-changing ideas, not a fleshly infant. Martin Luther King's bodily presence on earth didn't matter so

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[1] Unitarian Universalist Association, "Our Whole Lives: Lifespan Sexuality Education." http://www.uua.org/re/owl (accessed 3 April, 2017).

[2] This point about the centrality of OWL (and earlier, AYS) to Unitarian Universalist identity and theological formation was emphasized to me by Sadie Lansdale, whose phrase "bodies, all of them, are good," is quoted from the sermon she preached on this subject on 6 February 2017 at the Union Theological Seminary Chapel.

much as his (as we were taught to understand it at the time) intellectual and moral conviction

of white people. On the third Monday in January we would gather to listen to recordings of

King's most famous speeches, piped in through speakers, literally disembodied, a voice from

no vocal cords.

My body was good, then, but not really present. This was the first contradiction; at the

time, though, it didn't seem like one. In AYS we learned about the goodness of our bodies.

What mattered more was the time we spent with goodness of spirit, intellect and will. Whether

this internal goodness was to match the goodness of our bodies, or make us good persons with

neutral bodies, we saw ourselves, either way, in the tradition of the abolitionists, suffragists,

and civil rights activists we claimed as our ancestors. We were supposed to be some of the

"good ones"—the men, the middle-class folks, the white people (and we were almost all

white) who *got it*. Our bodies presented no obstacle.

Second, contradictions of my early theological formation arise from the fact that those

around me—particularly, but not only, black women—report their experiences of bodies like

mine being harmful. A classmate recounts, for example, what it meant for her to be in the

presence of a white man's body—a body like mine—on the bus:

> I couldn't stand to be in closed spaces, couldn't go beyond 96th street or so because there were too many white people. Too many white men to be specific.... One day on the bus a huge white man blocked me in the corner, me with my back to the wall and him facing me, his long hairy arm stretched out. I stared at his hand on the rail, suffocating. My nerves screamed, I tried to recite psalms, still staring at his hand.[3]

A second example: For several days after the 2016 election, there was a

"black/brown/people of color safe space" set up in one of my seminary's classrooms. One

element of making it safe was that unlike chapel, common rooms or classrooms, there were no

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[3] Elaina Taze Smith, "Things Too Terrible to Tell: Song in the Presence of Evil." Paper delivered in class at Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY, 31 October 2016, 6.

white bodies in there. Public events in the space were rescheduled; when my then-16-month-old son rolled his toy car into the safe space, I asked a black friend to go get it so that our white bodies could stay out. If any white person, no matter how woke or well-intentioned, had walked in there, it would have been violence and violation. White bodies, reported the safe space's organizers, can make a space no longer a safe one. Whereas for me, my body was mostly not present, but was good when it was, to them my body was (at least sometimes) all too present and all too harmful. My body was present and not; good and harmful to others. What to make of this confusion?

My estrangement from my own body's experience and my estrangement from the ways my body is implicated with others are, I think, linked. In Chapter 2, I will discuss what I take to be the theological roots of this estrangement, which has implications both for how I relate to my own body and how I, in and as a white body, relate to others. This entire thesis, however, is an initial attempt to render theologically intelligible a body like mine—white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, and middle-class—in a way that rejects its estrangement. In doing so, I interrogate notions of accountability to, and solidarity with, persons who are not socially marked as white. I engage principally with my body considered in its whiteness, but bodies are socially marked in other ways. I recall conversations with my (white) wife, for example, about the ways in which my standing around and pacing, in and as my male body were, despite our loving relationship, inadvertently harbingers of violence. My purpose in focusing on the social marks of race, and the way that they affect the interpretation of embodied persons, is to use the social marks of race as a hermeneutical entry point that might be extended, in the future, to other kinds of social marks.

This means confronting a present reality—the way in which white bodies are implicated in violence—that has roots in the long history of white supremacy. That history has shaped the social context in which I interpret the meaning of bodies like mine. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I am not interested in how it came to be true that my friend experiences the white hairy arm in this way, or that my classmates saw a need for a space free of white bodies. That would be a genealogical, historical, sociological or psychological project. I am interested, rather, in what it *means* for Christian theology, and thus for the kinds of Christian action possible for white-embodied-selves like me, *that* this is true. By asking "what it means for Christian theology," I mean that I am operating in a Christian confessional mode.[4] I am not asking whether Jesus Christ is and comes from God and in some sense saves us. Here, too, I am seeking to understand what it means *that* this is the case. Thus I have two principal theological sources in dialogue: first, these contradictions, which manifest in myriad ways; and second, my vivid experience of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ of God, one who heals and saves.

My friends' and colleagues' descriptions of the harms that come to them as a result of bodies like mine give me a strong intuitive sense that discourse about my body must be related in some way to discourse about *evil*. Their experiences of harm raise questions of theodicy. Ivone Gebara has an accounting of evil rooted in the kinds of harms my friends are experiencing. Therefore, in Chapter One, I begin with Gebara's understanding of evil as being

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[4] Scholars who have interrogated the category of "religion" provide useful reminders that "Christian" and "Christian theology" are not categories whose boundaries are easily drawn. John Thatamanil suggests that "those traditions that we have come to think of as religions house a variety of interpretative schemes and therapeutic regimes that are created by selective improvisation which draws upon a shared repertoire of rituals, myths, symbols, narratives of various sorts, and scriptures" (John Thatamanil, "Defining the Religious: Comprehensive Qualitative Orientation," in his upcoming book, tentatively titled *Circling the Elephant: Constructive Theology Through Religious Diversity*, p. 101). What I mean is simply that I am speaking "within the family" of those for whom the *person* of Jesus Christ is a central site of religious authority.

present "in the daily run of what is harmful to actual persons"[5] and identify the need for a critical principle that can distinguish between "harms" that are *evils* and those that, while subjectively unpleasant, are side effects of God's intention for the redemption of the oppressed and therefore should not be regarded theologically as "evil."

In Chapter Two, I argue that such a principle is provided by Shawn Copeland's articulation of the theological significance of the embodied-being-in-the-world known as Jesus of Nazareth. I argue that the rejection of body–spirit/soul/psyche/mind dualism and person–world dualism, legitimized in Christian discourse by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and expressed in Copeland's nondualistic category of "black-embodied-being-in-the-world," makes it necessary to understand white embodiment through a parallel category of "white-embodied-being-in-the-world." This category presents a more useful alternative to other terms (such as "whiteness") often used to characterize the "problem of white people."

In Chapter Three, I suggest that ethical response by white-embodied-being-in-the-world must be rooted in the particularity of white persons' implication in incidents of subjugation. Noting that some of those subjugations involve harm from white bodies simply by virtue of their presence, in the form of triggering, hauntings and trauma, I will argue that Copeland's understanding of black embodied experience can be extended in order to construct a theological anthropology that does take white embodied harm seriously. Only when white people refuse to distance ourselves from the ways in which our bodies are wrapped up in "the daily run of what is harmful to actual persons" can we begin to imagine credible possibilities for bodily solidarity.

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[5] Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 138.

In Chapter Four I take on the question of whether such solidarity is possible. I examine three responses: Jennifer Harvey's response rooted in the commands of Jesus, a dialectical response modeled on Irving Greenberg's response to the Holocaust, and an erotic response derived from Copeland and Audre Lorde. Weighing the strengths and weaknesses of each, I propose an erotic, dialectical solidarity as ethical response from white-embodied-being-in-the-world.

Chapter 1

The Location of Evil

Ivone Gebara undertakes a "phenomenological approach" to locating evil, which identifies evil *as it is experienced*, particularly by women.[6] Thus, the evils that Gebara identifies in the lives of the women whose stories she recounts include confronting material poverty, being left the care of the dead and dying, facing children's sickness and death, resorting to selling sex in order to live, and living in a domestic sphere which is a location of both physical and psychic destruction.[7] Evil is experienced as multiple.

Characterizing evil in its everyday multiplicity is not only faithful to these reports of women's experience, but is also vital to understanding their contexts and interrelationships— and ultimately ending them.

> [The] first thing to say is that "bad" does not exist, but rather "bad things." Putting evil in the plural gives it empirical and historical substance and recognizes the many contextual ways that it expresses itself—cultural, corporal, sexual. When we speak of evils, we place evil in a particular situation, in a time, a culture, a religion, a sex, a difference. This means abandoning a generic discourse about evil and entering into the daily run of what is harmful to actual persons.[8]

This is evil not as a devil or adversary, nor as a straightforward and comfortingly bureaucratic list of broken rules, but *subjective* and *sensual*. Evils are in sweat and tears; blood and pus; aches and pinches, *within* the created order. They are present in longings unfulfilled and dreams denied.

Yet we must ask, in two senses, which phenomenological experiences *count*. First,

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[6] Ibid., 14.

[7] Ibid., 18-21. With these example, Gebara reframes somewhat the distinction between natural and social evils. Death, disaster, and illness are natural evils to which all human life is subject, but it is a social evil that the burden of them falls disproportionately on women, so these evils are experienced by women as having elements of both.

[8] Ibid., 138.

which ones are "real," and therefore require theological analysis? Christian theologians have

long agreed that the harm of death or war requires a theological accounting. Does the harm

caused by a nightmare? Does a dream, ghost or vision confront us with a theological problem?

Is a phantom or a novel theological "data"? Second, should all of these experiences of harm be

regarded theologically as "evil"? If not, how do we decide? If so, how do we reckon with the

contradictions that entails?

What counts as harm?

Because white bodies are implicated in interactions with black bodies, in order to talk

about the theological meaning of white bodies we must understand some of the particular ways

in which this has been the case. With these harms as concrete examples, I can point out where

white epistemology has drawn the boundary of what must be explained theologically, and

purposefully include a fuller range of phenomenological experience in my own account.

During legal slavery in the United States, enslaved persons were rendered legally as

property, not persons. Shawn Copeland cites one enslaved person, Katie Rowe, who recalled

that "enslaved women (and men) were handled and inspected like cattle: 'De white men come

up and look in de slave's mouth jess lak he was a mule or a hoss.'"[9] Like a mule or horse, the

slave was valued in large part because of the agricultural productive capacity her or his labor

provided, which was then appropriated by the slave owner. Slaves could be bought and sold

away from their families and made the objects of sexual violence. One first-person account is

of the consequences one enslaved person suffered for resisting sexual assault by an overseer:

> [He] use to tie mother up in the barn wid a rope aroun' her arms up over her head, while she
> stood on a block. Soon as dey got her ties, dis block was moved an' her feet dangled, you

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[9] Copeland, M. Shawn, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 31, quoting James Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember, An Oral History* (New York, NY: Avon, 1988), 28.

know, couldn't tech de flo'. Dis ole man, now he would start beatin' her nekked 'til the blood run down her back to her heels.[10]

Copeland writes of even the enslaved woman herself being "subdivided" into parts that were useful to the slave owner: parts for profit, parts for pleasure, parts for procreation (and thus more profit and pleasure for the slave owner).[11] The profit was substantial: In November 2000, *Harper's Magazine* estimated that in 2000 dollars it would require $97 trillion to pay for the hours of uncompensated work done during the slavery era.[12] For my present purposes, I want to emphasize the degree to which these economic harms are not simple questions of production and consumption, but *bodily*: lost opportunity for bodily safety, food security, shelter, medical care, and other bodily goods that were rendered impossible for millions because the resources to acquire them were stolen. The loss of financial resources was an increased possibility of bodily harm.

Copeland's focus is on the harms inflicted during the U.S. slave period (1619–1865). After the end of this period and particularly after the end of Reconstruction (1865–1877), many of these embodied subjugations continued in transfigured forms. Black people still lived and labored under the perpetual threat, and frequent reality, of violence, including sexual violence and lynchings.[13]

All of these kinds of harms have been regarded as theological "data"—though not always consistently. There are other harms, however, which fall outside a scientific, Enlightenment conception of "the real," but nonetheless are theologically significant. The

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[10] Ibid., 35.

[11] Ibid., 38.

[12] Jack Hitt, ed., "Making a Case for Racial Reparations: Does America owe a debt to the descendants of its slaves?" *Harper's Magazine* (November 2000), 42.

[13] On sexual violence, see, e.g., Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010). On lynching, see, e.g., James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

Enlightenment epistemology that identifies truth and fact as co-extensive renders such experiences unintelligible. Because they cannot be established as scientifically factual, only experientially true, they do not count as data. However, as truthful recountings of the phenomenological experiences of black persons, I think white persons should interpret them as relevant and true. We should presumptively consider these experiences of hauntings and triggering as theological data, experiences in need of theological interpretation. This is particularly true given the degree to which this Enlightenment epistemology which would disqualify them operates, in this case, in service of white innocence. Instead, I follow Emilie Townes in valuing the truth of the matter over the fact of the matter.[14]

For example, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the apparent return of the child that Sethe had killed rather than allow her to be taken to slavery in Kentucky, is part of a cascading series of events—violence, apparitions—proceeding from the presence and actions of white bodies, especially the one known as "schoolteacher."[15] She is a living, bodily reappearance of a trauma. This particular account is fictionalized, not fiction: As Toni Morrison recounts in the foreword to the 2004 edition of *Beloved*, the novel was written after Morrison recalled the story of Margaret Garner, "a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner's plantation."[16] The theological importance of *Beloved*, however, does not hinge on its basis in a factual historical event, but in the truthfulness of the story it tells.

A final set of harms inflicted on black persons are experiences like the ones I recounted at the beginning of this paper, experiences of triggering and haunting, that white persons

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[14] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2006), 12.

[15] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2004), beginning on 60.

[16] Ibid., xvii.

precipitate, at least sometimes. Without exercising any kind of agency, intentionality or will, the man with the hairy arm or the white invader of the safe space can call forth ghosts and apparitions which black persons may experience as real harm. More radically, we can reflect on the harmfulness of white bodies even in situations where the agency of white persons is impossible. For example, U.S. military violence around the world has resulted in a circumstance in which the white body in the street of a distant city can awaken fear—uniquely among bodies, most of which, not being white, are simply bodies without the same kind of meaning. The white body in the street—the dead body, doing nothing but being present—can portend violence, which is its own kid of harm. Or there is the white baby in a stroller in Bed-Stuy, whose presence, marked as it is by its social connection to gentrification and police violence, frightens and traumatizes.[17] These are not harms caused by the agency or actions of white persons; they are harms caused at least in part simply by white bodies. In the social context that marks them as white, these bodies have at least a symbolic—but nonetheless very real—power to harm. As with fictional and fictionalized accounts like *Beloved*, I do not deny that these triggerings and hauntings might be explainable in historical, sociological or psychological terms. But I do reject the idea that such explanations are of any help in interpreting them theologically.

What Harms Count?

Liberation theologians can appreciate the phenomenological approach for putting lived experience at the center of the conversation. James Cone has described the process he undertook post-*Black Theology of Liberation* to root black theology in the experience, art, and

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[17] For this example I am indebted to my conversations with Candace Simpson, who knows well the phenomenon of white gentrifier baby in Bed-Stuy.

categories of black people, rather than a conceptual structure of European neo-orthodox theologians.[18] Certainly abstract categories of "evil" have been used, and continue to be used, to disparage and dismiss the lived experience of poor and oppressed people, and Christian theology—including some forms of liberation theology, to the extent that they ignore the concerns of women, queer people, or others—has been complicit in this.[19] The most famous invocation of "evil" in my lifetime, the notion of evil at work in George W. Bush's "axis of evil" is like this, for example, beginning with a category of evil rather than a phenomenological experience. This allows for violence to be committed, in this case by the armed forces of the United States, that need have no accountability to the phenomenological experiences of harm that Iraqis and others have. Instead of a universalizing, ontologizing category of evil, we should speak about the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime by accounting for the harms-in-their-context.

Here Gebara has an implicit critique of black and Latin American liberation theologians, who she understands to be beginning with "idealist" categories referring to the subjugated rather than the "concrete data" of the experiences of persons. These theologians' analysis of evil depends on immanent experience in the sense that solidarity is exercised and liberation attained in the created order. But liberation theologians, both black and Latin American, *begin* with a transcendent category for suffering—alternatively referred to as "the poor, "the oppressed," "black,"—or a transcendent category for salvation such as, most famously, "liberation." By rejecting these idealistic categories, Gebara is working to avoid the

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[18] James Cone, "Preface" to the 1986 edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), xviii–xix.

[19] For an analysis of some of the specific symbols and tropes deployed in the subjugation of black women, see Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil.*

ways in which even the framing of these categories is dependent on a discourse (and the power

relations thereof) that is a creation of the very powers who are responsible for the harms.

Yet it's not clear whether or on what basis Gebara prioritizes the experiences *of the*

oppressed, specifically. Yes, her focus is on women's experience; but she does not articulate

that this is, or should be, a prioritized starting point for theological reflection. Her emphasis on

women's experience is offered as a corrective to men's domination of discourse about evil.

And among women, who like any group, have differing levels of privilege and power, it's not

clear whether or on what grounds Gebara might choose to prioritize the experiences of women

who experience multiple compounding marginalizations.

It is also not clear on what basis Gebara can understand these experiences theologically

as *evil*. Certainly they can be understood as harmful, or phenomenological painful, simply on

the laudable basis of taking the people who experience them at their word. For "evil" to be a

useful category at all, however, and not simply a synonym for "painful," there needs to be a

way of deciding which harms are "evil" which are not. I take seriously Gebara's caution that

evil is multiple. But I do not believe that we can, on that basis, accept that a particular act is

both evil and not. Take, for example, God's promises as expressed in the Song of Mary, the

mother of Jesus. To begin, she identifies God by one of God's principal names, as savior: "My

soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior…."[20] In the rest of the song,

she identifies some of the things it means for God to be savior, including that:

> God has shown strength with God's arm;
> God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
> God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
> and lifted up the lowly;
> God has filled the hungry with good things,
> and sent the rich away empty.[21]

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[20] Luke 1:46b-47 (NRSV).
[21] Luke 1:51-53 (NRSV).

The powerful and the rich are likely, I think, to experience being tumbled from their thrones and being sent away empty as exceedingly unpleasant. But the Song of Mary suggests that this is an insufficient basis on which to identify these events as *evil*; on the contrary, it insists that we identify them as "good," that is, of God. So on what basis do we tell the difference between the harms that are theologically "evil" and those that are merely phenomenologically unpleasant? This is why liberation theologians use "transcendent categories." Without these categories, there is no way for God to say "no" to the horrors inflicted on the oppressed as a result of their social marks—not even the horror of the crucifixion.

Chapter 2

Revelation Enfleshed

The highly immanent, non-essentialising, perspectival approach to evil that Gebara

develops in dialogue with feminist thinkers does not have within it an obvious means of

condemning as evil the harms experienced by the lowly rather than those experienced by the

powerful. In this chapter I argue, following Shawn Copeland, that the embodied person Jesus

of Nazareth can provide a measure or standard by which some experiences of harm can be

identified as "evils."

For Copeland, in *Enfleshing Freedom*, Jesus Christ is the norm for theological

anthropology. Jesus' embodied being and embodied subjugation are the model for beginning

Christian theological reflection with particular human bodies as they are socially situated and

subjugated. She writes,

> [A]ny formula of theological anthropology that takes body and body marks seriously risks
> absolutizing or fetishizing what can be seen (race and sex), constructed (gender), represented
> (sexuality), expressed (culture), and regulated (social order). Moreover, such attention to
> concrete and specific, nonetheless accidental, characteristics, also risks "fragmenting" the
> human being. But what makes such risk imperative is the location and condition of bodies in
> empire; what makes such risk obligatory is that the body of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made
> flesh, was subjugated in empire.[22]

This formulation of Copeland's helps us to understand more precisely how it may be

that Jesus Christ is one who saves: by pointing those who follow him to the suffering bodies

under the boot of empire. To the extent that Jesus Christ is pattern and norm for human beings,

in whose image human beings are and should be, we can understand human beings principally,

perhaps only, in their suffering and "markedness" (the way they are socially designated as

raced, sexed, and so on). Further, in order to understand a *particular* human being—and to

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[22] Copeland, 56-7.

develop ethics and norms that may apply in a given case—we must take the marked, suffering body as the starting point.

Beginning theological reflection in the body rather than in a category referring to the subjugated is justified by the Incarnation and makes possible a specificity of reflection on how human beings might respond to suffering while avoiding ontologizing categories such as "the poor," "the oppressed," or "blackness." The intentional remembering of the marked, suffering body is the starting point for reflection on the Christian solidarity of my white-embodied self.

Unmasking Enlightenment Dualisms

Jesus Christ's embodied subjugation is the theological ground for Copeland's hermeneutic privilege of "black-embodied-being-in-the-world," which is designed to seek revelation specifically in the embodied experiences of black people, especially black women in a U.S. context.[23] This category is also is meant to avoid at least two kinds of dualism.[24] First, by referring to "embodied being," Copeland endeavors to avoid a dualism of body and spirit/soul/psyche/mind: "The body is no mere object—*already-out-there-now*—with which we are confronted: always the body is with us, inseparable from us, *is* us."[25] Second, by referring to "being-in-the-world," Copeland challenges another dualism, this time between an individual human person and the surrounding world. The inclusion of "black" as a hyphenated term rather than an adjectival modifier recognizes, I think, the deep relationship between the social marks of "black" and the "being itself."[26] The relationship between the "person" and the

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[23] Ibid., 25.

[24] Throughout, when I refer to "dualism," I take this dualism to be ontological and not simply analytic, that this dualistic terminology reveals a dualistic conception of reality itself and not simply a convenient way of talking about differences within a nondual reality. There might be practical reasons to talk about "persons" and "social systems," for example, even if we do not take them to ontologically distinct.

[25] Copeland, 7.

[26] That is, Copeland uses *black-embodied-being-in-the-world*, not black *embodied-being-in-the-world*.

"systems" that give a person social marks like "black" (or "white") is left—I think

deliberately—open. I will return to this relationship between the "systemic" and the "personal"

in Chapter 3; for now, the point is to note that "black" is no mere modifier, but included within

the capacious notion of personhood that Copeland employs.

The Enlightenment vision of the human being emphasized "the person," the "human

subject" or other similarly universalizing categories. It is not possible in this paper to

undertake a detailed history or analysis of this view of the human being; for our purposes, it is

sufficient to emphasize that the Enlightenment paradigm is dualistic in both of the senses that

Copeland intends to avoid. First, it entails a dualism between the body, on the one hand, and

the spirit, soul, psyche or mind on the other. The bodies of these Enlightenment subjects are,

supposedly, neutral.[27] Though persons may be socially marked as raced, sexed, classed, and so

on, personhood *per se* is not seated in the body that is thus marked. The problem with the huge

white man on the bus is only his behavior and not his bodily presence, which means nothing in

itself. Second, it entails a dualism between a particular human subject and the world around

them. Political and economic liberalism, in particular, emphasizes this latter dualism: without

it, acts such as voting and participation in markets lose their coherence, since both depend on

the free decisions of rational, monadic agents.

In principle any human person, because they are "separate," in some sense, from their

body, can have moral worth. In practice, however, the rootedness of this vision of human

beings in specifically white, male, bourgeois European norms means that those who are not

those things can never be fully worthy human persons in reality. The Enlightenment ideal of

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[27] Copeland rightly notes that the Enlightenment, while inscribing a particularly robust form of this anthropology, is not its point of origin. She suggests that the Enlightenment view is a child of *somatophobia*, fear of flesh, rooted in "the distortions of Neoplatonism, with its tendency to idealism, suspicion of ambiguity and discomfort with matter, *and* Pauline and Augustinian warnings about the flesh and its pleasures" (Copeland, 24).

the human person serves as "camouflage" for the elevation of the "the white, male, bourgeois European subject."[28] We may understand the Enlightenment person, in other words, as a result of ontologizing whiteness (and maleness, middle-classness, and Europeanness) in a way that "failed theology's vital task of abstraction: grappling with concrete data to discern, understand, and evaluate their emerging patterns in order to interpret their meaning."[29]

Since the Enlightenment, the white, male, bourgeois, European self has become the normative kind of self. Persons who are not all of those things therefore can never, by virtue of their bodies, attain the normative kind of selfhood. But because this "self" is articulated under a pretense of universalism and moral neutrality, even white, male, bourgeois, European(-descended) selves like mine have become unintelligible in our particularity *as bodies*. That is to say, the conflation of a body like mine with a universal ideal (and the two kinds of Enlightenment dualisms that go with it) has meant that a neutrality is imposed on my body that does not reflect its true partiality and relatedness to specific places, times, events, and other bodies. According to this view, my "self"—my agency, my intentionality, my will—can be partial and related in these ways. But to the extent that I conform to the Enlightenment ideal of a person, my body is, in some sense, no body at all. A body, as a physical thing, is always partial and related, but the on the Enlightenment view this is not relevant to my personhood. My friend's experience on the bus is data that confounds this abstraction of the universal human subject. This subject, the possessor of the white hairy arm, invoked generations of trauma and caused renewed harm to my friend without exercising any kind of agency, intentionality, or will. Taking my friend's experience at her word, there was something about

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[28] Ibid., 86.
[29] Ibid., 86.

the particularity of this white human being that needs a theological explanation; it insists that a body like mine *is* a body, and needs theological accounting for.

The unintelligibility of white bodies does not mean that white bodies are therefore subject to the same kinds or degree of violence as other bodies. This is empirically not true and morally myopic to suggest. Rather, my hope is to interpret *white-embodied-being-in-the-world*—a parallel category to Copeland's, but one that assumes neither that the white body can be rendered intelligible in the same way nor that the obligations that intelligibility imposes will be similar.

Beginning theological reflection in my own body returns a strange kind of data. For the most part, I do not experience it as victim, as Jesus does on the cross or as the subjugated do. But neither do I experience it as triumphant. I experience my body not even as a vivid mystery, not an overflowing void, but a flatness, like dough that doesn't rise. My body is merely a fact of the matter. I have a sense of my body as estranged, from myself and others, in ways that leave my body out of the processes of my soul/spirit/psyche/mind. My emotions are dulled by the bodily inability of my abdomen to heave with grief; spiritual intimacies are unavailable to me because my body will not fall out in the Spirit; even ecstasies of sex are marked by a tentativeness of touch. My body's unintelligibility is not just conceptual but also viscerally experienced. This is subjective experience to be sure, but like the experiences others have of my body, their own bodily experiences of triggering and harm, it's theological data. The Enlightenment account isolates my body from violence as well as from joy, and imposes unintelligibility on a white body like mine.

Revelation in the Body

The body is the primordial sacrament, the first and principal sign that God loves us.

The sort of environment in which I was raised, in which the "goodness" of the body was

affirmed (if not always consistently), is importantly correct: The body is in fact a sign of God's

goodness with which we are made and for which we are destined. This was expressed

doctrinally (the assertion that "bodies, all of them, are good") and ethically (no one cared if we

had sex or masturbated or danced: bodily pleasure was good). Smoking and drinking weren't

sinful because they represented gluttony or an absence of self-control; they were sinful

because they were bad for our bodies. More recently, this positive orientation toward the body

has been reflected in conversation around differently abled bodies and the ways in which those

bodies, too, are good.[30]

Yet this account is challenged by the experiences of those for whom bodily life is

traumatic, violent, painful, harmful, or otherwise negative. How is it, exactly, that bodies are a

sign of God's love if bodies are also the site of harm? How is it, exactly, that bodies are a sign

of God's love if bodies are also the medium through which violence is committed? In order to

answer these questions, it is not sufficient to affirm that "bodies, all of them, are good." We

need also to ask what *form* that goodness takes, to interpret it theologically. Otherwise, at best,

we are taking it on faith that bodies are good; are worst we are insisting that the bodily

experience of harm (or of harming) that so many have must be affirmed theologically as good

(implicated as it is in the body). If you cannot see as "good" the violation of your body, this

view insists, the problem is *you*. The "goodness" of my own white body amounts in practice to

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[30] For a narrative describing this trend, see, e.g., Elaine McArdle, "Changing ideas about disabilities," *UU World Magazine*. http://www.uuworld.org/articles/changing-ideas-about-disabilities (accessed 5 April 2017). For resources that demonstrate the increased attention given to this issue, see, e.g., the resources at http://www.uua.org/topics/disability-accessibility.

sanction for me to wield it as I will. And even when I am not committing acts of obvious harm,

I wield it carelessly, since my body is not something I can really feel or understand.

Confronting this problem is the embodied-being-in-the-world, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus,

too, as the canonical scriptures and tradition affirm, was tortured and executed. The tradition

goes out of its way to affirm that the torture, execution, and resurrection of Jesus happened to

Jesus in and as a body. Yet in Jesus, there is also an alternative account for the goodness of

body-persons, a norm to render our theological account of the body's goodness more robust:

Jesus' dual role as revealer and revelation, the one who brings God *and* is God to human

beings, makes Jesus the source of our knowledge about evil. In Barthian terms—which I find

helpful on this point—Jesus Christ is both the *way* in which God reveals Godself to human

beings and is *the substance of* the revelation. God reveals Godself both *in* and *as* Jesus—*in* and

as this embodied-being-in-the-world. That revelation, a free act of love on God's part, comes

always with both judgment and mercy; judgment-inside-mercy; mercy-inside-judgment. Thus

Jesus, the embodied-being in-the-world—"subjugated in empire"—is a revelation of both

judgment and mercy: judgment on suffering, mercy for the sufferer. [31] That is to say, wherever

Jesus is, there is God's saving mercy present with God's saving judgment; what is evil is evil

because it is evil in relation to Jesus, not to any other standard. The embodied subjugations of

empire are, in Jesus, condemned.

The fact that Jesus (in and as a body) is a norm and pattern for human beings unveils

the revelatory power of all human bodies. But this power should not be understood to be a

univocal affirmation of every bodily experience. Revelation is a complex of mercy and

judgment; we should understand the revelations in our own human bodies as likewise always

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[31] Copeland, 57.

both. Our bodies are always already implicated in empire.[32] To that extent they are both

censuring of empire and subject to censure because of that implication. Our bodies are always

already implicated in mercy and salvation—from harming and being harmed in and by

empire—and to that extent subject to mercy. Both of these are the goodness of our bodies. In

the flesh of Jesus—and therefore, all human flesh—is revelation, God-with-us, in our very

flesh.

The Scandal of White Bodies

Copeland's account of black embodied experience at the hands of white people

understandably emphasizes the harm itself and the person harmed. But it is notable that her

account (or the first-person accounts she chooses to quote) of how the harm comes to be

inflicted suggests a lingering dualism between the person and the social systems they inhabit.

In some instances, particularly in the first-person accounts, the presence of white bodies acting

toward (usually *against*) black bodies is emphasized: "Hill [the overseer] used to whip me and

the other [slaves] if we don't jump quick enough when he holler and... [he] whip us 'til we

bleed. Sometime he take salt and run on the [slave] so he smart and burn and suffer misery."[33]

At other times, though, more distance is implied between the act of harming and the person

who commits the harm. Sometimes this is rendered using the passive voice: For example, she

writes that "the bodies of enslaved women (and men) *were torn open*, lacerated, and punctured

at the whim or rage of sadistic power"—eliding the fact that those bodies were torn open,

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[32] "Empire," should, I think, be broadly understood. It refers to the powers of political, economic, and social subjugation, but also the natural "powers" that cause phenomenological harm, and finally to the power of death itself.

[33] Copeland, 114, quoting the Works Progress Administration narrative of a formerly enslaved person, Richard Carruthers, in Norman R. Yetman, *Voices from Slavery* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 53.

lacerated, and punctured specifically by other bodies, by white fleshy hands.[34] At other times, though less frequently, categories emphasizing systemic violence are used:

> *Slavery* thrived on the body of the black woman, which became the site in which the planter's economic desire intersected with black female sex, sexuality and reproductive capacity...[35]
>
> *Slavocracy* attempted not only to prevent enslaved people from thinking about freedom but also to check their freedom of thinking....[36]
>
> Men, from whom *slavocracy* had usurped the right to defend and protect their wives and children....[37]

Yet it's not "slavocracy" alone that does this, even if it is slavocracy that renders it possible, sustains it ideologically, and gives it a particular historical shape. For any given incident of violence, it is also the case that a (white) person did it to another (black) person, flesh to flesh.

Again, this is no indictment of Copeland. Her focus is understandably on the embodied-experience-in-the-world of black people, especially black women, and not that of white persons who were the culprits. Copeland's purpose is to understand theological anthropology through the hermeneutic of black-embodied-being-in-the-world, and so this (usually white) aspect of harm (the harmer) may be of no interest. For those of us, however, whose bodies and selves confront us with a need to understand the way our own embodied selves are situated relative to other bodies, the lingering dualism revealed by this imprecision of language only makes the unintelligibility of white-embodied-being-in-the-world more severe. Even more problematic, it continues to permit a degree of removal away from bodily accountability for racial violence.

This pattern of invoking bodily harm to black bodies but not the embodied character of the harmer—that is, this pattern of dualism—is found in other discussions as well, including

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[34] Ibid., 114; emphasis mine.
[35] Ibid., 33; emphasis mine.
[36] Ibid., 41; emphasis mine.
[37] Ibid., 52; emphasis mine.

those specifically focused (as Copeland's is not) on "whiteness." Jennifer Harvey, a white

Christian woman, makes an effort in *Whiteness and Morality* to understand the "moral crisis of

being white."[38] She articulates clearly the implicatedness of white persons in the social and

political structures of supremacy, and the internal contradiction of white people who need to

both understand that they are inescapably white and also actively reject much of what

"whiteness" urges them to.

> We can only begin to step into anything like a non-superior/evasive/guilt-ridden terrain as we embody active resistance to whiteness. Yet we must do so *only* as white racial selves, refusing to disassociate from the realities of our racial particularity, even with all the injustice this racial particularity signifies and manifests. We must, in other words, find ways to acknowledge that we "are white" while refusing at every turn to be white.[39]

For Harvey, the fact that this is a seeming impossibility exposes the larger contradictions of

the current sociohistorical and political context. Harvey is preoccupied with the social,

political, and historical dimensions of whiteness, with the processes that form and

continuously re-form "white racial selves." Harvey is attentive to the historical materiality of

white racial identity formation but not to the materiality of bodies which are always already

socially rendered as white. She criticizes other scholars for overlooking the "ongoing and real

socio-psychological dimensions of racial constitution, which render a critical lack of self-

awareness likely to reproduce white supremacist behaviors, gestures, and postures in the

process of trying to act against the social-political category."[40] But if we take the

implicatedness of white bodies seriously—that is, if we agree with Harvey that white body-

selves are always already marked as white, with all the harmfulness that comes with—then no

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[38] Jennifer Harvey, *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 19. "Whiteness" is Harvey's category. Obviously, I prefer categories that abstract less from the bodily nature of the problem of white persons.

[39] Ibid., 47.

[40] Ibid., 47.

amount of self-awareness seems able to address the problem. Like Copeland, Harvey rejects

dualism explicitly. She writes about "body-selves" as a holistic category of personhood.[41] But

she implicitly accepts dualism by repeated invocation of the problem in terms of white

identity, which is "formed" and "re-formed," presumably on an underlying substratum of the

body.[42] She thus is not able to address the ways in which the "moral crisis of being white"

lives in white-embodied-being-in-the-world and not simply in "identity." This implicit dualism

between spirit/soul/psyche/mind and the white body leads her, like Copeland, to overestimate

the possibility for ethically positive kinds of white presence.

By invoking "whiteness," I take it that Harvey (and others) are seeking to remove the

camouflage from the supposedly universal white, male, bourgeois Enlightenment subject and

expose its particularity. The category of "whiteness," however, does not accomplish this goal,

since it allows a distancing of "whiteness" from the "person-themselves," on the grounds

either that this whiteness is present systemically, not personally (person–world dualism), or

that the person herself can be subdivided (spirit/soul/psyche/mind–body dualism). A dualism

remains either way. For both Copeland and Harvey, the Enlightenment person is still implicitly

salvific, in the sense that white persons, like all persons, are meant to aspire to the

Enlightenment self, to a state in which their body makes no difference. The point of distancing

oneself from one's whiteness is to salvage the "person" underneath. Real particularity in any

body is a scandal to the Enlightenment self.

At moments when the moral scandal of white bodily particularity is especially visible,

that is, at moments when the potential harmfulness of our bodies becomes more obvious (if not

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[41] Ibid., 34.
[42] Ibid., 34.

fully articulable), we as white people make efforts to baptize ourselves out of the particularity and scandal of our own white bodies back into an Enlightenment self, into a body universal and morally neutral. Thus, when white people don safety pins after the election of Donald Trump, intending to signal their solidarity with Muslims and people of color, it can be understood as an attempt at a sacrament, an outward sign of some inner grace by which, we hope, our particular, scandalous bodies might instead be interpreted in terms of our "real," non-bodily selves.[43] When it comes to white people, there is a tendency to slip away from the revelatory character of bodily experience. I suspect this is because of the condemnation it exposes.

That white bodies are implicated in interactions with black bodies is obvious; this is part of what we mean when we talk about white- and black-embodied-being-*in-the-world*. And yet this is not necessarily our usual mode of talking. These usual terms—"whiteness," "white supremacy," "white identity/subjectivity/agency"—simply do not cover the field of what is going on when we seek to understand and tackle the "problem of white people." Indeed, beyond simply having limited usefulness, these terms may be pernicious in that they keep the bodies of white people obscure, abstract, or distant, allowing the problem of white people a safe place to hide behind safer disembodied notions of whiteness, white supremacy, and white subjectivity. At the moment we are caught in a harm, we can say, "it's not me," touching our own bodies in indignant innocence. "It's *whiteness at work*.". None of those terms can account for the experience that some people (in this case black women) have of my body, at least some of the time, as inherently harmful. I suspect that to resist the fleshly character of white

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[43] On the phenomenon of safety pins as a signal of solidarity, see, e.g., Valeriya Safronova, "Safety Pins Show Support for the Vulnerable." New York Times, November 14, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/14/fashion/safety-pin-ally-activism.html (accessed 5 April 2017).

complicity while emphasizing the fleshly character of black suffering is itself the white-embodied-being protecting its innocence, estranging itself from the world and from its body in order to avoid responsibility for the harms caused by flesh socially marked as white.

The point is not to flatten black experience into suffering alone: Copeland also enters into a discussion of the ways in which salvation and freedom are also embodied-experiences-in-the-world of black women. Other writers emphasize the bodily joys of black life: black community, black religion, black song, and black love, to name just a few. The point here is not to oversimplify black experience, but to emphasize interactions specifically with white people and their reverberating consequences as a way to better understand the theological meaning of white bodies. Nor is it to say that the harms of slavery, Jim Crow, or the present day were or are *only* bodily—these harms also caused psychological, spiritual, metaphysical, moral and other kinds of harm. Rather, Copeland's focus on bodily harms emphasizes, first, that these harms implicated the body and therefore the self; second, that particular bodily harms are theologically significant; and third, that speaking of harms to the body *as opposed to* harms of the spirit/soul/psyche/mind can inscribe a dualism, which Copeland wishes to avoid, between the bodily and non-bodily aspects of personhood.

To take embodied experience seriously as a site of divine revelation means that the whole embodied person is subject at every moment to God's grace in the form of both mercy and condemnation. When bodies are subject to harm, or implicated in harming others, what is involved is not the will or subjectivity only, nor only the body, but the entire person, the embodied-being-in-the-world. White straight cisgender men have bodies and are bodies, too. So what claims do bodies make on each other? And, if we are serious about attacking the white racial innocence that dualism allows: What claims do *persons*, who are *always bodies*, make

on each other? To explore what this means for the moral interpretation of bodies, particularly

bodies which are socially marked as white in a U.S. context, is the purpose of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

The Claims Bodies Make

As embodied-being-in-the-world, we all share the world with each other. But how and to what purposes? What about human persons is determined and shaped by this sharing? How does world-sharing put us in contact with one another? Ivone Gebara and Shawn Copeland each offer an account of this world-sharing, which I explore in this chapter in order to move closer to an account of what it means to be white-embodied-being-in-the-world. To take the experiences of black women seriously as theological sources points to the fact that white flesh does harm sometimes without really "doing" anything at all, and calls into question whether the problem really lies in the intentions or actions of white persons, or in something deeper and more inescapable, something in our flesh.

Gebara's category of "relatedness as a condition for life"[44] describes both an empirical reality and a theological/ethical norm; crucially, it has "ethical dimension in addition to vital/biological dimensions—what we call good or evil is also involved in this relatedness."[45] For Gebara, a Catholic theologian in a natural-law tradition, norms emerge from the purposes and nature of what things truly are. To the extent that religious symbols and language promote hierarchy or domination, Gebara advocates replacing them with "symbols of relatedness," which "invite us to see a quite different organization of the universe and lead us to a different understanding of human beings."[46] Such an understanding leads to an ethical norm of "mutuality," since these religious symbols, in more accurately characterizing the

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[44] Gebara, 132.

[45] Ibid., 134.

[46] Ibid., 134.

interdependence that is both our reality and our divinely given destiny, encourage us to act in accord with that reality.[47]

> To love the other as oneself has to be understood in concrete situations in which each individual, whether among community, friend, family or work associates, is ethically obliged to place himself or herself within the skin of the other. A mutuality takes hold and transcends any principle of judgment deriving from already established dogmatic laws. We have to construct among different groups provisional agreements, always capable of revision....[48]

This seems to accurately characterize an important present reality of interdependence, attested not only by the work of the natural sciences but also by the human experience of grace at work in human beings' relationship to one another. It also faithfully describes, and relates to that present reality, a longstanding Christian hope of community, attested since at least the Acts of the Apostles.

Yet this approach risks losing track of the differing ways in which particular persons are situated relative to social marks and interactions of subjugation. I simply do not, in my white, male, cisgender body, relate to the world in the same way as persons who are not all of those things. Relatedness of some kind is an important reality and a laudable norm. But what *kind* of relatedness matters. The kind of "relatedness" offered by Gebara simply is not robust enough a norm to undo the reality of power relations because it gives no evidence of understanding them. An account that requires undifferentiated mutuality from everyone flattens power relations as they empirically exist, and thus evades responsibility for undoing them.

There is a kind of mutuality, after all, that exists between the CEO and the minimum-wage worker in his (usually his) employ. By failing to distinguish between the kinds of behaviors that "mutuality" implies for the oppressed and the kinds of behaviors that

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[47] Ibid., 142.
[48] Ibid., 142.

"mutuality" implies for the oppressor, Gebara opens the door for the CEO to set the terms of their mutuality. The CEO is not likely to articulate forms of "mutuality" that may include the oppressed seizing their share by force, trickery, subversion or deceit—possibilities that I think we should keep open given that the very definitions of force, trickery, subversion and deceit are imposed by the powerful. Gebara can only assure us that the CEO, too, should behave in ways that respect the "mutuality" that is baked into the world from the start. The CEO's greater capacity for systemic action mean that this view puts effective material agency—and even the power to shape the social definition of "mutuality"—back in the hands of the powerful, not the oppressed. God as redeemer, fixer, healer comes not in the form of a homeless peasant child, but as the CEO, a transmuted form of Caesar as the Son of God. This is simply the wisdom of the world at work again, not the scandalous redeeming particularity of "the dead, exploited, despised victims of history."[49] What we need, then, are not only symbols—including theological language—to name the fact of interconnectedness (e.g., between the CEO and the minimum-wage worker) but ways of describing, critiquing and altering the relations *within* the creation they share.

The critique of power relations that gives moral priority to the bodies of those marked for destruction by empire is grounded in the specific body of Jesus of Nazareth. The suffering of the powerless, of (to use Gebara's language) all the crucified, can be affirmed by Copeland as evil because of the revelatory nature of the particular bodily suffering of Jesus, in whose death their suffering is condemned.[50] In the embodied being of Jesus we can find a critical standard for why the suffering of the oppressed, of those "subjugated in empire," is, in fact,

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[49] Copeland, 100.
[50] Gebara, 120.

evil, while the oppressor's phenomenological experience of harm, while unpleasant for them, is not.[51]

The Response of White-Embodied-Being-In-The-World

Because of the interdependence of all embodied-being-in-the-world, white-embodied-being-in-the-world must relate to others. But there are multiple ways that white-embodied-being-in-the-world can relate to the horrors inflicted by such being upon other embodied-beings. Though other possible reactions probably exist, I want to briefly outline three as a way of pointing out why a hermeneutic of "embodied-being-in-the-world" suggests a stronger alternative foundation for solidarity. One way is the reaction of sympathy or pity. This is the reaction characterized by "feeling sorry for" another person's negative experiences. When I read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,* and there is the rape of a child on page one, this is my instinctive response: "I can't imagine how terrible that must be!"[52]

A second way of relating to others' experience is on the basis of empathy. "I can imagine that," says empathy, "and it sounds terrible." (Or, "I have experienced something that I think is similar, and it *was* terrible.") When I read in Elie Wiesel's *Night* about how Wiesel's father died in the middle of the night, and how his body was carted away while Elie slept, I recall arriving at my mother's bedside a few minutes too late to be there when she died.[53] I interpret another's experience, implicitly understand it as belonging in a similar category (in this case, "the death of a parent") and react on that basis.

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[51] Copeland, 57.

[52] Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1982), 1.

[53] Elie Wiesel, *Night*. Marion Wiesel, trans. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2006), 112.

A third way is by fetishizing the experience of black-embodied-being, emphasizing its significance, importance, and uniqueness as an object of fascination rather than as an object of accountability. Unfortunately, the reaction of white male theologians to the work of non-white and/or women theologians is often in this vein: Womanist discourse, for example, is celebrated, but not really engaged with; white theology remains largely unaccountable to the experience and analysis offered by black women theologians. Its significance is either limited to black women, or is more in theory than in practice.

None of these three responses is adequate, and each of them is rooted in dualism. The presumption, in each of them, is that one can have an emotional or intellectual reaction to things happening to other bodies while avoiding a bodily relationship to them. Another way to put the observation that these are all dualistic responses is to say that they maintain estrangement from my body—they maintain, specifically, my estrangement from my white body—in the respects in which it is implicated with others in and as bodies. Ignorance and hard-heartedness, more overt forms of racism, are consequences of hiding the black body; sympathy, empathy and fetishization hide white-embodied-being-in-the-world. The white body is invisible when it comes to moments in which that body is morally implicated and visible when it can be idealized. The consistency here is not that black bodies are always visible and white ones always invisible, but that visibility or invisibility of white bodies in a given moment is a consequence of how they are socially marked.

What does it mean ethically to prioritize the interaction "in the world" of black and white "embodied beings"? A completely different kind of example may illustrate what I think is the relevant principle. Imagine that I am driving my car, perhaps a little recklessly, perhaps a little too fast for the terrain, and hit a woman with my car as she carries her groceries home.

The response of sympathy or pity would lead me to respond by saying "Isn't that terrible how you got hit with a car!" The response of empathy would lead me to respond by saying "That reminds me of the time I got hit by a car" or perhaps "I sure wouldn't like to be hit by a car." The response of fetishization would lead me to respond by saying "This experience that you have had of being hit by a car is really important and significant."

None of these responses is wrong, exactly. It is, indeed, terrible to be hit by a car! I definitely do not want to be hit by a car! And that experience is certainly (at least to the person I hit) very important! And yet, each of these responses strikes me (and should, I think, strike you) as not only ridiculous but morally monstrous. The reasonableness of these responses on their own terms does not hide the fact that the morally appropriate reaction is to respond *from my particularity as the person who is implicated in the act,* that is, who hit this poor woman with my car. Responding in this way will lead me to be responsible for particular kinds of help and healing appropriate to that particularity. In short, the appropriate response is accountability, a response rooted in an accounting, a story told from a particular point of view.

The reaction of responding *from my particularity as the person who is implicated in the act,* who hit this woman with my car, is morally appropriate even if it is also true that the road was slippery or poorly designed, or that visibility was low, or in all sorts of other conditions. There is lots going on around the interaction of hitting someone with the car that is important to fully understanding what happened. Just because a particular interaction involves a finite number of embodied-beings-in-the-world doesn't mean that we escape the task of contextualizing these interactions in space, time, and relative to other embodied beings. Being a "being in the world" means that multiple layers of historical, social, psychological and other kinds of analysis about "the world" are needed to understand any particular embodied being

and its relationships. This is not a perfect example; the physical forces at work in a car crash are less complex and contested than those at play in the interactions of bodies which are socially marked as raced, sexed, classed, etc. The point is simply that we all have to understand the various ways in which we are implicated by particular embodied subjugations in which our embodied-beings-in-the-world are implicated, and speak theologically from that vantage point. Analysis that begins from the implication of embodied-being-in-the-world does not require the application of "idealistic theory"[54] or the imposition of a transcendental category, but immanent analysis (what Copeland calls "useful abstraction").[55]

Putting myself "within the skin of the other," in Gebara's phrase, is (in addition to being impossible) not morally appropriate.[56] Her shoes are not mine. To say this is not to deny mutuality; it's to have an ethic of mutuality that takes interrelatedness seriously enough not to pretend like we all relate in the same ways. Moreover, the embodied being of Jesus, the pattern and norm for human beings, points us toward our own embodied selves, and the complex ways in which they, too, are implicated in the subjugations of empire. After all, the others around Jesus at the crucifixion—the Roman soldiers, the administrators of empire—are embodied-beings-in-the-world, too. The CEO of Burger King and the hourly employee making $9.75 an hour are, in some sense, dependent on one another. But the power of the CEO means the burden of behaving in accordance with "mutuality" is likely to fall on the minimum-wage employee. As with the Roman soldiers and Jesus, the shape of the particularity matters. This is the concrete reality of how such symbols are deployed in the actual world of power. This is the power of the "social marks" of race.

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[54] Gebara, 122.
[55] Copeland, 86.
[56] Gebara, 142.

The Co-Dependence of Person and World

Understanding the systemic implications of phenomenological experience also makes it possible to trouble the waters, in a different way, of person–world dualism. The distinction made between the "systemic" and the "individual" is more problematic than this binary may suggest. These may be analytically useful terms. We do need a language of "powers and principalities," which do things that are qualitatively different from the things individuals do. This famous passage from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* describes these qualitative differences:

> "Sure," cried the tenant men, "but it's our land…We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours….That's what makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it."
> "We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man."
> "Yes, but the bank is only made of men."
> "No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it."[57]

Rooting analysis in phenomenological experience emphasizes that the systemic is not simply the individual in aggregate. But the individual is not simply an epiphenomenon of systems. The harms of racial violence are clearly not present in systems alone; their significance is in the fact that they are phenomenologically real *to persons*. Systems live in persons, and persons in systems. Neither is ontologically basic. They are always together and immanent in each other.

Though I am not committed to it as the only possible analysis, Pierre Bourdieu proposes one way of understanding the mutually dependent relationship between a person and these material and ideological systems that manifest as "social marks." Bourdieu regards even

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[57] John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1986), 33.

the seemingly inscrutable practices of physical bodies as determined by what he calls

"habitus" and thus indirectly by the political and social conditions that have shaped the habitus

up to the present moment. Not just wills or personalities but bodies themselves are "embodied

history," carrying with them the concepts and practices of the past. A rough analogy might be

to the construction of a city. The layout of a city may originate in a certain pattern for reasons

themselves having to do with history. For example, some European cities have their origin in

the layout of a Roman military camp. Thus, to this day, the possibilities and constraints for

what roads are available to drive on are those that the history of political and social relations

has embodied in the city. In *Masculine Domination*, for example, Bourdieu writes that

masculine domination thus is self perpetuating—not a case of simple determinism, but a kind

of "relationship of circular causality," possessed of a "semantic thickness" that renders each

symbol connected in its meaning with a whole network of other symbols which achieve

plausibility by the strength of their connections with each other.[58] The self, social systems, and

the symbolic order are all arise together and interdependently.[59] This is an account of the

persistence of the "social marks" of race, sex, and so on.

Thus the symbolic system of race and the closely related material systems that order

and are ordered by that symbolic system, cannot be suspended by simple acts of will. They are,

in fact, inculcated into a "will" from the beginning. Bourdieu also points out that an emphasis

on will puts undue emphasis on the actions of the dominated, and can end up blaming the

dominated for having failed to will themselves out of domination: "Symbolic power is

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[58] Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*. Richard Nice, trans. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 11.

[59] Here, with notions of the interdependent arising of the self *and* social/symbolic systems, I move significantly toward both process theology and certain Buddhist concepts, such as "pratītyasamutpāda" or "dependent co-arising," as it is understood in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition to refer to a general principle of interdependent causation.

exercised by the dominated but not in a simplistic way that makes it their own fault—we have to understand the social construction of the cognitive structures that organize the consciousness of the dominated in the first place."[60]

We need not assent to a caricature of human beings as wholly determined to understand that this troubles a dualism between a person and the world. Not just subjectivities and identities but our bodily constitutions and tendencies are shaped, deeply shaped, by interactions with social, economic and political systems and with other beings whose habitus is also shaping and shaped by those systems. In an important sense, systems (material and symbolic) live *in* individual persons and vice versa. "White supremacy" lives in white bodies and therefore white persons. Such an account gives texture to our understanding of our "common creatureliness":[61] because we all have the same created order in common, embodied interactions are related to lots of other embodied interactions.[62] As even the thinnest notion of interconnectedness affirms, I am related by bodily interactions to my mother's womb, and through her to bodily interactions with others. What that particular set of interactions *means* is subject to lots more analysis, but the basic question remains: How do embodied selves interact with one another? From this kind of analysis, a complicated portrait of a particular interaction seems likely to emerge, including *useful* abstractions which really do "grappl[e] with concrete data to discern, understand, and evaluate their emerging patterns in order to interpret their meaning"—abstractions which are analytically useful but not an ontological starting point.[63] The solidarity that this renders possible is rooted in each one's particular relationship to a

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[60] Bourdieu, 64.

[61] Or, put in Gebara's language, "relatedness as a condition for life" (Gebara, 132).

[62] Copeland, 100.

[63] Ibid., 86.

particular embodied subjugation, taking the form of "existential reflection, historical scrutiny, presence to memory, social analysis, acknowledgement and confession of sin, authentic repentance"[64] to each one according to the distinct social locations each one occupies.[65]

The Evil in This White Flesh

What does this mean for the interpretation of my friend's and my classmate's experiences? The harm inflicted by the man with the hairy white arm, or by the white body in the safe space, is not really a question of white people's agency; there is nothing unreasonable in reaching for the pole on the bus, or being in a room. Yet without doing anything, there is a harm committed simply by the presence of white flesh. I cannot avoid the habitus that shapes social interpretation of my body.

With these experiences, we reach the limits imposed by the lingering dualism of Copeland's notion of solidarity. Copeland implies, I think correctly, that we do not all relate to particular embodied subjugations in the same way. Here she departs, I think, from Gebara's ethic of mutuality in that she leaves more room for the reality that not everyone relates in the same way when we examine power relationships within our common creation. There is more space here for mutuality that is cataclysmic, organic, and contentious. Noting this provides an appropriate point of contact between white and black experience that can be fruitful as a starting point for ethical reflection. What I want to emphasize, though, is the degree to which one's unique relationship with a particular embodied domination can fall outside the scope of one's agency or control. Systems and histories live in the habitus of our embodied-beings (which are always already in the world) and in the habitus that conditions they way others can

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[64] Ibid., 126.
[65] Ibid., 101.

engage with our flesh. Copeland names persons who, she says, have "incarnated" solidarity with black women: William Wilberforce, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, and so on.[66] Surely it is true each of these did better than their contemporaries who were indifferent to or defended chattel slavery. It remains an open question, however, whether or not such solidarity can overcome the embodied character of white harmfulness, which is not simply a question of white agency or subjectivity but a question of what white bodies do even prior to having done anything at all. Bodies are not biologically but socially marked, and that means that they do things socially, to other people, outside themselves.

Copeland's account of solidarity—the salvific embodied practice modeled above all by Jesus Christ—involves an elision of white bodily harmfulness, a consequence of dualism between body and spirit/soul/psyche/mind. Her notion is that white bodies can escape the moral problem of implication in whiteness through particular solidaristic behaviors. But this requires a separation of the white "agent" from the problems of the white body. The body, remember, is "no mere object—*already-out-there-now*—with which we are confronted: always the body is with us, inseparable from us, *is* us."[67] If the white *body* is implicated—and the experiences of the black-embodied-beings-in-the-world with whom I have contact and to whom I am accountable suggest that it is—then the white (embodied) *person* is.

Bodies are socially marked not only as black and white but also as male, female, and other kinds of bodies; large and small and thus more or less physically threatening bodies; straight and gay bodies; cis and trans bodies; bodies that conform more and less to particular standards of beauty or bourgeois presentation; and so on. More pointedly, white harmfulness is

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[66] Ibid., 125.

[67] Ibid., 7.

not the only kind of harmfulness that resides in embodied-being-in-the-world. Even operating

within a hermeneutic of raced bodies, I am conscious of the danger of inscribing a black–white

binary that both oversimplifies the complexities of race in the United States, and which has its

own dynamics particular to that context. My hope is to use the hermeneutic of black bodily

experience to better—not exhaustively—give an initial account of the social and moral

problem of white bodies. Other, more intersectional hermeneutics—engaging across multiple

axes of embodied harm—are possible and important to a fuller picture of the

white/male/middle-class/etc. human being. If the method explored in this paper is fruitful, it is

worth investigating the marked character of embodied-beings-in-the-world in other aspects and

theologizing them on their own terms.

Copeland's method, if rendered consistently nondualistic, opens up a possibility for a kind

of solidarity that is not rooted in abstraction. Specifically, it enables moral reasoning that is rooted

in reflection on particular interactions of subjugation, within their historical and social contexts

but also in terms of the bodily relationships that different parties have to instances of subjugation.

Nevertheless, this nondualistic account suggests some tough questions and even existential

dilemmas. For one thing, it suggests that the possibility of positive white agency is elusive. It may

simply not be possible to be "one of the good ones," even if as Christians we want so badly to

follow the "eros for others" of Jesus.[68] No amount of good works can unmark us or remove us

from our implication "in the daily run of harms."[69]

The challenge to God's goodness and power posed by the bodily suffering of black women

has a counterpart: the challenge to God's goodness posed by the bodily evil of white people. At

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[68] Ibid., 65.

[69] Gebara, 138.

least part of the theological meaning of my friends' and classmates' experiences, and others like them, is that the white embodied self in the contemporary United States presents a version of the problem of evil. In this white flesh of mine—not simply in contingent aspects of my subjectivity or social position—is something irreducibly harmful, something opposed, merely by its existence, to the flourishing of other living things around it. My white fleshy being calls into question the goodness and power of God.

To realize this provokes, at least for me, a deep anguish. If the escaped slave killing her baby to avoid the baby's enslavement, as in *Beloved*, presents itself as morally intelligible in the face of the horrors of slavery, then it must be equally understandable for the white person to kill their own child rather than let the child grow up to be by definition harmful. I do not say this in abstraction: It is possible that in having a 20-month-old white son in this time and place I am committing a grotesque moral crime. I do not relish the thought that his flesh is marked already with evil. But whatever solidarity my partner and I model and teach him must somehow take account of the problems posed by our, and his, white flesh.

Chapter 4

Solidarity and Eros as White-Embodied Being

For white persons in the contemporary United States, authentic solidarity with black persons is made difficult, even impossible, by the constant possibility of white bodies being harmful. Yet the same radical interdependence that renders these possibilities for bodily solidarity so difficult also *demands* bodily solidarity on the part of white-embodied-being-in-the-world. To avoid action *is* to act, to affirm the status quo. The violence of the status quo can hum along without much active intervention from white-embodied-being-in-the-world, which supports it much of time simply by existing.

This circumstance, in which embodied solidarity is both impossible and required, obviously presents a conundrum. In this chapter, I explore three responses to this problem. First, I examine the notion of white response given in an essay by Jennifer Harvey. Harvey's analysis is close to my own, making the paces where we depart all the more revealing: it is, again, about holding on to the body. Second, I examine the possibility of a dialectical response modeled after that proposed by Irving Greenberg, who wrestles with the problem of theodicy in the wake of the Holocaust. Finally, I turn again to Shawn Copeland and her invocation of Audre Lorde's category of "the erotic," finding in the erotic an animating force for the kinds of responsiveness that may be possible and necessary for white-embodied-being-in-the-world like me.

"What Would Zacchaeus Do?"

Jennifer Harvey arrives at a similar dilemma in the course of her chapter "What Would Zacchaeus Do?" Harvey offers an analysis of the ways in which white Christians' identification with Jesus recenters and reinscribes the violence of whiteness even in white

Christians who intend to battle it.[70] Her intention is to explore the popular question "What

would Jesus do?" in a manner that keeps "the racial particularity of the white Christian in

mind."[71] In the move by the white Christian to identify with Jesus either as a fighter of social

ills or as the Black Christ "the centrality and power of the white actor is reiterated and

reaffirmed. Simply put, identifying with the divine is about the last thing that a white person

whose life is embedded in white-supremacist structures should be doing."[72]

Harvey's anthropological portrait of white people takes seriously the "stickiness" of

social marks. "The reality is that collective and sustained complicity with white supremacy

over centuries has malformed our very humanity as white people."[73] To say this shows a

laudable seriousness about the problem of white people, suggesting, like Copeland, that the

malformations of racism are not necessarily ontologically secondary, while allowing for the

eschatological possibility of total disidentification from whiteness. For Harvey this

"disidentification" is not merely a question of internal identity, but—because internal identity

is always being shaped by "external" material forces—a question of social and political action.

She concludes that a different question is appropriate: What would Zacchaeus do? At Jesus'

urging, the biblical Zacchaeus divests himself of his wealth and makes reparations several-

fold. Harvey suggests that a similar disinvestment from whiteness is called for.[74]

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[70] Jennifer Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do?" in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* George Yancy, ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 84-100. As before, I find that the language Harvey employs, specifically around "whiteness" and "white identity," tends to reinforce a dualism within white body-selves. In order to not misrepresent Harvey's argument, I retain her terminology here despite my misgivings.)

[71] Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do," 86. On the Black Christ, see Cone, *A Black Theology Liberation*, 110-128.

[72] Ibid., 95.

[73] Ibid., 97.

[74] Ibid., 98-99. The story of Zacchaeus is found in Luke 19:1-10.

Yet this emphasis on the commands of Jesus—which is related, I think, to Harvey's own rootedness in U.S. evangelicalism, which underscores the authority of the Bible as a source of rule-based moral guidance—leaves me wondering how Jesus *in and as a body* relates to this question. Earlier, I emphasized the importance of understanding Jesus as *embodied*-being-in-the-world; Jesus' human body is what makes the bodies of the subjugated the starting point of Christian ethics. On Harvey's account, norms that are applicable to white persons come from Jesus only as a giver of moral guidance, that is, as a being principally of spirit/soul/psyche/mind. How can this be reconciled with an account of Jesus as embodied-being-in-the-world, whose suffering *and* solidarity are also *bodily*? Does asking "What would Zacchaeus do" help resolve this? To the extent that this question leads to particular actions of divestment from the structures of white violence, this is praiseworthy. But to the extent that it keeps the white body hidden, to the extent that it holds a possibility of being "one of the good ones," it seems to reinforce the logic of this violence. To the extent that it avoids the body of Jesus, it robs white Christians of a constructive norm that is needed in order to differentiate evil from harm.

"The Narrow Edge of Rock"

Embedded in Harvey's account, as in mine, is a sense that white persons cannot, except perhaps with great difficulty, engage in any kind of solidarity. But this dilemma has been faced before, in various guises. The problem of theodicy is not new, and others' engagements with it may be instructive. One specific response is that of Irving Greenberg, who seeks to interpret the meaning of Jewish identity and theology in the wake of the Shoah. The complicity of Christians individually, and Christian social structures corporately, in the Holocaust leads Greenberg to ask "Is the wager of Christian faith lost?"

Those who followed Jesus as the Christ, in effect, staked their lives that the new orientation was neither an illusion nor an evil, but yet another stage in salvation and a vehicle of love for mankind [sic].… As is the case with every vehicle, divine and human, the spiritual record of this wager has been mixed—comprising great inspiration for love given and evils caused. The hope is that the good outweighs the evil. *But the throwing onto the scales of so massive a weight of evil and guilt raises the question about whether the balance might now be broken, whether one must decide that it were better that Jesus had not come, rather than such scenes be enacted six million times over—and more. Has the wager of faith in Jesus been lost?*[75]

The dilemma for white people is, if anything, more stark. If the wager of faith in Jesus has been lost, then the abandonment of Christian faith is a possibility, if a painful one. But, as this paper has argued, the social marks of whiteness live in and on the bodies of white persons. The wager of faith for white-embodied-being-in-the-world—the wager that avoids suicide or the murder of one's own white child—is that the God-created goodness of white-embodied-being-in-the-world is not decisively condemned by the ways in which it is implicated by the social marks of race.

As a Jew, Greenberg asks a question of theodicy: How could the Holocaust have been permitted by God, who supposedly is faithful to the promises made to God's people? His response as a Jew suggests a parallel response for Christians.[76] In the wake of the Holocaust, Jewish "faith is living life in the presence of the redeemer, even when the world is unredeemed... We now have to speak of 'moment faiths,' moments when Redeemer and vision of redemption are present, interspersed with times when the flames of the burning children blot

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[75] Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" in *Holocaust: Religious & Philosophical Implications.* John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum, eds. (New York, NY: Paragon House, 1989), 310. Emphasis mine.

[76] This analogy, which seeks to learn about the oppressed/oppressor relationship between black/white embodied-beings-in-the-world by examining the oppressed/oppressor relationship between Jews/Christians, is obviously complicated by both the historical relationship between Christian supremacy and white supremacy in the United States, and the nuanced, dynamic racialization of Jews in a U.S. context. Thus in a U.S. context someone like Irving Greenberg is both part of a subjugated community of Jews relative to Christians, and a subjugating community of white people relative to, e.g., U.S. black people. There is still, I think, something to learn from the formal structure of Greenberg's Jewish response to the Holocaust.

out faith."[77] It is a dialectical response confronting the simultaneous reality and unreality of God's promises head-on.

The dialectical response articulated by Greenberg bears a resemblance to Barth's dialectic approach to preaching in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, in which he writes that "there remains only to keep walking" along a "narrow edge of rock" between "dogma and self-criticism." "If [one] attempts to stand still, [one] will fall either to the left or to the right, but fall [one] must. There remains only to keep walking... looking from one side to the other, from positive to negative and from negative to positive."[78] For Barth, the reason for a dialectical approach is primarily epistemological, in the tension between Kantian epistemological resignation about God and the demands of Christian proclamation. Greenberg helps Christians to understand that this dialectical approach, in the wake of moral horrors such as the Holocaust, or the violence linked with U.S. social marks of race, can also have a moral force. Where for Barth, Christians both must and cannot speak of God, for Greenberg Christians both have no right to speak of God, and no right not to. Christians both must and cannot have anything to say amidst the moral shame and horror of Christian participation in and passivity about the Holocaust, alongside the Christian conviction that God is, in the same world in which that happened, somehow made flesh. Christians and Jews share a dialectic tension between faith and doubt, meaning and nihilism, the presence and absence of God, the reliability or spuriousness of God's promises. For Christians wrestling with the meaning of the Holocaust for our theologies, dialectical responses like this one seem to be appropriate as a starting point for our theological response. The other possibilities are unfaithful either to the

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[77] Greenberg, 319.

[78] Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. Douglas Horton, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1935) 207.

"reality of the nothingness"[79] or do fatal damage to core Christian doctrines like incarnation (God is with us) or redemption (God will save us), without which Christians cannot say anything very "Christian"—without which we are simply admitting that the wager of Christian faith is lost.

In the case of the white-embodied-being-in-the-world, too, there seems to be a dilemma of must-but-cannot, both of which are rooted in the unity of the created order. White people have no right to act in the world because of the ways in which their actions, even their presence, can inevitably cause harm. White people must act, have no right *not* to act because the same inter-implication of white people in the world with everyone else means that their failure to act is also an act that ripples outward, usually in maintenance of the status quo. Where Greenberg looks for "moment faiths," white people might look for "moment solidarities," glimmers of possibility in which bodily solidarity is possible, knowing that they have no permanence or guarantee of reoccurring. This dialectic is not one which operates in purely intellectual terms, which finds the impossibility of action routinely at the moment of action's necessity. To treat the presence of moment solidarities as something that can be predicted scientifically is likely to be a manifestation of a particularly white, bourgeois, masculine norm, and imposes a preconceived notion of solidarity rather than allowing it to emerge in response to black-embodied-being-in-the-world.

An "Eros for Others"

Jesus' personhood, precisely because it is a fully *human* personhood, is one in-the-world. Jesus was Jewish-embodied-being-in-the-world, that is, embodied-being-in-the-world

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[79] Greenberg, 334.

that was socially marked in the particular way that Jews were marked in the Roman imperial context. This in-the-world-ness is the cause of violence directed at Jesus. It is the world that, by the relationship it has established between violence and particular kinds of social marks, is responsible for the torture and crucifixion of Jesus.

But for those of us whose relationship to a particular subjugation is not as the harmed embodied-being-in-the-world but as one implicated in the act of harm, can the embodied-being-in-the-world, Jesus of Nazareth, provide any useful guidance for what our embodied solidarity might look like? For Shawn Copeland, Jesus is not only subjugated being-in-the-world. Jesus' embodied-being-in-the-world also gives a model of "eros for others" that Copeland points to with the term "solidarity."[80] Jesus of Nazareth is "the measure or standard" not only for the condemnation of suffering but also for "the exercise of erotic power and freedom in the service of the reign of God and against empire."[81] The entire course of Jesus' life and ministry, not only his death on the cross, exemplifies erotic solidarity. Solidarity generally, and white solidarity in particular, emerges erotically.

A fuller picture of the erotic is given by Audre Lorde in the essay "Uses of the Erotic."[82] The word itself is derived from Greek *eros*, "the personification of love in all its aspects, born of Chaos and personifying creative power and harmony."[83] In Audre Lorde's usage part of the nature of the erotic is that it is *felt*, not described or defined or

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[80] Copeland, 65.

[81] Ibid., 64-65.

[82] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic" in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, Crossing Press, 1984), 53-59. Lorde locates the erotic specifically in the experiences of women: "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women" that may be the antithesis of the sterile, "euroamerican [sic] male tradition"—including what is identified in this paper as the Enlightenment tradition (Lorde, 55). But I take "the erotic" to be a feminine power because of the way that gender and sex are marked, not because it is ontologically or biologically female. It need not be inaccessible to everyone who is "biologically male."

[83] Ibid., 55.

intellectualized, though "intellectual" acts can be expressions of it: she gives examples of "erotically satisfying activity" that include "dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, [and] examining an idea."[84] It is perhaps best approached verbally through the oblique language of poetry.

To develop the notion of the erotic that is at play in the salvific ministry of Jesus, I propose that the erotic can be thought of as a non-dualistic category of holy power, that sacred force which animates the actions of Jesus Christ. In sectarian terms it might even be approximated to "the power of the Holy Spirit." Its nondualism is suggested in a variety of ways. First, the erotic lives in individual persons but is connected to others, blurring the "pornographic" distinction between a person and those around them (or put a slightly different way, between a person and "the world").

> There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical "What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating gunrunner?" In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect… [But] the dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.[85]

The words "being shared" suggest that the erotic is not sited cleanly in "the individual" or in "systems" or "politics"—that is, in things we do with other people. There is an ambiguity in the erotic that neither sites it in the individual or in the community, though it is present in both. It is not a thing that exists in an individual and then is shared but springs forth in sharing, precisely because it acknowledges the reality of interconnectedness.

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[84] Ibid., 56-57.
[85] Ibid., 55-56.

The erotic also expresses an ambiguity between body and "self." That Lorde finds the erotic in the "sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional psychic or intellectual" suggests that the erotic transcends these divisions—or perhaps is too immanent to be characterized by such transcendent categories..[86] The richness of "the erotic" as a category suggests the range and power of solidarities that emerge from it, suggesting that both the personal and the systemic (which in the end are not separate things) must claim our attention.

The precise shape of this is hard to discern and articulate, because it is diversely expressed and because the erotic is not fully expressible in worlds. But it is also obscured and distorted by the presence of pornographic pseudo-solidarities which confine the erotic within dualisms—including some of the most common solidarities that white people are urged to undertake. Some of these solidarities inscribe a dualism of spirit/soul/psyche/mind–body. Certainly this includes solidarities which resemble the three dualistic responses in Chapter 3 (sympathy, empathy, and fetishization), but even responses which are attempts to respond with accountability are pornographic inasmuch as they confine connection to the embodied subjugations of others to the sphere of the spirit/soul/psyche/mind. This is perhaps counterintuitive. What makes a response like white guilt pornographic is *not* that it is too bodily but that it is are *not bodily enough,* not truly bodily, but about particular "sensations." Its dualism renders it pornographic.[87]

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[86] Ibid., 56.

[87] Because of this, it's worth being cautious about the feeling of guilt that my account of white-embodied-being-in-the-world may inspire, because it risks reinstating dualism between the "body" and the "self." The social marks and social discipline applied to white persons mean that we can wield our bodies carelessly, most of all because we are under the impression that they do not matter at all. "White guilt" manifests this callousness by attempting to respond emotionally to the "problem of white people" while erasing the bodies that lead to the moral status of guilt in the first place. What I want to emphasize is a moral status of guilt (or perhaps better, implication) not guilt as a personal feeling.

There are other pseudo-solidarities which are pornographic because they inscribe too deep a dualism between a person and the world, emphasizing either individual response at the expense of systemic intervention, or vice versa. Contrary to Copeland, who indicates that in some sense "black" is constitutive of black-embodied-being-in-the-world, some visions of the salvation of black people from the violence of white supremacy, including most liberal ones, envision that in order to be saved their blackness must be abandoned. Social personhood is restored, but social particularity must be abandoned. The liberal eschatology envisions, at the latter day, a complete absence of social markedness, because they are accident of the essential person, the Enlightenment, universal person. In the end, insists this view, we're all just people.

Solidarities such as this one fail to grasp the ways in which "the problem of white people" extends to the level of social and political systems (though they are not present *only* in these systems). Within the realm of the erotic, particularity is not an *individual* question, one in which internal identity becomes acceptable to and accepted by a social context. Not only would this be more person–world dualism, it would be naïve about the ways in which "internal" identity is shaped. To say that there is an "I" that can be considered entirely apart from these social marks ignores the semantic thickness that they have, as Bourdieu has emphasized. In the erotic, as in his account of the interconnectedness between material/symbolic systems and the human person, neither the individual nor a social system is ontologically prior, making it able to act throughout the reality that contains selves (which are always also bodies), symbolic orders and social systems.

Though erotic solidarity is not merely individual or solely systemic, it is *particular*. Some people will find the sense of satisfaction in building a bookshelf but others will not. The

scriptural accounts of the erotic solidarity of Jesus do not erase the particularity of those to

whom Jesus responds. This is apparent, for example, in the story of the Canaanite woman:

> Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.[88]

The Canaanite status of the woman and her daughter is not erased by Jesus' ministry.

At the end of this story she is neither a Jew nor a person-in-general. More generally, Jesus'

acts of healing are responsive to the different maladies and problems of social personhood

faced by the various persons he encounters. Jesus heals the blindness of the blind man, expels

the demon called Legion, raises Lazarus from the dead according to the particularity of their

problems and pleas made by them and their loved ones.[89] Jesus himself rises from the dead

bearing the scars of the empire's execution.[90] Jesus, the model for Christian solidarity,

maintains social particularity *and* restores to social personhood.[91] As Shawn Copeland writes,

"Bodies are marked—made individual, particular, different, and vivid—through race, sex and

gender, sexuality, and culture," and this markedness is a divinely given source of "delight."[92]

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[88] Matthew 15:21-28, NRSV.

[89] Respectively: Matthew 9:27-31, Mark 10:46-52, Luke 18:35-43; Mark 5:1-20, Luke 8:26-37, Matthew 8:28-34; and John 11:38-44.

[90] John 20:19-29.

[91] Jesus' "eros for others" is also present on occasions when such solidarity does not come easily to him. Jesus is socially marked as Jewish, which puts him in a relationship of subjugation, but also puts him in a position of subjugator relative to some other beings-in-the-world—and Jesus' self-conception seems at time to reflect this. He does not readily relate to the Canaanite woman, initially referring to her as a "dog." He must be cajoled to heal the Canaanite woman's daughter.

[92] Copeland, 56.

The notion of the erotic has a great deal of promise. Lorde's description of what it is and what it makes possible resonates deeply with my intuitive sense of what my body, in its "unintelligibility," is missing: The experience of my body as merely factual, not as true; the inability to dance or fall out in the Spirit; the loss of playfulness in music or in sex. To the extent that erotic solidarity, which is always both personal and political[93] requires confronting the ways in which I have been confined to and conscripted into daily disciplines of white supremacy, the erotic itself a key to undoing it. But some caution is warranted. The erotic, at least as it is described by Lorde, has no limiting factor; it is a vivifying force, never a divine "no." Lorde, a black lesbian woman who has no need, necessarily, for caution about how the category might be employed: she is at little risk of abusing its holy power. Yet what seems to the white person (and especially to the straight white cisgender man) as listening to the inner urgings of the erotic may, in fact, be simply more desire to dominate, to wield my body as I will. The caution of Harvey is appropriate here, even if her solution isn't viable: white people's casting of themselves as those who restore others to social personhood is itself an act of white violence. Without the self-limiting of a dialectic approach, the erotic becomes another transcendental sanction for white bodily harm. For white people, the erotic slips too easily into pornographic violence.

Erotic, Dialectical Solidarity

That the erotic is, as I have described it, a non-dualistic category of holy power does not mean that it does not manifest in particular places and ways. Eros itself is never solely individual or solely systemic, though it may be present in a particular moment to a particular

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[93] Which, I emphasize again, is always wrapped up with the social marks of my maleness, markers of class and education, and others, notwithstanding my focus on race in this thesis.

person in a particular way. It may manifest to Audre Lorde in the writing of a poem or to a city in the kairotic arising of a social movement but that does not mean that it surges forth as poetry or protest to everyone in every context.

It is this possibility, I think, that makes the erotic an important source of animating the kinds of dialectic action suggested by Greenberg. A dialectic animated by the erotic manifests differently from one moment to the next while never losing the felt, bodily, primordial, always-personal-and-always-political connection to what is present but not emphasized. A formula of a white person's dialectic response that operates mechanically, absent some cultivated sensitivity to the churning erotic life of the world, will tend to be inflexible toward the actual needs of embodied-being-in-the-world, and inflexible in ways that are biased toward the interests of white-embodied being. What opens up the possibility of Greenberg's "moment faiths" and a white person's analogous "moment solidarities" is not a formula of solidarity or a metronomic dialectic but a deep immersion in the erotic, particularly as it manifests in other embodied-beings-in-the-world. What keeps white people's solidarity accountable, grounded in its own impossibility, is a dialectic sense that white solidarity both *must* and *cannot* be. Dialectic thinking pushes white-embodied-being-in-the-world to work on personal and systemic, never pausing with one or the other but knowing they are mutually tied. To cultivate attentiveness to the erotic, and therefore increase one's capacity for dialectic response, is a process that manifests itself in the whole life of white-embodied-being-in-the-world.

As is made clear by the long, brutal history of violence inflicted by white flesh upon black, continued even to this very hour, the principal costs of white supremacy are not borne by white-embodied-being-in-the-world. Yet there is part of the cost that lives in my body and, however trivial it may be in the scheme of things, is mine to wrestle with. My point is not that

the "problem of white people," manifested in violence simultaneously systemic and fleshy, is principally about the harms inflicted on white persons. My point is certainly not that the harms are as severe. The category of "the erotic," like the category of "embodied-being-in-the-world," emphasizes, though, that distortions of the personhood of others are tied to the distortions of my own personhood. The erotic animates a constant dialectic movement between attention to the erotic as "personal" and as "political."

The promise made by white personhood, by the Enlightenment anthropology, is that my social personhood can exist only at the expense of another's. The need to invent a subhuman arises at least in part because the Enlightenment anthropology tacitly requires such a creature, without which I cannot be a person. See, for example, the famous challenge laid down by James Baldwin in the 1963 TV documentary called "The Negro and the American Promise," in which he argues that it was White America that invented its image of the black person, and distorted the black person into its image.[94] (His language is more forceful.) But the erotic is not so zero-sum. Rather, my ability to respond to the embodied-being-in-the-world of others is cultivated by my awareness of eros as it manifests in my own embodied self. It is simultaneously a cultivation of my personhood and my political possibilities—even if the emphasis is, at a particular moment, in one domain or another.

It it eros that, above all, that animates the dialectic response, that might, with prayer and fervent attention, keep me always focused on the impossibility of the task, because it maintains the immediate sense of connection that drives both the *must* and the *cannot*. My ability to work responsively, erotically, at the level of the symbolic and material systems of white supremacy is not simply a matter of political power, correct analysis, or organizing skill.

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[94] "The Negro and The American Promise," Episode 3. Directed by Frank Barzyk. Hosted/written by Kenneth Clark. WBGH Boston, 1963.

My capacity for response lives also in me as embodied-being-in-the-world, and stands or falls also on the degree to which I can attend to the life-force present me, in and as my body. It relies as much on my ability to dance and fall out in the Spirit, to make love and to write poetry, to be a creative, intuitive cook, and a father to my white son, and all of this in ways that do not abandon my political weapons but sharpen them. Jesus, as the model of erotic solidarity, keeps front and center both the impetus to continue and the conviction that white-embodied-being like me can, perhaps, respond—but can never solve or save.

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