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# Toward a Theology of Transformation

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Hannah Griggs

Senior Inquiry

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION:  
DESTROYING THE SYCAMORE TREE OF WHITE SUPREMACY

2/13/18

When I was in sixth grade, I visited the National Archives in Washington D.C. I remember looking into the glass case which held the Declaration of Independence, my heart swelling with pride as I read the sacred words, “we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal...”<sup>1</sup> These words filled my twelve-year-old self with an evangelistic zeal to spread the gospel of democracy. As a young woman, I knew that America<sup>2</sup> has not always upheld this promise. I knew that our founders excluded women from this promise, but I believed that through the triumph of the women’s rights movement, America renewed its original commitment to democracy by enfranchising women. Likewise, through the triumph of the civil rights movement, I believed that America renewed its founding values. After all, it was 2007—we had a black man and a woman vying for the democratic nomination.

As a white girl growing up in the United States of America, I assumed that Americans had largely overcome racism. I was taught that through the efforts of brave, respectable leaders like Martin Luther King Jr.—no thanks to Malcolm X—America forged a path toward racial progress. However, in 2014 when I graduated high school, it became painfully clear that racism persisted in dangerous ways, threatening the lives of my fellow Americans. That summer, police in New York killed Eric Garner; in August, police in Missouri killed Michael Brown; and in November, police in Ohio killed Tamir Rice—all unarmed black males.<sup>3</sup> I was shocked; my lived experience told me that police officers could be trusted. The persistent violence against

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<sup>1</sup> “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription” *The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*, accessed January 18, 2018. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this essay, when I use the word “America,” I am referring to the United States of America, not the North and South American continents.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Funke and Tina Susman. “From Ferguson to Baton Rouge: Deaths of black men and women at the hands of police” *Los Angeles Times*, last modified July 12, 2016/date accessed January 18, 2018. <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-police-deaths-20160707-snap-htmstory.html>

American citizens of color<sup>4</sup> continues to shatter my sense of what it means to be an American—surely this cannot be the land of “liberty and justice for all.”<sup>5</sup> The continuing violence against people of color necessitates an immediate and compassionate response. Beginning in 2013, Black Lives Matter has consistently provided that response, defending black safety, dignity, and existence by organizing demonstrations and participating in other forms of nonviolent direct action.<sup>6</sup> In solidarity with Black Lives Matter, my fellow students at Augustana College organized a Die-In. Silent and unmoving, they lied on the ground to protest the wrongful deaths of unarmed black men killed by police officers. I stepped over and between their bodies as I hurried to class. I chose to keep walking when I should have lied down beside the protestors. I chose to ignore the grave injustice beneath my feet.

But walking over the bodies of my classmates awakened something inside me. I began to see a terrible disconnect between white American Christians who declare God’s radical love for all people—regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or religion—and our half-hearted solidarity with, or even deliberate opposition to, the liberation struggles of marginalized people. Hardly any of the Christians I knew—myself included—participated in the protests. In fact, a survey by Barna Group reports that as of 2015, only nine percent of mainline Protestants

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<sup>4</sup> While this essay focuses on violence against black Americans, I also condemn violence against Native Americans, Mexicans, undocumented immigrants, Muslims, Jews, LGBT people and many marginalized communities.

<sup>5</sup> The Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified December 28, 2017/accessed January 18, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pledge-of-Allegiance-to-the-Flag-of-the-United-States-of-America>

<sup>6</sup> “About,” *Black Lives Matter*, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about>.

like me support the Black Lives Matter movement. Only three percent of people who regularly attend church had *ever* attended a rally or demonstration for racial justice.<sup>7</sup>

It is one thing for a person to critique a tradition in which he or she does not participate. But it is more difficult—and more compelling—for a person who deeply understands and loves a tradition to critique it from within. When I use “we” language, I am speaking to and about white Christians like me—the target audience of this work. I am a Christian through and through. I grew up singing hymns, memorizing Bible verses, and going to Vacation Bible School. But more importantly, I have felt God’s call to be present with those who suffer, and I have felt God’s presence in my own suffering. Jesus calls us to practice a ministry of radical accompaniment: “‘I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in....’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”<sup>8</sup> When white Christians stand by as black people are killed on the streets, we aren’t living into God’s call. Jesus calls us to advocate for justice; Jesus calls us to protest. My hope is that rather than continuing to ignore this grave injustice, we white American Christians will remember Jesus by protesting in steadfast solidarity with black liberation movements.

The first section of this essay provides a brief introduction to the analytical frameworks upon which my argument relies: white privilege, social memory, and narrative framing. Secondly, I examine the social narratives that shape white American Christian social memory. White supremacist assumptions corrupt white American Christian social memory, obscuring our memories of Jesus; the Jesus of the gospels promotes the freedom and dignity of all people—a

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<sup>7</sup> Morgan Lee, “Where John Piper and Other Evangelicals Stand on Black Lives Matter,” *Christianity Today*, published May 13, 2016 and accessed January 27, 2018. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/may/where-john-piper-evangelicals-stand-black-lives-matter-blm.html>

<sup>8</sup> Mt 25:35-40

legacy that directly opposes white supremacy. The next section observes the narratives that black American Christians tell about the civil rights movement, the Exodus story, and the story of Jesus' crucifixion. Black American Christians remember American slavery in the context of the Exodus story and remember Jim Crow lynching in the context of Jesus' crucifixion, advocating for a theology of liberation. By rejecting the narrative of white supremacy, black collective narratives undermine white social memory. Furthermore, by rejecting white supremacy, black liberation theology more appropriately remember Jesus.

In the final section of this essay, I advocate for white American Christians to adopt a theology of transformation. Through a theology of transformation, white American Christians might thoughtfully reckon with our (sometimes unknowing) participation in narratives of racism and structures of injustice. Following the lead of black liberation theologians, I will propose resources from within the Christian tradition to transform white American Christianity's collective memory and "imagined community."<sup>9</sup> By changing our collective memory, we reframe problems, causes, moral norms, and solutions. By reframing, we articulate new roles for white American Christians to take as we interact with our past, present, and future. More specifically, this will entail shifting from a reconciliation paradigm to a reparations paradigm, as theorized by Jennifer Harvey in *Dear White Christians*. I propose the story of Zacchaeus as a model for reframing white American Christian memory to begin a theology of transformation. By collectively remembering narratives like the Lukan story of Zacchaeus, white American Christians will begin to participate in a theology of transformation—a theology of transformation that will reframe our group identity and our relationships with Christians of color.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Weedon and Glenn Jordan. "Collective memory: theory and politics." *Social Semiotics* 22, no. 2 (April 2012): 143-153. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2018).

White American Christian and scholar Jennifer Harvey argues that we white Christians have *particular* work to do in order to adequately respond to racial injustice. As white American Christians, we are given certain privileges withheld from people of color. Even as Christians committed to challenging racism, we have certain blind spots—blind spots created by historical and social privileges that have given white people unequal access to power and resources. To clarify, “white racial identity has emerged as those deemed white have lived in active or passive complicity with racially unjust practices and have continually accrued, even until today, the material benefits of those histories.”<sup>10</sup> We white Christians didn’t earn or ask for these privileges, *and yet* we continue to benefit from the stolen freedoms bestowed upon us *just because* of our whiteness. White privilege can be simple, like buying Band-Aids that match your skin tone. Even though this might seem insignificant, white privilege often results in unequal access to social power and financial resources. White privilege means that we never have to worry that our natural hair might prevent us from getting jobs. We do not worry that we will be paid less just because we are white. We do not worry if calling the police will protect our bodies or cost us our lives.

Black Christians and white Christians cannot relate to American history or relate to each other apart from the unjust power dynamics caused by white privilege, complicating white people’s participation in interracial dialogue.<sup>11</sup> White people have the luxury of ignoring racism, which means that engaging in discussions about white privilege can make us feel guilty, agitated, and uncomfortable. Critical whiteness scholar Robin DiAngelo writes that “White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and

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<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Harvey. *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 55.

<sup>11</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility.” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54-70.

guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.”<sup>12</sup>

Although the social, economic, and political privileges of whiteness enable white people to safely support people of color, white people are least likely to advocate for racial justice.<sup>13</sup> Our racial identity *means* social, political, and economic inequality. Acknowledging these historically and socially constructed privileges creates an identity crisis for white people: “a moral crisis that those of us who are white must challenge head-on—to its depths and in concrete ways over a long enough period of time—so that its meaning might be radically and utterly transformed.”<sup>14</sup> As Christians, we white people have a sacred duty to disrupt white supremacy.

Signaling white supremacy remains prominent in America’s contemporary consciousness, a participant in Angela Sims’ oral history of lynching draws parallels between Jim Crow times and the current historical moment: “If you went beyond a certain area, you could get arrested just because you were in that area, because you were black. . . . It was—well, it’s still happening. . . . There are still times when we are stopped, questioned about being in certain areas”<sup>15</sup> Agents of white authority continue to prevent black bodies from occupying free space, resulting in police brutality. Responding to police brutality that threatens black lives, Black Lives Matter (BLM) continues to lead demonstrations, boycotts, protests, sit-ins, and marches, relying on the nonviolent strategies of the civil rights movement.<sup>16</sup> Even after the emancipation of the slaves, the victories of the American civil rights movement, and the rise of Black Lives Matter,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Sims, *Lynched*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> “Herstory,” *Black Lives Matter*, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/>.

black American identity continues to remember the narrative of white supremacy because it continues to threaten black lives.

Narrative framing and social memory<sup>17</sup> theory provide white American Christians with a framework for disrupting white supremacy. Rhetorician Robert Entman asserts that narratives contextualize (or frame) societal problems and causes, defining the moral norms to determine solutions: “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”<sup>18</sup> Narrators frame stories—consciously and subconsciously—by choosing which details to incorporate or ignore. Storytelling is an act of rhetorical framing; just as children are taught to look for “the moral of the story,” people identify the ways in which the story’s characters and events frame problems, causes, and solutions—giving us narratives upon which we build our moral landscape.

Social memory demonstrates that individuals and groups construct narratives of identity using institutional and cultural storytelling. Collective memories—narratives of the past—define group identity by interpreting the past, present, and future. The act of collectively remembering is in itself a method of narrative framing. By choosing to publicly remember a historical event, the narrator implicitly provides a model for the future community. In other words, by telling stories and interpreting them, groups create social memories and imagined futures. Using social memory, black Christians and white Christians tell different stories about our shared past,

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout this essay, I use social memory, collective memory, social imagination, collective imagination, social narratives, and collective narratives interchangeably. Words like remember and imagine usually signal a social memory theory framework.

<sup>18</sup> Robert M. Entman. “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 52.

framing our historical problems, causes, moral norms, and solutions differently. By identifying the failures and successes of the past, narratives express a community's identity, shared goals for the future, or "imagined community."<sup>19</sup> But, as Jennifer Harvey asserts, black American Christians and white American Christians imagine vastly differing versions of America's history of slavery and racial injustice. Until black American Christians and white American Christians can imagine a common story of race in the United States, the church will not realize racial reconciliation.

For white American Christians, many stories exist within our social imagination that create a problematic group identity. Historically, white American Christians have understood sin in terms of individual vices, rather than social structures. In fact, we white American Christians tend to frame salvation *only* in terms of individual, heavenly reward. The white American Christian tendency toward individual salvation traces back to our roots as Puritans. Because the Puritans believed in John Calvin's doctrine of predestination, otherworldly concerns for one's personal salvation dominated the lives of these early white American Christians.<sup>20</sup> White American Christians tend to think of racism—and other systemic problems like poverty, patriarchy, and xenophobia—in terms of individual sin. Soong-Chan Rah, an Evangelical pastor and scholar, asserts that when Christians "think of racism, we often see this only in individual terms.... If we use the language of individual sin to address sin, then no individual is guilty.... But if we use the language of corporate sin, then we are all complicit. Anyone that has benefited from America's original sin is guilty of that sin and bears the corporate shame."<sup>21</sup> Because white

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<sup>19</sup> Weedon and Jordan, "Collective Memory," 143.

<sup>20</sup>Max Weber. "Protestant Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism." *Max Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman, trans. E. Matthews, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2009) 70.

American Christian narratives of sin locate sin only in the realm of individual vice, white American Christians lack the conceptual power to frame sin in terms of community. While most white American Christian individuals denounce racism and long for racial reconciliation, white American Christian identity (often unintentionally) collectively perpetuates racism by reproducing narratives built on assumptions that devalue people of color.

Taking into account our different historically and socially constructed privileges, white people and black people must respond to white supremacy differently. Black liberation theologians like James Cone, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Martin Luther King Jr. have provided black American Christians with counter-narratives that affirm black life and dignity in the face of white supremacy. As white American Christians respond to black liberation theology, we must remember that liberation from white oppression is not *for* us (white people). Nevertheless, collective white engagement with liberation theology is essential to racial reconciliation. To be sure, as Jennifer Harvey notes, while white people are not exceptionally immoral, white people “have failed to *collectively*...refuse white supremacy.”<sup>22</sup> White American Christianity’s need for racial reconciliation does not come from an experience of suffering but from our active and passive role as oppressors. Our white privilege means that the white American Christian church has a God-given responsibility to atone for our collective sin.

#### WHITE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN SOCIAL MEMORY

The notion of white supremacy undergirds many of the narratives white American Christians tell and have told about our own racial, national, and religious identity. White supremacy buttresses white American Christian narratives of the civil rights movement, American exceptionalism, America as God’s chosen nation, and Christian sin and salvation.

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<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 55. Emphasis mine.

White American Christians tell the story of the civil rights movement as a narrative of racial progress, integration, and reconciliation between black and white Americans. However, white Christians impede racial reconciliation by relying on integration as the ultimate solution to racial injustice.<sup>23</sup>

A reconciliation paradigm dominates the way justice-committed Christians understand race and think about the problem of racism. The paradigm laments the reality of racial division (or separation) in our churches and faith communities and sees this division as a primary indication of racism. This paradigm thus advocates a pursuit of just racial togetherness across lines of racial difference as a central ethic in Christian life through which all racism will be eradicated.<sup>24</sup>

Using Entman's criteria for rhetorical framing, white American Christian social memory locates the problem as racial division caused by segregation. Our collective memory sees racial separation as a moral failure, making integration the ultimate solution to racial discord. Racial conflict permeates American Christian society; however, the reason Christians fail to achieve racial reconciliation is within the reconciliation paradigm itself.<sup>25</sup> Racial reconciliation eludes us because white American Christians fail to remember the whole story of the civil rights movement.

While the American civil rights movement did combat segregation by advocating for the integration of schools, buses, and other public institutions, segregation was only a symptom of the problem of white supremacy. Racism isn't caused by segregation; it's caused by white supremacy. Our white American Christian narrative of the civil rights movement remembers King's desire for reconciliation as he says: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

their character.”<sup>26</sup> By advocating for integration, white Christians assume that King supports the reconciliation paradigm.<sup>27</sup> But our white American Christian narrative of the civil rights movement all too often forgets King’s desire for justice: “I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate...the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice.”<sup>28</sup> King acknowledges that simple complicity in racism is perhaps worse than extreme racism, for it is far more pervasive, systemic, and difficult to precisely identify.

White American Christian memory forgets that, by the end of the civil rights movement, black Christians felt immense frustration toward their white counterparts: “When we misremember the civil rights movement.... we forget and ignore the festering and deepening racial alienation—including between those who had been allies during the movement’s heyday—that marked its end.”<sup>29</sup> Because white American Christian social memory forgets the historical reality that racism and racial injustice persisted during and after civil rights movement, we cannot fulfill our longing for reconciliation. Because we inadequately diagnose the problem, we also inadequately formulate a solution.

Also dominating white Christian collective memory in the United States is the narrative of American exceptionalism.<sup>30</sup> Certainly white American Christians have not forgotten slavery,

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. “I Have a Dream...” *National Archives*, published 1963 and accessed January 28, 2018. <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 15-41.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *National Archives*, published April 16, 1963 and accessed February 15, 2018. <https://www.archives.gov/research/aic/reference/black-history-topical.html>

<sup>29</sup> Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 103.

but our dominant narrative of American progress tells us that we have overcome it: Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, Martin Luther King Jr. ended segregation, and we elected a black president. As Americans, “we the people”<sup>31</sup> pride ourselves on having constructed an exceptional form of government—“a more perfect union”<sup>32</sup> However, despite the positive values that our American narrative extols, the narrative of American exceptionalism has a particularly problematic past—a past that white American Christians collectively ignore because it is too ugly to look at—beginning as the narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism.

The English colonists of what became the United States of America thought of themselves as the descendants of the Anglo-Saxons—an ancient Germanic tribe who believed themselves to be genetically superior to all other races: “Morality and freedom flowed through the Anglo-Saxon veins. The instinct for liberty was essentially genetic.”<sup>33</sup> Following the English legacy of self-perceived genetic superiority, American founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson reasoned that defending liberty permitted exterminating anyone who lacked Anglo-Saxon heritage: “this unfortunate race, whom we had been taking so much pains to save and to civilize, have by their unexpected desertion and ferocious barbarities justified extermination, and now await our decision on their fate.”<sup>34</sup> White colonists of what became the United States of

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<sup>30</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), 3-44 and 90-130.

<sup>31</sup> “The Constitution of the United States: A transcription.” *National Archives*, reviewed October 23, 2017 and accessed January 28, 2018. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> “Thomas Jefferson to David Bailie Warden, 29 December 1813,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified November 26, 2017, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0046>.

America—the carriers of English social memory—imagined that they had inherited the genetic material for liberty and democracy, substantiating their claim to perfect governance.<sup>35</sup>

The narrative of American exceptionalism is inherently a white supremacist narrative. Even during the twentieth century, white people openly acknowledged the link between American exceptionalism and white supremacy. In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson praised the infamous film *Birth of a Nation*, openly sanctioning the white supremacist propaganda of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>36</sup> In the United States, English language proficiency and having white skin<sup>37</sup> signaled the right to property and autonomy, which ultimately resulted in the conflation of whiteness and Anglo-Saxonism: “Whiteness signified that the immigrants were Anglo-Saxon *enough*. From all appearances, they were indistinguishable from blood-carrying Anglo-Saxons.”<sup>38</sup> The narrative of American exceptionalism emerged from the narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, entrenched in white supremacy.

Americans not only conceive of the United States as democratic nation, but also as a Christian nation. The narrative of America as God’s chosen nation began with the United States’ original colonists.<sup>39</sup> Remembering the Israelites who escaped oppression by crossing the Red Sea, the Puritans imagined their journey via the Atlantic Ocean as the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land.<sup>40</sup> Imagining themselves as the new Israelites, the Puritans believed that God had forged a covenant with his chosen people: “Because God had elected them, this nation both

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<sup>35</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 3-44.

<sup>36</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*. 18-20.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 39. Emphasis Mine.

<sup>39</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *America, Amerikkka: Elect Nation and Imperial Violence*, (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2007) 7-33.

<sup>40</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 3-44, and Ruether, *America, Amerikkka*, 26-36.

monopolizes true knowledge of Christianity and has a right to expand, to colonize the land of the Americas...”<sup>41</sup> Creating a white American Christian memory that aligns American Christians with the former slaves of Egypt, the early American Protestants justified their occupation and violent conquest of what became the United States—imagined as the Puritans’ Promised Land.

For Christians, *our* participation in the preservation of white supremacy threatens the integrity of our faith. By framing America as an exceptional nation elected by God, the Puritans provide the United States with a divinely ordained, supposedly *Christian* obligation to expand territorially and spread the gospel of democracy: “This expansion is an expression of a unique mission entrusted by God to this American people to be the exponents of liberty and self-government.”<sup>42</sup> Just as this narrative legitimated English colonialism, it has also served to legitimate American imperialism throughout our history. When the narrative of America’s divine election is exceptionalism is conflated with American exceptionalism, it too becomes a white supremacist narrative.<sup>43</sup> Because these narratives function to support white supremacy, they corrupt white American Christian memory of Jesus whose main concern was the immediate and tangible wellbeing of the poor—not the flourishing of the rich and exceptional.

We must remember white American Christianity’s terrible history of white supremacy—a narrative that we desperately suppress with the narrative of racial progress. Creating sustainable relationships between human beings means that Americans must collapse the ideology of American exceptionalism: “there must be explicit theological critique of those ideological themes that have been exploited by the theology of ‘America’ as elect nation, chosen by God to

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<sup>41</sup> Ruether, *America, Amerikkka*, 31.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-91.

dominate and redeem the world.”<sup>44</sup> Reckoning with our social memory of American exceptionalism and America as God’s chosen nation should create a serious moral crisis for white American Christians because it means that the narrative of white supremacy is not *only* an American narrative, but it is also an American *Christian* narrative.

#### BLACK AMERICAN CHRISTIAN SOCIAL MEMORY

Liberation theology, which began as a 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American Catholic movement, advocates for wellbeing of people oppressed by individuals and institutions, explicitly opposing white supremacy and all social powers that threaten human dignity. Harnessing the power of collective memory, liberation theologians remember the heart of Christian ministry as “God’s preferential option for the poor.”<sup>45</sup> In particular, black liberation theologians have used resources within the Christian tradition, such as the stories of the Exodus and Jesus’ crucifixion, to imagine human sin and God’s salvation both collectively and individually.<sup>46</sup> Through the resurrecting power of God’s in-the-world salvation, liberation theologians seek to improve the conditions of oppressed people by remembering Jesus who challenged sinful social, political, and economic structures.

Black liberation theology provides counter-narratives<sup>47</sup> to the dominant (and sometimes forgotten or repressed) narratives of white American Christian collective memory and history. Black people have been reframing white narratives for generations, affirming their essential

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>45</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1988).

<sup>46</sup> See the *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James Cone, *Stand Your Ground* by Kelly Brown Douglas, and Dr. Martin Luther King’s most famous speeches.

<sup>47</sup> In the black American Christian context, creating counter-narratives is known as “signifyin’.” Signifyin’ is method of narrative defiance used within the black community: “[signifyin’] has come in the form of double talk or coded language, as seen in the spirituals and the blues. Sometimes it is simply ‘repetition with a difference.’ In the main, signifyin’ is one of the ways in which black people have spoken truth about and to power.” See Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 214 to read this quote in context.

humanity in the face of white supremacy. As white American Christians seek a theology of transformation, we need the insights of black liberation theologians like Martin Luther King Jr., James Cone, and Kelly Brown Douglas who have already reframed American and Christian stories in ways that reject white supremacy. By collectively remembering Jesus' radical solidarity with suffering people in the stories of the civil rights movement, segregation, slavery, and lynching, black American Christian memory rejects the narrative of white supremacy. In particular, they reframe the story of the Exodus and Jesus' crucifixion to identify God's preferential option for the poor.

Like in white American Christian social memory, black American Christians remembers the civil rights movement as advocating for desegregation. However, black American Christian collective memory also provides a counter-narrative. Douglas argues that in the "Dream" speech that "King drew upon America's belief that it was God's city on a hill to call it to task for its treatment of its black citizens."<sup>48</sup> King repeated the narrative of Winthrop's city on a hill, but "with a difference."<sup>49</sup> In King's version of the narrative, God calls Americans to shine a light on the problem of racism. King's dream subverts and regrades white American Christianity's collective memory, using it to justify racial justice. Malcolm X immediately provided a counter-narrative to Martin Luther King's nonviolent movement against white supremacy: "'While King was having a dream,' Malcolm told a reporter shortly after King's 1963 March on Washington address, 'the rest of us Negroes are having a nightmare.'"<sup>50</sup> While Malcolm X critiqued Christianity, James Cone argues that the Christianity that Malcolm X knew was not truly

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<sup>48</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 214.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>50</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 49. Emphasis Mine.

Christian at all. It was the product of the narrative of white supremacy's corruption of white American Christian social memory.

Many black Christians were hesitant to support Black Power because of the violent nature of the movement; however, as early as the 1970s, James Cone asserted that the goals and message of Black Power were consistent with Christianity, irreversibly influencing the relationship between black liberation theology and the civil rights movement. By aligning the message of Jesus with the message of Black Power, James Cone makes Malcolm X a central figure in the black American Christian collective memory. Cone argues that “the work of Christ is essentially a liberating work, directed *toward and by* the oppressed. Black Power embraces that very task.”<sup>51</sup> White people are not saviors, freeing black people from the grips of oppression—in fact, we have collectively created the context for oppression. Black Power is consistent with Christianity because “shouting Yes to black humanness and No to white oppression is exorcizing demons on both sides of the conflict.... The call for Black Power is precisely the call to shoulder the burden of liberty in Christ, risking everything to live not as slaves but as free [people].”<sup>52</sup> Challenging white American Christian narratives, Cone argues that the task of liberation is not the task of the oppressors, but instead the duty of the people who experience oppression. However, when oppressed people experience God's salvation, Cone asserts, Christ also saves the oppressors.

During the time of American slavery, black American Christian slaves began remembering God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression. Defying the narrative of white supremacy, slaves sang spirituals as a form of resistance,<sup>53</sup> using Biblical analogies to

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<sup>51</sup>James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997) 42. Emphasis Mine.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 42-43.

articulate an imagined future. Black American Christians reclaim the Exodus story from the Puritans, who imagined themselves as the new Israelites. Dichotomizing Egypt and Israel, Pharaoh and Moses, slavery and the Promised Land, black American Christians often remember the story of the Exodus in spirituals and sermons. In the Biblical story of the Exodus, the Israelites are slaves in Egypt when God calls Moses to liberate the Hebrew people. When the Egyptian Pharaoh refuses to release the Israelites, God sends a series of ten plagues upon the Egyptians. Each time God “hardens” Pharaoh’s heart, and Moses resolutely demands that he free the Israelites. By God’s will, Moses parts the Red Sea, providing a path for the Hebrews to flee to safety. After an additional forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites finally reach the Promised Land.

Remembering the collective history passed down from black slaves, King analogizes the black freedom struggle to the struggle of the Israelites. King famously closes “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” proclaiming: “And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!”<sup>54</sup> Just as Moses fails to reach the Promised Land, King was assassinated before his dream was realized. But King knew that the journey to the Promised Land was collective, not individual. When King says “we, as a people,” he publicly remembers that the struggle for salvation is the tangible presence of God’s justice experienced not only individually, but also collectively.

Alluding to the story of the Exodus throughout his sermons, King unites the black American Christian narrative memory with the story of the Israelites, envisioning a group identity that counters white supremacy. By publicly claiming a narrative of black American

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 94-103.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” *American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches*, delivered April 8, 1968, accessed February 14, 2018.

Christianity's past, King defines his group's shared future, applying the narrative frame of the Exodus story to his own context. According to Entman's criteria for narrative framing, King also reframes white American Christianity's perceived problems, causes, moral landscape, and future goals. King's narrative frame identifies the problem as injustice against black Americans and the cause as racism. King defines the moral norm as freedom, which necessitated Moses's call from God to liberate the Israelites and legitimates his call to work for liberation. Using social agency, King relies on the shared narrative of Moses and the Exodus to indicate his political and spiritual agenda: freedom from racism and white supremacy.

Imagined as characters in the modern Exodus story, Harriet Tubman—like Martin Luther King Jr.—is also remembered as a Moses for her people. In keeping with liberation theology, the slaves worked for collective, in-the-world salvation in addition to personal, heavenly salvation. Just as Moses (by God's will) led the Israelites out of slavery, Tubman led more than 300 people to freedom in the North as the conductor of the Underground Railroad.<sup>55</sup> Scholars assert that slaves used spirituals like "Go Down, Moses" as veiled language to voice plans for escape, singing "Go down Moses / Way down in Egypt land / Tell all pharaohs to / Let my people go!"<sup>56</sup> Alluding to Exodus 9:1 in this spiritual, black slaves demanded freedom—not just individual freedom, but collective freedom.

Black American Christian social memory tends to remember Jesus and Moses almost interchangeably, creatively minimizing the distinction between Jesus and Moses. For example, the slave spiritual "O the Dying Lamb!" uses a common epithet for Jesus—namely, the Lamb—

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<sup>55</sup> Leslie Anderson Morales, "Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People." *Appleseeds* 6, no. 7 (March 2004): 4. MasterFILE Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed January 30, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> "African American Spirituals," *Library of Congress*, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/>

to describe Moses: ““I wants to go where Moses trod, / O de dying Lamb!””<sup>57</sup> Matthew’s gospel frequently draws parallels between the two figures, but America’s Christian slaves “tended to merge Jesus into Moses and Moses into Jesus.... producing out of two figures one liberator who promised individual deliverance from sins and collective deliverance from slavery.”<sup>58</sup> This unique amalgamation of Moses and Jesus counters the white American Christian narratives told by slaveholders. The slaves conceptualized of salvation as not only a heavenly reward, but also as the in-the-world presence of God’s justice.

For black American Christians, Jesus is intimately connected to the Exodus story of freedom from slavery. Just as Moses worked to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian oppression, black liberation theology remembers Jesus in solidarity with suffering people—“the ‘crucified’ class of his day.”<sup>59</sup> By identifying Jesus with the black slaves, black American Christians resist the narrative of white supremacy that continues to undermine black liberty and life. Carrying the memory of the black American Christian slaves, black liberation theology implicitly compares Jesus and Moses. As Douglas writes that the “Jesus story serves as a ‘new exodus.’”<sup>60</sup> Just as Moses liberated his people from Egyptian slavery, Jesus confirmed God’s “preferential option for freedom.”<sup>61</sup> As Douglas’ reflection on the Exodus story demonstrates, the parallels between Jesus and Moses continue to influence black American Christians’ collective memory.

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone unites the narrative of Jesus’ crucifixion with the horrors of lynching in the United States. From the 1880s to the 1940s, the

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<sup>57</sup> “O the dying Lamb!” quoted by Stephen Prothero, “Black Moses,” *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2003), 210.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>59</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 174

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

looming threat of becoming the victim of the lynch mob dominated the concerns of black Americans. Although legal rights to property and liberty were nominally granted to black people after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the white mob continued to restrict access to physical space, effectively excluding black people from their legal rights. Especially disturbing for justice-seeking white American Christians, “spectacle lynchings” enjoyed “the explicit sanction of local and state authorities with tacit approval from federal government, members of the white media, *churches*, and universities.”<sup>62</sup> In 1866, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) emerged, committed to terrorizing black people. As a nominally Christian organization, the KKK enjoyed the support and protection of churches, politicians, and legal institutions.<sup>63</sup> As Ireland Hill, a black Texan woman who lived through the Jim Crow era, recalls in an interview with Angela Sims: ““We knew exactly what to do if we went to town. You know, you stayed your distance—whatever you wanted to do you did it—back in the colored part of town.””<sup>64</sup> White supremacists, supported by the collective silence of complicit white people, policed black access to space and resources, meaning that a black person on the white side of town could be taken to prison or the lynching tree.

The memory of Jesus’ suffering and solidarity with suffering people is at the heart of black American Christian social memory, functioning as a collective narrative that gives black people a sense of shared history, purpose, and identity. Cone’s narrative frame identifies the cause of Jesus’ crucifixion as “mob hysteria and Roman imperial violence.”<sup>65</sup> Defining the moral norm as liberation from suffering and death, the solution to the crucifixion is Jesus’ resurrection

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<sup>62</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Sims, *Lynched*, 10.

<sup>65</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 31.

and salvation, Cone writes that “in the resurrection of the Crucified One, God could transmute defeat into triumph, ugliness into beauty, despair into hope, the cross into resurrection.”<sup>66</sup> Cone publicly remembers Jesus’ crucifixion in light of lynching in the United States, creating a collective memory.

Identifying the suffering of black people in the United States with the suffering of Jesus on the cross, Cone names the cause as racism embodied by white power. Representing the black theological imagination, Cone remembers that death is not the end of Jesus’ story; Jesus’ death is followed by the resurrection. The solution to lynching is resurrection and salvation: “African Americans embraced the story of Jesus, the crucified Christ, whose death they claimed paradoxically gave them life, just as God resurrected him... While the lynching tree symbolized white power and ‘black death,’ the cross symbolized divine power and ‘black life’—God overcoming sin and death.”<sup>67</sup> The lynching tree, like the cross, reminded black American Christians that even in defeat, there is hope, for Jesus found victory in defeat.

Douglas highlights the narrative of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well as a central story of Jesus’ ministry. Consistent with black liberation theology as a whole, Douglas frames Jesus in solidarity with suffering people. Douglas’ narrative of Jesus’ ministry posits that Jesus rejects his socially constructed privilege, supported by narratives of patriarchy, to proclaim his solidarity with all people experiencing oppression. The Samaritan woman occupies several social identities that multiply her experience of oppression: her ethnicity, gender, and class combine to designate her as promiscuous and impure. On the other hand, Jesus occupies several social identities that reduce his experience of oppression: his Jewishness and maleness give him power in his religious and patriarchal context. Nevertheless, Jesus, as God incarnate, chooses to

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 18.

align himself with the Samaritan woman, affirming her inherent worth. Douglas' retelling frames Jesus' ally-ship with the social outcasts as a central to Christian identity.<sup>68</sup>

Black liberation theology imagines Jesus' salvation as a temporal, collective experience that, through Jesus' solidarity with those who suffering, frees subjugated people. Black American Christian collective memory of the crucifixion as told by theologians like Kelly Douglas and James Cone, frames the problem as crucifying violence, sanctioned by in-the-world oppressors. By suffering on the cross, Jesus demonstrates his solidarity with all people who suffer. In the gospels, "Jesus fully strips himself of all pretensions to power, privilege, and exceptionalism, even as the incarnate revelation of God. What is clear is Jesus' free and steadfast identification with crucified bodies."<sup>69</sup> Because of his resurrection, Jesus promises salvation from in-the-world, crucifying violence, pledging solidarity with those who suffer. As DiAngelo writes, "[m]aintaining the connection between the cross and the 'empty tomb' is essential to the meaning of the resurrection itself...It makes clear that the evil that God overcomes is historical, that is, that God really defeats the powers of this world."<sup>70</sup> In Jesus' resurrection, black American Christian collective memory identifies God's solution for crucifying violence as *both* temporal salvation *and* heavenly salvation.

#### TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

In order to understand our complicity in structures built on the assumption of white supremacy, white American Christians need a new conception of sin and salvation that recognizes both individual and communal contributions to sin and works for in-the-world salvation. As feminist scholar Nancy Pineda-Madrid writes, "[Christians] need to interpret

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<sup>68</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 174-179.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

salvation through a personal and individual lens, but when we reduce salvation to only this, it is not Christian salvation. To interpret salvation socially is to bring the crucified peoples down from the cross.”<sup>71</sup> Because storytelling is an act of social agency,<sup>72</sup> the narratives that we choose to tell can be changed—or transformed. By reimagining our collective memory, white American Christians can live a theology of transformation. A theology of transformation first entails examining the narratives that we choose to tell about others, but especially the narratives that we choose to tell about ourselves. We white American Christians will respond to liberation theology by rejecting the narratives of our collective memory that sustain racism, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression. Living a theology of transformation means that we will begin to tell new stories, stories that make Jesus’ love for all people the central theme, framing problems, solutions, and moral norms accordingly.

We white America Christians must engage with liberation theology in order to dismantle the false narrative of white supremacy. While liberation theology rightly uplifts people experiencing oppression, theologies of liberation must also transform those who play the part of the oppressor. White American Christians need liberation not because we suffer from oppression but from our active and passive roles as oppressors. James Cone argues that, paradoxically, “unrestricted freedom is a form of slavery...therefore when blacks assert their freedom in self-determination, whites too are liberated”<sup>73</sup> because those who oppress others also oppress themselves. White American Christians need to transform our relationship to our own whiteness in order to transform our relationships with our neighbors. Until white American Christians confront our collective history of white supremacy and name our sins, we will not see

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<sup>71</sup> Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011) 152.

<sup>72</sup> Weedon and Jordan. “Collective Memory,” 146.

<sup>73</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 41.

reconciliation between the white church and communities of color. The power dynamics produced by white supremacy will continue to invade our relationships with our fellow Christians and our fellow Americans—preventing white Christians from engaging in a theology of transformation.

Justice-oriented white American Christians are attempting to wrestle with our collective history of white supremacy and its modern manifestations. As Jennifer Harvey notes, during the past two decades, mainline American Protestant denominations have consistently named diversity and inclusion as central Christian values—attempting to remember Jesus by loving our neighbors. Many churches have intentionally sought reconciliation between white communities and communities of color, organizing conversations about racial differences between congregants. Many Christians hope that by engaging in dialogue and friendship, we will achieve unity by transcending our racial differences. Unfortunately, the ethic of transcendence contributes to a color-blind theology that fails to account for the different realities of black and white American Christian memory and experience. Despite increased dialogue between people of different races and deliberate efforts to welcome racially diverse populations, racial discord remains prevalent within American Christianity.<sup>74</sup>

Jennifer Harvey argues that rather than understanding interracial dialogue through the lens of reconciliation, we must transition to the paradigm of reparations. *Dear White Christians* provides us with a way to transform our relationships with Christians of color. Our new roles with our black American Christian peers must redistribute power stolen by institutionalized privileges. This redistribution of social power and economic resources is known as reparations. Only a paradigm of reparations accounts for the historical relationships between white and black

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<sup>74</sup> Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 18-41.

communities that produce asymmetrical access to power and resources. Instead of arguing that racial division causes racial tensions, the reparations paradigm argues that white supremacy causes racial tensions. As social memory theory tells us, the description of the problem and the perceived solution comes from the narratives groups tell about their shared history. By reframing the problem, the reparations paradigm guides white Christians toward a solution that takes into account the particular power dynamics that shape the problem. White Christians must redefine the problem as white supremacy, and the solution as reparations, calling for the redistribution of material resources in order to repent for the sin of slavery and its modern-day legacies.

Many justice-seeking white American Christians hesitate at the word reparations, saying that reparations are fiscally impractical. Perhaps on a national scale reparations are not economically feasible, but the church is not beholden to economic expediency. We follow Jesus, who turned over the tables of the moneychangers, asking, ““Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a robbers’ den.’”<sup>75</sup> As Christians, we are called to follow the example of Jesus, who uplifted the poor without regard for economic prudence. Just as black liberation heroes have used resources within the Christian tradition to define their social memory, we must also use narrative resources within our tradition to advocate for a theology of transformation. Following the lead of black liberation theology, white Christians can harness the power of social memory to disrupt white American Christianity’s allegiance to the narratives of white supremacy, participating instead in a narrative of transformation, reparations, and finally, reconciliation.

However, the social narratives of black liberation theology present unique challenges for white Christians who engage with liberation theology. Black liberation theologians often articulate God’s preferential option for the poor through the story of the Exodus, identifying the

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<sup>75</sup> Mk 11:17

plight of black people with the slavery of the Israelites under Egyptian domination. But for white Christians, identifying with the slaves in Exodus is grossly inappropriate; based on historical precedent, white Christians would certainly identify with the Egyptians. Throughout American history, white people consistently play the part of oppressors. Facing the opposition of powerful white people, people of color have relentlessly asserted their dignity and autonomy. Likewise, Moses asked the Pharaoh ten times to free the Israelites, but each time, “the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land.”<sup>76</sup> Justice-oriented white Christians long for racial reconciliation, but the Exodus story offers no narrative guidance for white Christians seeking repentance and reparations.

Entman’s model of framing demonstrates the difficulties white American Christians face when retelling the Exodus story. If black Christians are the Israelites and white Christians are the Egyptians, this story frames the problem as slavery and its cause as the Egyptian’s unwillingness to relinquish power. Because God sides with Moses, it is easy to evaluate the moral landscape of the story: freedom is God’s will. The Egyptians—the stand-ins for white Christians—repeatedly ignore God’s will. Rather than acting as allies in Moses’ struggle to lead the Israelites to freedom, the Egyptians actively and passively accept the institution of slavery. As the theories of social memory demonstrate, collective memory creates group identity. The Exodus story provides a powerful model for black Christians escaping injustice. But the Exodus story provides no direction for justice-oriented white Christians. Our particular history requires a different story to lay the foundation for collective memory. We cannot continue to resist God’s will for freedom. In order to change our group identity, we must interrupt, displace, and replace our collective memories that make us complicit with white supremacy. We need a story of reparations. We need a story of transformation.

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<sup>76</sup> Ex 11:10

A paradigm of reparations has scriptural precedent, meaning that all Christians should take it seriously. The parable of The Rich Young Man is in all three synoptic gospels, calling the rich to redistribute power and resources to the poor. When the young man asks Jesus how to obtain eternal life, Jesus answers, “go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”<sup>77</sup> But like white American Christians, the rich man clings to his social and economic privilege. The Biblical story of Zacchaeus also operates under Harvey’s reparations paradigm, providing a model for white Christians to re-envision our relationships with black Christians. While Zacchaeus is featured only in Luke, the story of Zacchaeus is consistent with the gospel’s memory of Jesus.

The story of Zacchaeus has the potential to help reframe white Christianity’s conception of race relations in the United States, shifting from a reconciliation paradigm to a reparations paradigm and beginning a theology of transformation. Luke 19:1-10 tells the story of a wealthy tax collector named Zacchaeus. Eager to see a glimpse of Jesus, Zacchaeus climbed atop a sycamore tree. When Jesus saw him, he called Zacchaeus down from the tree, prompting the crowd to loudly complain, for Jesus chose to eat and lodge with a tax collector and representative of the oppressive Roman regime. As the crowd scorns his privilege, Zacchaeus repents, saying: “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”<sup>78</sup> In so doing, Zacchaeus offers reparations.

The story of Zacchaeus provides a Biblical model for a theology of transformation. Framing the problem as Zacchaeus’ abuse of power as a tax collector, the crowd deems Zacchaeus’ actions as morally reprehensible. The narrative’s solution to this moral conundrum is Zacchaeus’ redistribution of his material resources. As a character representing imperial power

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<sup>77</sup> Mt 19:21, Mk 10:21, Lk 18:22

<sup>78</sup> Lk 19:8

and privilege, white American Christians should identify with Zacchaeus. Unlike the Exodus story, the Lukan story of Zacchaeus addresses Christian expectations for people who occupy positions of historically constructed privilege, possess material wealth, and hold social power. Zacchaeus provides a model for today's white American Christians to meaningfully engage with our white privilege.

Aiding our understanding of the Zacchaeus story, Douglas Oakman, a historical Jesus scholar and white American Christian, explains the social privilege of tax collectors in ancient Rome. Oakman argues that debt predominated peasant concerns during the time of Jesus. In an agrarian context, a low yield and food insecurity threatened the survival of peasants; “[w]hen this was compounded with low productivity or successive bad years, default ensued. The tax collector, or a wealthy man advancing his credit, might insist on securing a fiscal debt through property”<sup>79</sup> (Oakman 32). While peasants struggled simply to survive, Roman authority demanded exorbitant taxes. Both social and economic powers multiplied the oppression of the peasants, privileging tax collectors and Roman elites in the process.

Because the Zacchaeus story reframes the problem as Zacchaeus' abuse of power and the solution as the termination of Zacchaeus' power, this story provides white Christians with a model for reparations that the Exodus story certainly cannot. Zacchaeus does not simply apologize, seeking reconciliation: he offers reparations. He redistributes power and resources in order to repair his relationships with his neighbors, transforming the ways in which they will experience togetherness. It is only after Zacchaeus offers reparations—after Zacchaeus has experienced spiritual transformation—that Jesus says: “Today salvation has come to this

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<sup>79</sup> Douglas Oakman, *Jesus, Debt, and the Lord's Payer: First-Century Debt and Jesus' Intentions*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014) 32.

house.”<sup>80</sup> By pursuing in-the-world social justice, God’s salvation enters the temporal, human world in which Zacchaeus lives. The story of Zacchaeus typifies collective, temporal salvation through reparations—the result of a spiritual transformation.

Also symbolizing his access to power, Zacchaeus sits atop a tree sycamore tree, high above the crowd. Sycamore trees are massive, growing as wide as ten feet in diameter and as tall as one hundred feet high. As the sycamore trees age, the wood becomes hollow, allowing wildlife to hide inside.<sup>81</sup> Like Zacchaeus, we white Christians hide from our history of white supremacy in sycamore trees—ironically insulated by the bastion of white supremacy that we desperately want to forget. Like Zacchaeus, white Christians occupy a position of social power, producing an unequal distribution of material and social resources. Historically, we white Christians have sat atop the sycamore tree of white supremacy, enjoying our undeserved privileges. But Jesus beckons white American Christians to “hurry and come down” from that tree of white supremacy.<sup>82</sup> Zacchaeus came down from the sycamore tree, abandoning his protected place of privilege. Showing God’s desire for both personal and collective salvation, “[Jesus] interacts with Zacchaeus not merely as a corrupt member of a warped society, but as an individual in need of redemption.”<sup>83</sup> Jesus calls white Christians to lay down our power and seek communion with the whole body of Christ. Seeking reconciliation, Zacchaeus “hurried down and was happy to welcome [Jesus].”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Lk 19:9

<sup>81</sup>Jackie Carroll, “Sycamore Tree Care: How to Grow a Sycamore Tree,” *Gardening Know How*, published March 25, 2015, accessed February 14, 2018, <https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/trees/sycamore/sycamore-tree-care.htm>.

<sup>82</sup> Lk 19:6

<sup>83</sup> Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 34.

<sup>84</sup> Lk 19:6

Perhaps Zacchaeus was surprised when he was met by anger and derision, as the crowd called him a “sinner.”<sup>85</sup> White people seeking racial reconciliation are often surprised and frustrated when our efforts toward interracial unity are met by resentment.<sup>86</sup> Like Zacchaeus, white American Christians must remember our history as oppressors. Sycamore trees have invasive root systems that damage sidewalks and obstruct plumbing systems, posing a threat to surrounding objects.<sup>87</sup> When we seek communion with black Christians—people whom we have historically marginalized through our active or complicit participation in the narrative of white supremacy—we are trespassers, bringing our privilege into the very spaces designed to protect black Christians from the brutal, life-threatening effects of these privileges.

Because of our different experiences and privileges, black American Christians relate to the sycamore tree as the lynching tree. As we white Christians sit on that tree enjoying the privileges of whiteness, black Christians “[have] to walk past that hangman’s tree.”<sup>88</sup> While Zacchaeus enjoyed his stolen wealth, the Roman peasants continued to suffer—fearing that Zacchaeus might take what they needed to survive. Similarly, Reverend Kidd describes the terror of walking past that sycamore tree—the lynching tree—remembering, “[t]he innermost part of myself was frightened beyond the ability almost to move.... It made you think, what would happen and what could happen if you were in the company of whites. It was always there. That intestinal ache on the inside of your body.”<sup>89</sup> As white people, we have the privilege to forget

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<sup>85</sup> Lk 19:7

<sup>86</sup> DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” 56.

<sup>87</sup> Grant, Bonnie L., “Tree Root Systems: Learn About Problem Tree Roots,” *Gardening Know How*, published March 30, 2015, accessed February 14, 2018, <https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/trees/tgen/problem-tree-roots.htm>.

<sup>88</sup> Reverend Clarence Parker Kidd qtd in Angela Sims, *Lynched*, 90.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

the terrible roots of the social and economic inequality between black and white American Christians, but as Christians, we have a moral obligation to remember and reject white privilege.

To prevent the roots of white supremacy from invading our relationships and threatening black lives, cutting down the sycamore tree is not enough. Sycamore trees have invasive root systems, meaning that, “[t]ree removal is often the only answer and the stump should be ground to prevent the continued growth of roots.”<sup>90</sup> As justice-oriented Christians, we must reject the narrative roots that give nutrients to the tree of white supremacy. We cannot simply cut down the sycamore tree; we must dig up the roots and destroy the whole, enormous tree. Unless black Christians enjoy the social power and resources afforded to white Christians, Christians cannot experience the healing power of God’s justice and salvation. We must work to redistribute social and material resources, for “there is no justice without power.”<sup>91</sup> Only then, when we destroy the sycamore tree of white supremacy that invades our interracial relationships, can we experience racial reconciliation and work toward a theology of transformation.

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<sup>90</sup> Grant, Bonnie L., “Tree Root Systems: Learn About Problem Tree Roots,” *Gardening Know How*, published March 30, 2015, accessed February 14, 2018, <https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/trees/tgen/problem-tree-roots.htm>.

<sup>91</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 61.

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