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Race Is a Story Written on My Body

"You have to choose. Pick a box, white or black," my mother told me in the lobby of the bank, the blank social security form laid out on the glass table. "It doesn't really mean anything. It's just a government form, but you can only choose one," she said. But, for a six-year-old everything has meaning. So I considered my mom and dad. I considered myself, lighter skin than my brother and father, straight auburn hair like my mother. To be real, I liked her better. "White," I said after these quick calculations. But of course it didn't have any meaning. "Black," my brother chose after doing his own internal math. This was the first moment I began to *tell* the story of my body, when I began to feel that my body was a story.

My mother wanted to believe that my decision didn't have any meaning. But of course it did. The story took shape in small ways at first, ways that I didn't intend. Somehow I

found myself in its pages. I would read its words. The words of race would read me.

"Why you talk like that?" We were all hanging on monkey bars during recess.

Me? "Talk like what? I talk like my mom and dad. Why do *you* talk like that?" I saw a "me" instead of an "us."

There were innocent middle school crushes and a few notes from girls whose skin was like mine, brown eyes, brown hair. They saw me as I walked through the halls, looked at me in ways the little white girls didn't. Were they like me? Was I like them? I'm ashamed to admit it, but I didn't think so at the time. Like most kids that try to navigate the purgatory of middle school, I tried to say who I was by being sure of what I wasn't. This is how we all come to understand who we are—drawing lines of similarity and distinction, conjuring an image of ourselves and doing our best to live into that image or resist it.

High school cafeterias held the usual questions. Where to sit? Who were my people? Race was an abyss. And something had changed in me. My hair did not hang down my face or part on the left. It had begun to curl and stand atop my head. It was unwieldy, alien, the first sign that I was not what I thought I was. In the midst of disorientation I found my way with a hasty kind of echolocation, throwing out sounds and listening for what bounced back—feeling and looking for difference, for safe places to continue swimming forward. I discovered that darker kids saw my body like theirs, even if I didn't yet. "You're black. Work on the MLK assembly with us."

Me? "I guess." I still feel the tremble when the first chord of "Lift Every Voice" sounded in my chest. This came from *my* people? I didn't walk toward the sound right away. It would take a Korean American woman to help me discover what it meant to be black.

We were nineteen and had a mutual friend who thought we'd connect. I called Gail Song on the phone and, I'll be honest, I thought I was talking to a black girl. (She probably thought she was talking to a white guy.) There was something in her cadence. She echoed the tremble I had heard in the hymn on MLK Day. She was a child of the in-between, too.

Gail was the child of Korean immigrants and grew up poor in a northern suburb of Chicago. Her friends were the "dark" kids who clung together in a sea of whiteness. On Sunday and Wednesday nights her family drove into the city to their Korean Pentecostal church for all-night prayer or Bible study. "You full Korean?" the grandmothers would ask her because her skin was a little darker and her eyes just a little deeper set. The echo in her voice came from the black church, though. When she could choose for herself she sought out her people, and she found them in the black Pentecostal churches.

We met in person for the first time two months after that first call and many letters later. Gail was beautiful. Deep tanned skin, brown eyes and hair with streaks of blond, big hoop earrings, and a laugh that poured joy into the room. She was driven and fun, gospel and classical. She was truly Pentecostal, speaking in many tongues.

To know her was to be drawn into two worlds. The first was the life of the black church. I just tried not to stare the first few times. This was not my Southern Baptist Church in Maryland. Gail swayed, clapped on the backbeat, knew when to "Amen" and when to "Yaasss." I remember thinking then that this woman was blacker than I would ever be.

But she also drew me into the world of Korean Americans, kimchee and bulgogi, cold-spicy noodles and never wearing shoes in the house; hanging back at the after-church potluck until most people have filled their plates and getting to the waiter first to pay the check at dinner. I was immersed in the tensions of becoming American, wanting to be seen as American, and I came to see that racism wasn't just a white thing. I saw that we were all caught in the story.

I'm sure she'd say I drew her into a new world too, butter and salad dressing, sharing your feelings and TV. I'm still not sure it was a fair exchange. In meeting Gail I discovered a freedom to explore the story of that tremble I had felt in high school, that I saw in her and felt in church. W. E. B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnett, Ida B. Wells, David Walker, Sojourner Truth; I discovered the terror and the power of the black story, of my story, and how my mixed body was threaded into this long history.

Race is this act of conjuring. As our lives entwined I began to feel the currents of race flow around us. I was undergoing a conversion, of sorts. I could not name it at the time, but when I was nineteen and began to read the history of my body and this word, race—and its children: white, black—I began to see the way I had been its unwitting

disciple. I followed its precepts and sought its appeasement. My desires, my loves were shaped by it. To become black would require a conversion.

I began to see new stories, new modes of being, new joys and imperfections. I saw myself inside this racial story, as a carrier of its truth and pain. To be black was to walk inside a struggle, a pressure that sought to name, encountered by declarations of what I was not or could not be. But to be black was also to survive, resist, overcome. Joy and flourishing could be revolutionary.

Race is not a history. Race is the story of our bodies, of our churches, of our faith. Race is a story that shapes the idea of what our bodies are for. It is a word that has de-created our world and us. Enacting an amazing capacity to name and to classify, to build and to use, our bodies have been drawn into a colonial idolatry where relationships, communities, nations are shaped by an idolatrous idea made flesh in our everyday lives. It might have begun with colonial ships, but it persists and marks us all. Whether we are old to America or new to this land, race encompasses all of our lives and we must navigate its effects on a daily basis. We are telling the story or we are resisting the story, but we cannot leave its pages.

We are all participating in the story of race. It is ubiquitous. It has shaped how we live, who we live with, how we see others, and how we see ourselves. Some suggest we should just become post-racial, as though we can train ourselves to see something other than race. But there will always be something, some difference that we use to justify the privilege of some and the suffering of others.

When I married Gail I saw how this story was not just a story of white and black. Her mother arrived in America at twenty-two and had to navigate language and neighborhood and food. Bananas and Chef Boyardee was what it meant to be American. Her father did not venture as far out into this new land, staying close to Korean neighborhoods and within Korean churches. But for Gail there was another level of complexity. The language of her home was not the language of her friends. The food of her home was not the food of her friends. At school she was asked, "Where are you from? No, where are you really from?"—every day the perpetual foreigner. She had to navigate how people interpreted her face as foreign even if America is the only place she had ever known.

But even as I heard the stories of alienation among Korean Americans I also sensed the divide between Korean Americans and black communities. Despite our mutual alienation, the story of race still wrote our bodies apart.

After we were married, Gail and I faced a decision every time we moved to a new city. Where should we go to church? The black nondenominational church, the multicultural charismatic church? the Korean American church? The question of race and faith were always intertwined.

When I was sixteen I became a Christian. When I was nineteen I became black. Christian identity and racial identity were never far apart in my life. They were both words and ideas that walked and talked and touched, meanings and truths bound to my body. I first encountered

the enfleshing, the embodiment of Christian identity in the transformation of my father. Growing up he was a kind man, but yoked to the bottle. He wasn't violent, but he was barely present. By the time I was eight he and my mom had divorced, even as they remained friends. I saw him choose little things over my brother and me, my mother. I saw him as the cause of my mother's loneliness and pain. But when I was fifteen I came home and was surprised to see him sitting at the kitchen table with Mom. He had cancer. Stage four. Three months to live.

He came to live with us and I discovered he had gotten sober. He was a Christian now. But I could feel his peace, even in my confusion. I found myself encountered by a God who speaks, becomes present through broken, imperfect people.

Jesus did not meet me in a dream or in a book or in a thought dropped from space. God encountered me in hugs and embraces and grief and mourning and laughter. God met me in potlucks and people who called me by my name. And in these people I met a God who became like me, who desired me so deeply that the difference between finitude and infinity was not so wide that this God could not traverse it to be with me, to be like me so that I could be a bit more like God, to be with God. In those teenage years I came to understand myself as Christian and black, two claims that I am still living into, still trying to discern what faithfulness looks like.

But in this journey I have come to understand that race and faith are not distinct, separate questions. That I thought they could be is the byproduct of a certain Christian story,

a Christian story that bears responsibility for the racism and sexism and violence of our world. It may not be the root cause, but there were not just guns and slaves on the boats that carried colonizers to the New World. There were Bibles, too.

Our world is indelibly marked by race, by violent differentiations of ethnicity, culture, and gender. I have no use for a Christianity that does not account for the ways our bodies are named and shaped. The ways we name our bodies and actions are never innocent and innocuous; our words matter. Our bodies do work. Every day I am encountered by a world that tries to name me. My very existence, my breathing and laughing and writing, arises out of a Word, a Word that authors all that I am. The relationship between words and bodies is not a voluntary area of consideration. For a Christian, it is *the* question of our identity.

If Christianity can separate the bodily questions that shape or misshape our everyday lives it is not a faith of the incarnate Word; it is a lie, a lie that denies our stories, our bodies, and how our bodies do work in the world.

We are stories. To say we are a story is not to suggest we create ourselves. Poetry, fiction, art is not about telling falsehoods, but speaking the truth. But we do not need fiction to tell stories about who we are and why we are. To say that identity, faith, or race is a story is to say that we are a product of history and that we participate in that history. We cannot extricate ourselves from it, but neither are we slaves to it. When I chose "white" on that form at six years old I began to tell a story about who I was. I retold that story as

I tried to explain to others (to myself) why I didn't talk like the other black kids or listen to the same music as my brother. But eventually I would have to see myself truthfully. I would have to tell another story about my body. I would have to tell my story alongside the body of my wife and eventually my children. But like my baptism, the Christian symbol of participating in Jesus's death and resurrection, I must name the story that is being put to death. I must struggle to discern what must die and what must live even as I emerge from the water, a new person. This is the call to discipleship. But this is not just a story of my spiritual identity. There are other stories that have shaped my body and my life: the story of race, the story of gender, the story of nation and class. These stories are woven into us, thread-by-thread, commercial-by-commercial, neighborhood-by-neighborhood, and sermon-by-sermon. What is the story of race that has shaped us? How can the Christian story help us to see ourselves, and one another, in more faithful ways? And even more, how can we live for one another's fullness and flourishing?

Our identities are about our bodies. Who we are is bound to how we live. I cannot call myself a soccer player and walk onto a basketball court with ice skates and a volleyball and hope to have anyone recognize me as a soccer player. To be a soccer player I choose certain clothes. Through hours of training I even develop a certain walk; I tend toward certain foods and away from others. I use shorthand words and I tend to see certain people because of my training schedule and I tend to not see others. A culture emerges around these patterns, and when my children are born they eat, sleep, and

breathe these patterns until they are not a choice, but simply a way of being. To be a soccer player is to be human, to be human is to walk this way, talk this way, eat this way. After a while I don't need the names to do the work. The walk does work. The talk does work. Who I am announces itself as I enter the room without saying a word. My body does work. These dynamics are not just individual but social and systemic. The way we read one another's bodies is connected to the ways our society has valued some bodies and devalued others. Media, neighborhoods, education all participate in this process of drawing us into a racial world.

Christianity is about a body that does work. It is a confession that arises from a people who speak of the creation of humanity as bearing God's very image, that our bodies are wonderful and beautiful. It is a confession that we were made for community and relationship and that our bodies are what make this image possible. It is a confession that arises from a God who is utterly different than creation. The ease with which we worship in racially and ethnically distinct churches in this country belies a tragic truth. In America, Jesus is only occasionally the center of Christian identity, especially for those who seem to utter his name so often. Too often, Christian identity in America is more about bodies governed by a racial ideal in the guise of a so-called Christianity. Race is more determinative for our lives than being a Christian. Race shapes who marries who, where we live and cannot live, who is more likely to be seen as guilty or innocent, who shapes our prospects for education or health. Race permeates our existence in this country. This story is not simply about

a few bad apples or an abstract notion of sin. This is about a Christian story that has not accounted for the body of Jesus or the bodies of those who believe.

More than twenty years from those two life-transforming conversions, racial and Christian identities are inseparable in my world. Both of these conversions required death so that I might find life. Envy. Lust. Jealousy. Insecurity. Greed. Cowardice. Embracing the life of Christ meant being willing to identify the aspects of my life that were so contrary to the peace of God's life, so contrary to the image of God knit into me from the beginning of time and reconstituted in me through Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection.

But maybe these were the easy things to see. When encountered by the history of my blackness something else had to die—the lie of my independence, of my autonomy, of my life only being my own. I was part of a people. My story was bound up on multiple sides of this tragic encounter, but I could not extricate myself from it. I would have to open my eyes to the ways I had been formed by the story, by the ways that I resisted and participated.

In awakening to my blackness I was also reborn in my faith. The living God, the God of flesh and blood, encountered me in new ways. There was more I needed to repent for than lies and lust. There was something else in me that needed to die. I had to awaken to the ways racial supremacy had shaped me, how it had formed me to see poverty or crime as individual issues rather than systemic problems. I had to awaken to how media and schools and friendships had shaped me. I had to awaken to the ways my

manhood authorized my voice while others were silenced or ignored. I had to awaken to see again an incarnate God who was not like me, a poor Jewish child conceived to an unwed mother in a colonized land.

But perhaps most of all, I was reborn into a realization that my body does work in this world. When I teach, when I walk down the street, my body is speaking and these words are powerful. But just like a disciple, I cannot know the meaning of these words fully. I must learn to listen and follow and deepen my understanding of the language that I am being taught to speak and live.

God wants us to be free. The heart of Christian confession is that God abhors the deaths we are subjected to. Scripture is the testament to God's continual desire for us to be alive, to love and be loved, to be with God and with one another. In our deluded sense of independence God reminds us of our essential relationality. In our exile or imprisonment God comes near. In the midst of our violation of others' bodies, bodies made in the image of God, God becomes like us, makes bodied life a part of God's own life. For lives repeatedly alienated through a thousand little comments or rendered invisible by society, God sees and names and touches. In the midst of these the incarnation is God's Word to us that our bodies were made to be free and to love.

When I read Scripture, encounter activists, hear poets, I am reminded that God desires our bodies to be free. God becomes like us so that we can become like God—so that we might love one another, be with one another, that our lives might mirror and participate in the community that is

God's life. This freedom is a bodily freedom. It is a freedom that animates where I live, who I marry, what vocations I aspire to. Freedom is the possibility of living a life without being perceived as a threat wherever I go, or having to prove that I might have something to contribute. Freedom is the possibility of discovering who I was created to be, which is enough of a challenge without the explicit and implicit messages that my body is an exception to what is beautiful, good, and wise.

Our world thwarts God's goodness, subjects one another's bodies to terror and abuse. Race, in particular, permeates so many of our contemporary terrors. The confluence of colonialism and whiteness (its supremacy and sovereignty) completely reshaped the world. The American slave system and current criminal justice system, global media, explosions of cosmetic surgeries that exalt Western myths of beauty, the persistence of whitening creams, postcolonial violence, and the seemingly unending cycle of terrorism and antiterrorism, all churn from the peculiar modern engine that is race.

Race cycles within sexism and patriarchy, arguably the most ancient of systemic sins. Black men who could brilliantly articulate the basis of their freedom would silence black women in their midst who co-built the churches, the marches and movements. White feminists could highlight the patriarchal exclusion of women from educational opportunities or workplace leadership and yet resist critiques that highlighted their complicity in racist structures. The masters' wives were no abolitionists.

To hope for the death of race is not to hope for a post-

racial utopia. No, race is not the particular hue of my body or the language I speak. Race is a system, an intuition, a systemic reflex that seeks to decipher who can use who. It is an imaginative frame that justifies the death of the Native and the violence of the colonist, the deportation of the Mexican worker and the citizenship of the Irish refugee. Race is a way of resisting difference by violently determining which differences matter. Race is about power, sovereignty, and how words can become enfleshed, part of our daily, bodily lives, shaping who we are.

We resist the words that are being spoken over us, seek different ways of stating who we are or should be. But even our refusals participate in this world because they have to respond to what has been said. Race is an illusion, a falsehood, a creation of man. Yes, but it is a creation the way "America" is a creation, a falsehood. Once there was a time when this land was called by other names, with different expectations of faithfulness. But now it is called America and some of its people "Americans" and others "alien." These names are now part of our story. Race lives now and we cannot simply return to a time before America, before whiteness or blackness. We cannot go back to the Native peoples and ask them what we should call it or how we should live. There are too many dead, too many roads, too many homes, and too many new names.

We will always be children of this racial world, even if race is long dead. But perhaps resurrection is possible. It created the world we live in. As disciples we follow, we live into a vision of truth. We develop practices and ways of seeing the

world. We do not always live into these words faithfully, but they shape how we think we should live, what we should hope for, and what we think we do or don't deserve.

Christian discipleship is life found in death. Perhaps Christian discipleship offers us a way forward because its life is found in death, even if what must die is not always for us to determine. Discipleship is a rediscovery of our bodies and lives; a life of following is entering into the mystery of what it means that God has made us in the image of God. Discipleship is a wrestling with the ways that our lives have been so deeply determined and deformed by this racial word that we can only begin by naming the death that it has brought to all of us. Like unknowing believers on the precipice of a baptismal pool, we must submit our bodies to death, even if we do not know what will still be alive when we emerge from the water.

In the beginning of our world there was a word. Its syllables were European ships crossing the sea, leathers ripped from dark bodies and replaced with button suits, chains clinging in cargo holds, and the moans and cries of dark bodies whose life was again and again twisted out. The world we live in now is intertwined with words uttered by men with the power to create a distorted order. Their words did not create like God creates, however. Theirs were words of de-creation, creating themselves by the death of the world that encountered them. It was an exercise of fear and hubris. We exist in the shadow of a moment where this hubris was not familial or local. The colonists shaped the entire globe. Wherever the ships went, they took with them a view of

themselves that had no room for difference. In this way, race is an incarnation, of sorts. Race is the embodiment of an idea that was brought into world. Race is the water out of which we are all born.

The death of race. But in the face of this terrifying truth it is also important to say that my body is not a race. Race is the structure of death, the dehumanizing and de-creating word a people sought to speak over the world, and violently succeeded. Race is what overshadows the world, conceiving our bodies and their differences as something to be perpetually overcome. Race is like cancer, a cell that shares a likeness to part of my world, and yet because of the slightest variance in its structure, it multiplies violently in my body until I am overrun and overdetermined by how it sees me, a body to be consumed.

I will not survive these deformed cells, this de-creating word, race, by pretending it does not exist. We cannot pretend that it is not there lying dormant in every body. No, I can only survive and prayerfully flourish if I can begin to see what my body is for and what it ought to be, if I can seek the life, relationships, and political organizations that can make that life possible for me and for others. I must first begin with what my body is. Surely I am more than a mind or a soul. Surely being made in the image of God is more than a capacity to name, to determine, to cut, hew, and build.

And I will not survive the death of race by hoping to simply get past it, to be post-racial. We cannot be post-racial because we cannot be post-story. We cannot escape the story that has formed us or the stories that shape the

world we live in. We cannot be post-racial because race is not about the differences that we see. It is about how those differences have come to form who we think we can be for one another. Race is a story bound to the death of certain bodies that continues to exert itself on how we live and hope in this world. Race was a de-creating word, a word that dehumanized and rendered dark bodies into things to be used. We must account for the deaths race has woven into our story as a people. In accounting for its destructive de-creation of the world, we can begin to see how our particular bodies and lives can begin to speak the deepest truth of Christian confession—that God desires us to be free, for one another and for God.

Race is not simply biology or the various physical marks that supposedly distinguish human beings from one another. Race is a network of ideas and beliefs that become enfleshed in our economy, our social life, and our national imagination. This web traps us in our skins, shapes how we see one another and our world. Death is always a part of race.

"Building" a new Christianity. To face the death of race as Christians we hope to witness to the justice, peace, and love of what God has done in the world through Christ. But like those first creatures who bore God's image in the garden, God calls us to participate, to work, to steward, maybe even to help build. Building could be seen as utilitarian, practical. But what you will find in these pages is not a step-by-step guide to overcoming race and racism. By build I mean to say that what is made requires our participation, our intention, counting the cost. But building is also a process that requires

understanding the materials with which we create, the challenges of building in a certain nook or on certain slopes. When I was in grad school I began to build my own bookshelves. I measured the wall's height and length. To be efficient I made a jig and pre-cut the sides and shelves. But when I began to put the shelves together along the wall the pieces did not fit quite right. The wall was actually different heights on each side. As I did more research and worked with other carpenters I discovered that building is about planning and adapting, that you have to measure and cut along the way. It means building as you go, not measuring everything before you begin, but cutting to fit the spaces you have.

Building a new Christianity is not to say we are building from nothing. Building suggests that we find ourselves in the midst of fragmented homes and fallen structures. Some are older and some are more recent, but what we have is somehow not suited to the conditions we find ourselves in, or that we have created for ourselves. So we must build, build from the pieces that have been left to us, both broken and beautiful, scattered pieces and whole foundations, to create a space that can witness to what God has done and is doing in our midst.

I realize that the idea of a new Christianity might seem like a bit of hubris. There is nothing truly new. So when I think of a "new" Christianity I mean a *Christian* sense of new, a baptismal sense of becoming new creatures, where we rise from the waters as newborns. We are not learning the world for the first time. We discover what our lives must look like as we live from the particularity of our bodies and our stories.

We must learn the patterns of faithfulness that we are called into and the patterns of unfaithfulness that have formed us or that we continue to live out of. We must discover what to confess about who we are and who God is.

Too many American churches especially have failed to see that far from being an answer, the church has been part of the problem, continuing to construct without recognizing the centrality of the body, the very timbers with which we build. Instead, I hope this is a beginning, a way to reimagine what it is that Christ calls us to in the midst of a world so violently marked by race. In this book I do not offer steps to reconciliation or a radical new world. What I hope for is a way of measuring our space more faithfully, of seeing our bodies and lives more faithfully so that we might know better what must be cut and what can be built together. I hope this book is a way of helping us to see our unfaithfulness, but also begin to see the beauty and gift of what it means to be made in the image of God. I hope that in this book we can begin to see why our bodies, in all of their beautiful particularity, are so important for being made in the image of God, and how race distorts the very quality that allows us to love and live with God, and one another.