

Unholy Trinity: The Violence of Anti-blackness

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Guns, poverty and race. What is the relationship between these three things. Most particularly, how has it happened that particular bodies—namely black bodies—have disproportionately victimized by the violent realities of guns and poverty and what can we, as a faith community, do about it? These are the questions that I will attempt to answer in the brief time before me. Let me begin.

In a 1967 speech defending black protestors rights to use violence “to rid ourselves of oppression,” Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, then known as H. Rap Brown, said “Violence is a part of America’s culture. It is as American as cherry pie.” While Al-Amin’s words received much criticism at the time, he actually spoke a truth about America—especially when it came to the black body, that perhaps even he did not even fully grasp.¹ It is a truth that allows us to understand this unholy trinity if you will between guns, poverty and race to which black bodies have fallen prey. For this unholy trinity points to two often ignored narratives that are integral to America’s identity—an identity which indeed fosters the violent culture to which Al-Amin points. They are the narratives of anti-blackness and white supremacy. Let us look first at this narrative of anti-blackness.

Anti-Blackness: A Narrative of Violence

The narrative of anti-blackness became most conspicuous with Europeans’ earliest incursions into the African continent. While ancient Greek and Roman scholars were certainly chauvinistic when it came to appraising the body aesthetic

¹ The version of this saying in American lore refers to apple not cherry pie.

of their own people, there is little evidence that color prejudice was integral in their thought or culture. In general, the reality of color prejudice is of Western origination, coming into full relief with the earliest European encounters with Africa.

While the belief that Africans were meant to be slaves was prevalent prior to European encroachments upon the African continent, an anti-black narrative was not as apparent until their arrival. As the historian Winthrop Jordan says, “one of the fairest-skinned nations [the English] suddenly came face to face with one of the darkest peoples on the earth.”²

Whether describing Africans as black was initially done with purposeful malicious intent is debatable, what is clear is that skin-color mattered to the Europeans in their encounters with a people seemingly starkly different from themselves. Furthermore, black was not a benign signifier. No less an authority than the Oxford English Dictionary had already established whiteness as a sign of innocence, purity and goodness, while blackness signified vileness, danger and evil. As far apart as the English complexion was from the African, the meaning of whiteness was from blackness. Consequently, to describe the Africans as black insured that the Eurocentric color-defined gaze would not remain innocent, if it ever was. It was only the beginning of anti-blackness that provided the aesthetic justification for the enslavement and other violent acts against the bodies of “black” men and women.

² Jordan, Winthrop D.. *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia) The University of North Carolina Press. Kindle Edition, 6)

As crucial as skin-color was, it was not the only physical feature that astonished these early white intruders and soon to be pillagers of Africa; nor was it the only aspect of the anti-black narrative. Europeans also noted the fullness of the African's lips, the broadness of their noses and the texture of their hair. It soon became very clear that there was more at play than just a shocked realization of the diversity of human creation. In the European imagination, the Africans' physiognomy signaled a genetic difference. When coupled with the dissimilarity of dress and customs, not to speak of religions, the European interlopers became convinced that the "blackness" of the Africans was more than skin deep. They believed it penetrated through to the very character and soul (which some Europeans claimed Africans did not possess) of the people, thereby signaling a people who were so thoroughly uncivilized that they were more beastly than human.

Now, this beastly descriptor implied not simply that they were wild and uncivilized but also hyper-sexualized. As Jordan points out, the terms "bestial and beastly" carried with them sexual connotations. Thus, when an Englishman described the Africans as beastly "he was frequently as much registering a sense of sexual shock as describing swinish manners . . ." ³ Adding to this was the unfortunate circumstance that the Europeans first encounter with the African apes coincided with their first encounter with the people of Africa. It required, therefore, a small leap in the European imagination to conceive of an inherent connection between the African "apes" and the African people. Once such a tie was forged, it

³ Jordan, *White over Black*, 33.

was an even easier leap of logic for the Europeans to assume, as Jordan remarks, “a beastly copulation or conjuncture” between the two species.⁴ It was in this way that “blackness” came to signal a people who were grossly uncivilized and dangerously hyper-sexualized.

If nothing else, it was clear to the white intruders that these were a people who needed to be patrolled and controlled given their dissolute character and “beastly” disposition.

The violent nature of the anti-black narrative itself now becomes clear. It is about more than a chauvinistic repulsion to skin color. It is a narrative that negates the very humanity of a people; therefore, it is inherently violent. Any ideology or system of thought that objectifies another human being must be understood as violent. Furthermore, as we will see, such a system of thought initiates a cycle of violence in which the objectified being, in this instance black bodies, become entrapped. This brings us to the centrality of this narrative to the American identity and another violent narrative.

The anti-black narrative arrived in America with the Puritans and Pilgrims. When America’s Pilgrim and Puritan forebears fled England in search of freedom they believed themselves descendants of an ancient Anglo-Saxon people who uniquely possessed high moral values and an “instinctive love for freedom.” Their beliefs reflected an Anglo-Saxon myth instigated by a first century philosopher who touted the distinctive superiority of these Anglo-Saxon people from the ancient woods of Germany. Fueled by this Anglo-Saxon myth the early Americans crossed

⁴ Ibid., 31.

the Atlantic with a vision to build a nation that was politically and culturally—if not demographically—true to their “exceptional” Anglo-Saxon heritage. As such, America was envisioned as a testament to the sacredness of Anglo-Saxon character and values, if not people. American exceptionalism was Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. American identity was equated with Anglo-Saxon identity. In order to safeguard America’s mythic Anglo-Saxon vision and sense of self, a pervasive culture of whiteness was born. Thus, whiteness became the perfect way to mask the fact that America was an immigrant nation with migrants—even from Europe—who were not actually Anglo-Saxon.

The elevation of whiteness was inevitable since—as noted earlier—whiteness had come to signify purity and moral innocence, a skin-tone therefore befitting exceptional Anglo-Saxons. Invariably, therefore, whiteness forged an impregnable wall between America’s myth of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism and that which might compromise it—such as those persons on the other side of whiteness. Hence the birth of white culture with an anti-black narrative as its defining feature, was born. After all, there was nothing more opposed to whiteness than blackness—not only in color but also in what it signified about a people.

It is this opposition between whiteness and blackness that forms the basis of white supremacist ideology. With the emergence of a white supremacist ideology two things become clear. First, to state the obvious, the ideology of white supremacy depends upon the narrative of anti-blackness since the notion of white superiority rests on the idea of black inferiority. Second, whiteness itself must be regarded as a violent identity construct inasmuch as it is defined by denigrating that

which is non-white, notably blackness. This brings us back to the fact of white culture. To reiterate, if America's mythic Anglo-Saxon/white identity was to be protected, then blackness had to be repelled at all cost. This is the job of white culture.

White culture in its various manifestations is that which perpetuates the idea of white superiority and—especially through its legal and extra-legal expressions—helps whiteness to stand its ground against any corrupting or threatening intrusions into the white Anglo-Saxon space (such as for example black bodies. And so once again the reality of America's inherent violence becomes evident. For like white identity, white culture in all of its expressions is intrinsically violent given its necessary anti-black nature. The fact of the matter is, that as long as American identity is grounded in the myth of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism (and it is), then it is grounded in violence. In this regard, there is no getting around it: anti-blackness is a part of America's original DNA.

And so it seems that not only is violence in general “as American as cherry pie,” but so too is violence against black bodies.

The Deadly Impact America's Anti-Blackness.

This is a violence that goes beyond the racially-biased war on drug, biased policing and “tough on crime” measures all of which contribute to the fact that while only 13.2% of the U.S. population, African-Americans constitute almost 40% of the prison population. The anti-black violence that is endemic to America is that which leads to the racialized violence of poverty. And so, it is no wonder that while the **poverty** rate for the population as a whole is 13.5%, the rate varies greatly by **race**.

Blacks have the highest **poverty** rate at 24.1% and Non-Hispanic whites the lowest at 9%. The **poverty** rate for the black and Latinix (21%) population is more than double that of whites. Moreover, while over a four year period (2009-2013) almost half of whites who were in poverty were able to move above the poverty threshold, only one third of blacks and Latinix persons were able to do the same. An even more disconcerting manifestation of the anti-black narrative is its impact on young black bodies. This narrative has assured what has become known as a school-to-prison pipeline, as it is in fact easier to get involved in the criminal justice system than to get a quality education. According to recent Department of Education data, black males are three times more likely than their white counterparts to be suspended from school, while black girls are six times more likely than their white counterparts. In fact, black girls are the fastest growing population in the juvenile justice system. If the odds of black children being trapped within the juvenile justice system are high, then the chances that they will live in poverty are even greater. overall, 20% of children in the U.S in poverty. Black children were almost four times as likely as white or Asian children to be living in poverty and significantly more likely than Latinix children.” In fact, over a three-year period (2010-2013) the poverty rated declined for white and Latinix children while holding steady for black children. In short, because of the violent anti-black narrative that helps to define America’s identity, black bodies are trapped in a cycle of violence from poverty to incarceration, to death. Which brings us to the reality of gun violence.

It is often that we hear the refrain that black people are killing themselves. This observation often reflects a facile response to what is going on with no

awareness that this violence is the violence that violence has created. Indeed, given the violent culture of poverty which is most properly understood as a culture of death (with its realities of lack of decent job, housing, educational and recreational opportunities) a culture again that a disproportionate number of black persons—especially the young are trapped, we should not be surprised at the high rate of gun violence and hence black on black gun homicides, what should surprise us most is number of black persons that in fact survive and thrive with dignity in a situation that intends their death not the abundant life which God promises us all.

But there is an even more disconcerting reality when it comes to the fact of guns and this narrative of anti-blackness in relationship to black bodies especially those of young black women and men. Again, inasmuch as the anti-black narrative is central to America's collective identity, it has insinuated itself into the collective American consciousness. Consequently, successfully implanted deep within the American psyche is the image of the black body as a dangerously criminal body and thus as an ever-present threat to whiteness. There are numerous studies that reveal almost "automatic, unconscious" responses to black bodies, as if those bodies are threatening or criminal in and of themselves.⁵

Given the pervasive impact of the anti-black narrative on the white imagination, it is no wonder that it was easier for the public to paint 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who had no juvenile record, as a thug who deserved to be killed while giving his killer who had a police record a pass, nor should it be a surprise that

⁵ Joshua Correll et al., "The Police Officer's Dilemma: Using Ethnicity to Disambiguate Potentially Threatening Individuals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83 (2001), discussed in "Across the Thin Blue Line: Police Officers and Racial Bias in the Decision to Shoot," [http:// www.fairandimpartialpolicing.com](http://www.fairandimpartialpolicing.com).

the officer who shot and killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown thought it reasonable to describe Brown as a “demon,” just as it seemed reasonable that the officer who killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice might mistake him for a 21-year-old threatening man, or that an officer would perceive Sandra Bland as threatening during a traffic that led to her arrest and death.

To reiterate, the narrative of anti-blackness is violent as its sole purpose is the denigration and dehumanization of black people. This narrative alone would have a devastating impact on black lives. However, as it has interacted with America’s narrative of Anglo –Saxon exceptionalism and thus become an integral part of America’s identity, it is even more deadly. These narratives and guns don’t mix—which means that America and guns are a most deadly combination for particular groups of people given the fact that these narratives are endemic to America’s very identity—and hence Amin’s observation takes on even greater meaning as it would seem that gun violence is just as American as cherry pie. And so how are we to break this cycle of violence, especially as it impacts black bodies.

Breaking the Cycle of Anti-Blackness

How are we to break the cycle of violence perpetuated by the violent narrative of anti-blackness? It is here where Jesus’ crucifying death and resurrection speaks to our situation.

The cross represents the power that denigrates human bodies, destroys life, and preys on the most vulnerable in society. As the cross is defeated, so too is that power. The impressive factor is how it is defeated. It is defeated by a non-violent, life-affirming force that is none other than God’s resurrection of Jesus.

It cannot be stressed enough that God's resurrecting power is one that, by definition, respects the sacred integrity of all human bodies and the sanctity of all life. This is significant in two ways as we reflect upon the narrative of anti-blackness.

Black feminist literary artist and social critic Audre Lorde once said, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."⁶ What the crucifixion-resurrection event reveals is that God does not use the master's tools. God does not utilize the violence exhibited in the cross to defeat deadly violence itself. As Lorde suggest, while this may bring a temporary solution, it does not bring an end to the culture of deadly violence itself. Rather, one stays entrapped in that very culture. As such, "only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable." This implies therefore that the only way to defeat violent power is with non-violent means.

There is no doubt that the cross reflects the depth and scope of human violence. The cross in this respect represents the consuming violence of the world. It points to a world that is saturated with violence. This violence includes not simply the physical brutality meant to harm bodies, but also the systems, structures, narratives, and constructs that do harm, including the narrative of anti-blackness and the systems and structures it fosters in conjunction with the narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. To reiterate, anything that would devalue the life of another is violent. Through Jesus, God enters into this world of violence, yet does not take it into God's very self. Thus, God responds to the violence of the world not in an eye-

⁶ Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider*, 112 (emphasis in original).

for-an-eye manner. Instead, God responds in a way that negates and denounces the violence that perverts and demeans the integrity of human lives. God accomplishes this by affirming life, as seen in the very resurrection of Jesus. Essentially, God responds to the violence of the cross—the violence of the world— in a nonviolent but forceful manner.

It is important to understand that nonviolence is not the same as passivity or accommodation to violence. Rather, it is a forceful response that protects the integrity of life. This is even clearer as one recognizes that Jesus was crucified in the first place because of his active resistance to the violent political and religious powers and structures of his time, which trapped various people in violent, hence crucifying, realities of living. The point is that while violence seeks to denigrate and do harm to the bodies of people, nonviolence seeks to free bodies from denigrating and deadly violence. By not resorting to violence, it seeks to break the very cycle of violence itself. It is in this way that the crucifixion-resurrection event reflects nothing less than a counter-narrative to the crucifying narrative of violence. This has implications for breaking the cycle of violence perpetuated by the narrative of anti-blackness.

Anti-Blackness and the Matter of Black Lives

Even as people must consistently resist and dismantle the systems and structures of anti-black violence that serve to protect the myth of Anglo-Saxon (white) exceptionalism, something just as essential must be done to counter the narrative of anti-blackness. That is an actual counter-narrative that affirms the value of black bodies. This narrative must disrupt the collective consciousness of America—

especially white America—if black bodies are ever to be truly free from the various violent manifestations of America’ anti-blackness. There are various ways to disrupt the narrative of anti-blackness that in fact the churches can lead the way in, which I hope to engage in our later discussions. For now, let me focus on the importance of one that has stirred controversy and that is the Black Lives Matter movement. In this regard, the refrain *blacklivesmatter* is just as significant as the movement’s active protest against the systemic and structural violence perpetrated against black bodies. For the refrain itself offers a direct counter-narrative to the narrative of anti-blackness as it loudly affirms the sacred value of black lives. With this being the case, it was inevitable that as the #blacklivesmatter hashtag went viral and as it moved into the public square, whiteness would stand its ground with the refrain “all lives matter.” Essentially, this latter refrain was nothing less than an utter refusal to acknowledge the value of black lives, and thus a refusal to reject the narrative of anti-blackness. So, in the end, it is essential that the blacklivesmatter refrain be consistently repeated in the public square. It must constantly counter-act the hold of the narrative of anti-blackness on the white American psyche. But there are other ways to disrupt that narrative, ways that churches must engage that reveal that blacklivesmatter, that involve what goes on in our churches in terms of worship, in terms of the fabric of our churches, the promotion of not simply cross-cultural interactions but cross-cultural literacy (I for one think that racial justice training and cultural literacy must be a requirement for the ordained), all in an effort to break the cycle of violence that is an anti-black narrative and to disrupt the unholy trinity of guns, poverty and race.

Until such time, the words of Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin will continue to speak a truth: violence against black bodies will remain as American as cherry.