“Seldom does an author share his soul. Not just his life and experience, but the people and events that inspire him; the art, the music and the encounters that feed his imagination; the passion that drives him. That is what Chris Pramuk does in *Hope Sings, So Beautiful*. His passion is nothing less than overcoming every form of discrimination, but especially racism, to gaze on Christ ‘in ten thousand places.’ It is spiritual theology at its most satisfying. His publishers have also produced a book in the same spirit, intended to move the senses as well as the mind. If you want uplift and are not afraid to be turned upside down and inside out, this is the book for you.”

—Drew Christiansen, SJ  
Former editor of *America*  
Visiting scholar, Boston College

“Kiss ‘doubt and small living’ goodbye and prepare to take a tremulous step across the color line. *Hope Sings* gracefully shepherds the reader beyond isolated, self-centered prisons into inspiring worlds of scholarship, story, and song. Pramuk does not present a simplistic diagnosis of race problems, but an ‘alternate horizon’—painful, partial, mysterious, but nonetheless resonant with music. To those who help us see, we owe the deepest reverence; this author is one.”

—Kathy Coffey  
Author of *The Best of Being Catholic*

“Pramuk creatively interweaves music, scholarship, art, the natural world, theology, personal experience, spiritual writings, and much more to examine discipleship in a racist and fractured world. But above all he unveils the everyday mystery of divine love that beckons us to new life and a new way forward.”

—Timothy Matovina  
University of Notre Dame  
Author of *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America’s Largest Church*

“*Hope Sings, So Beautiful* dares to interrupt readers, inviting them to reflect more deeply still on systemic racism’s dehumanization of us all. Pramuk writes with eloquence, integrity, and urgency.”

—Kimberly Vrudny  
University of St. Thomas
Hope Sings, So Beautiful

Graced Encounters across the Color Line

Christopher Pramuk
See, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
~ Isaiah 43:19

Jesus said to him in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.”
~ Mark 10:51

Hope rings, so defiant.
Hope stings, so deferred.
Hope sings, so beautiful.
~ Author’s notebook, April 2012
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


Henry, author’s son, at Sturgeon Bay, Michigan. Photo by author.

Tanisha Belvin, 5, holds the hand of fellow Hurricane Katrina victim, Nita LaGarde, 89, as they are evacuated from the Convention Center in New Orleans, Louisiana, Saturday, September 3, 2005. AP photo/ Eric Gay.


View from Christ in the Desert Monastery, Abiquiu, New Mexico. Photo by author.

x Hope Sings, So Beautiful


Lauri, author’s wife, with children, rural Guatemala, 2012. Photo provided by author.

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At time of publication, permission for use of the following lyrics from Hal Leonard Corporation were pending: “Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol and performed by Billie Holiday; “Russians” by Sting; “Big Brother” and “Village Ghetto Land” by Stevie Wonder.
FOREWORD

“A body of broken bones.” This is how Thomas Merton described us humans—our fractured disunion, our immersion in egoism, our imprisonment in hatreds, our instinctive recoil from sacrifice and pain and sorrow. This is a book about how our vicious essentialism breaks the bones of the body of our humanity; more importantly, this is a book about hope and, above all, grace.

We are a body of broken bones—in need of resetting, in need of love. As a person of faith, a husband, a father, a theologian, a writer, a lover of the natural world and its Creator, Christopher Pramuk digs deep into his own intentionally expanding lifeworld in order to write in elegant, penetrating prose how we might go about resetting those bones with deep, passionate love for one another through authentic encounter, that is, through engagement that evokes a new relationship one with another or perhaps with the natural world and that brims over with the mystery of God.

Pramuk pioneers what he calls a method of catholicity. Taking the mystery of the incarnation with utmost seriousness, he enacts a conversation that presumes goodwill, is sympathetic in principle to multiple voices, is committed to discipline and generous listening, nurtures and enriches the imagination, thrives on the question, requires attentiveness of eye and ear and mind and heart, and relies on hope. The horizon of Pramuk’s concern is wide—cultural, social, historical; but his focus is spirituality and pastoral practice. We are a body of broken bones—in need of resetting-love. He asks: “To whom do we belong and are we responsible? Who is the ‘God’ in whom we place our trust, and what does this God ask of us in building a world of greater justice, compassion, and solidarity? How does the memory of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection shape and expand our
imagination, the very ways we see, judge, and act in society and in relationship to the natural world?”

“The church fathers,” Marie-José Mondzain reminds us, “believed that truth only obtained its authority by means of emotional power, its direct access to the heart.”2 We are a body of broken bones in need of resetting-love. With great simplicity, deep emotional power, and humble authority, Christopher Pramuk offers us a mosaic of images and sketches for our reflection, prayer, and action—a kind of prescription for resetting-love for our body of broken bones, a prescription that pierces the heart with the truths he tells.

M. Shawn Copeland
Boston College
INTRODUCTION

“I see people looking like trees and walking.”
~ Mark 8:24

For much of my career as a teacher in Jesuit Catholic institutions, I have had my feet in two very different worlds: the world of privileged, and largely white, Jesuit education, and the world of black Catholic worship. It would be hard to overstate the cultural gap between these two worlds. One of the most moving, if rare, cross-cultural experiences I can remember was an Advent prayer service conceived and organized collaboratively between my students at Regis Jesuit High School in Aurora, Colorado, a largely white, wealthy, suburban community, and the youth choir of St. Ignatius Loyola Catholic Church in Denver, a mostly black, lower-income, inner-city parish, where I played piano. For the all-male white students of Regis Jesuit, travelling some thirty minutes into the inner-city environs of St. Ignatius Loyola was akin to visiting a third-world country; for the all-female black youth choir of St. Ignatius, their white counterparts more or less did come from another country.

Over the course of two intensive weeks of rehearsals, I watched in wonder as the imaginative worlds of both groups, along with their stereotypes and prejudices, were broken wide open. Through the medium of shared creed, storytelling, and song, discomforts faded.

and tenuous friendships began to form. The presumption of goodwill 
made room enough for give and take, for trial and error, for sponta-
neity and laughter: in a word, for grace. The gathering of both com-
munities on the evening of the service, with parents and grandparents,
brothers and sisters, and all manner of folks in all style of dress, was 
a beautiful sight to behold. Not a few left the church that evening 
with smiles of joy and tears, and rumors of possibilities never before 
imagined.

Nearly forty years ago, Motown recording artist Stevie Wonder 
released a double-album masterpiece called *Songs in the Key of Life*, 
seventeen songs that gave brilliant voice to a world largely hidden 
from mainstream, middle-class, white America. I vividly remember, 
as a young white kid, listening to the record for the first time. Though 
I was too young and far too insulated to grasp the social and racial 
complexity of the songs, I was mesmerized by the music. Forty years 
later I am still mesmerized, and the full genius of Wonder’s artistry 
still eludes me. Today, when I introduce his music and his remarkable 
story to my college students, I never cease to wonder how the en-
counter with such an artist opens their social horizons, much as mine 
were broken open as a child. “Would you like to go with me / Down my 
dead end street / Would you like to come with me / To Village Ghetto Land?” 
How strange, sad, and beautiful that a blind man would be teaching 
us how to see.

For some forty years and much longer, black artists, preachers, 
thologians, and public intellectuals have challenged their white 
colleagues and fellow Christians not only to see and to hear but also 
to *feel* the presence of God rising from the struggles and joys of life 
in the black community. They have asked white Christians to take 
seriously the hopes and dreams of a faith written and sung, so to 
speak, “in the key of black.” Unfortunately, it is a call that remains 
largely unheeded today.

With this book, I join my voice with other scholars and artists 
seeking to sow seeds of racial justice, healing, and hope in a society 
and church where, as Martin Luther King Jr. often lamented, “eleven 
o’clock Sunday morning” is still the most racially segregated hour in 
America. Of course, with a topic as rich, complex, and hazardous as 
race, no single book can serve every purpose, satisfy every reader, or 
come anywhere near to being comprehensive. My aims here are mod-
est, frankly experimental, and at times quite personal. Above all, what binds the following meditations and case studies into a coherent vision is the theological virtue of hope. And hope, like people, is multivalent. It manifests in different shades and colors. It sings in many voices.

Hope rings, so defiant. Hope stings, so deferred. Hope sings, so beautiful. I take my title from the epigraph that opens this book, lines which came to me late one evening as I struggled to express the beautiful but complex “music” I hear rising from the histories of peoples of color in America. The image of “Ruby Green Singing” on the cover of the book expresses this music, this paradoxical mystery of beauty and hope-in-struggle, much better than I can say. Hope comes toward us, as it were, from the future, from God’s own future, just as surely as it rises from the lessons and wisdom of the past. Ruby Green stands rooted firmly in the present, gazing in faith and hope toward the future of God’s imaginings, while her song rises on the tide of memories laid down, and terrible prices paid, by her ancestors in the past. “Ruby Green Singing” embodies for me the promises of hope, as does Stevie Wonder, a blind man who shows us the way to see.

**Racial Consciousness and the Problem of Starting Points**

Repeatedly in the gospels, Jesus is seen healing the blind. Yet for me the most compelling of all these miracles is the one that did not “take” the first time, the blind man of Bethsaida.

Putting spittle on his eyes [Jesus] laid his hands on him and asked, “Do you see anything?” Looking up he replied, “I see people looking like trees and walking.” (Mark 8:23-24)

Of course, Jesus finishes the healing and sends the man on his way. But it is the man’s shadowy, *in-between state* of partial sight and partial blindness that most intrigues me, and seems an almost perfect metaphor for our human condition. Slow the story down and stretch it out over the course of a lifetime, generations, and then centuries, and the blind man of Bethsaida, before Jesus finishes the job, becomes a fitting parable for race relations in America. We are all still on the way, each of us stumbling forward in partial blindness, seeing people
“looking like trees and walking.” But the face of Christ is there, hidden in light and shadow, calling us forward into our freedom.

White, black, brown, red, or yellow, our healing and growth into the freedom of love is rarely so miraculous or complete as that of the blind man of Bethsaida. We are social beings, persons-in-community. Like a rope woven together by many different strands, we grow into our freedom and capacity for love together in families, communities, and complex societies through the interplay of countless relationships, encounters, and transformations—and, to be sure, many tragic failures, sins, and mistakes—along the way. Communities grow stronger and weaker by degrees over the course of generations, just as individuals transform in love and social empathy over the course of a lifetime. Our starting point matters, but rarely, thank goodness, is it the end of the story.

Conversations about race are difficult enough without imposing the impossible condition that every person’s starting point should be the same. Like the rope made of many different strands, our collective strength and wisdom depends on the recognition that each of us enters the conversation (or refuses it) from a unique social location and developmental stage in the drama that is a human life. It takes empathy and patience, especially among strangers, to hear the converging strands of what is and what has been in the story of our respective lives and then to imagine together a future vision of what is possible in the shared task of building what Dr. King called the Beloved Community. Complicating but vastly enriching the task is the realization that very few of us come to the table tethered to a single social location. Like a river swollen by many streams, I am the confluence of many inheritances. Who I am cannot simply be reduced to any one of them.

This book offers a mosaic of images and sketches-in-progress for thinking and praying through difficult questions about race in a way that seeks to honor the complexity of the subject and the persons we are who seek to engage it. At times it is quite personal, as theology or spirituality in general, and race discourse in particular, cannot help but be. Because its horizon is both transcendent and deeply personal—Is there anything more intimate or elusive than one’s relationship with God?—theological reflection in any setting invites vulnerability, humility, and risk. The risks I take here are my own, of
course, as well as any successes or failures; yet, in truth, they also belong to the beautiful but broken body of God’s people of which I am a part.

I set the stage in chapter 1 by reflecting on three very different but valid entry points into the conversation about race. The first is the “world” of academic discourse on race. The second is the global “world” of the poor, behind which lurks the onerous weight of European and US history in relation to nonwhite peoples and poorer nations across the globe—here my focus is on Haiti. The third is “the song circle,” by which I mean the “world” embodied in the African American spirituals tradition and, more broadly, any community of faith and memory, solidarity and wisdom, to which we may belong. Like the tributaries of a river, each of these three worlds represents major influences in my own life and distinct social locations from which I seek, as a white Catholic theologian, to do theology. As such, they also reflect the blind spots and biases I may bring to the table as someone who is still very much on pilgrimage.

Chapters 2 through 9 each takes as its focus one or more themes, stories, or case studies from the worlds of literature, music, art, or theology, which then serve as an entry point for exploring, as the subtitle puts it, “graced encounters across the color line.” By “graced” I mean having the character of a gift from God. Such gifts are often paradoxical: they disturb and console at the same time. Grace interrupts our habitual ways of seeing, judging, and acting from day to day, even where it illumines a truth that already is but was hidden from our sight. A “graced encounter” is an illumination that leaves us without words to describe it, save perhaps “thank you.” Grace issues in wonder and amazement, for, as the famous hymn by former slave trader John Newton goes, “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

By an “encounter” I mean more than an experience or isolated event that happened and then was done with. An encounter involves not just “me” or any individual but a whole situation, climate, or atmosphere in which a person is drawn beyond themselves, sometimes unexpectedly or unwittingly, into a new relationship with others or perhaps with the natural world—and thus, at least implicitly, with the mystery of God. The most significant encounters in our lives stand both in and outside of time, pregnant with presence and dense
shades of meaning in memory and imagination long after the fact. The face of Jesus will forever haunt the man of Bethsaida, shaping his whole way of interpreting the world, reorienting his whole climate of thought.

Several years ago my wife Lauri and I adopted two children from Haiti. When we were married almost twenty years ago, neither of us could have predicted this path or the shape our family would take. Early in our marriage we spent a month working in rural Honduras at an orphanage and nutrition center for malnourished children. I can see today how that formative experience, a graced encounter of the most difficult and beautiful kind, transformed our whole climate of thought as a young couple, awakening desires in us that would later bear fruit in our family. There is a hidden line, unpredictable, meandering, and wholly mysterious to me, linking our falling in love with the people of Honduras and the adoption of our two children from Haiti. As it happens, partly because of such grace-filled encounters, the “color line” now passes right through the center of our family.

Historically the color line divides not just white Euro-American peoples from Africans and African Americans but whites from every other so-called (and so negated) nonwhite community in the New (Old) World: Caribbean and Latin American peoples, Native Americans, Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and so on. Certainly various prejudices and “colorisms” pass between and within these communities as well. I grew up in a white suburban neighborhood in central Kentucky and had little contact with any of the above communities until my midtwenties, when I moved to a larger city and was quickly plunged into more diverse environments. Since then, my religious imagination has been shaped by the movement across various color lines, including immersion in Mexican American and black Catholic parishes in Denver, South Bend, and Cincinnati, as well as the study of black and Latino literature, art, and theology. More recently, the horizon of Native American history and spirituality has opened up to me, thanks in part to a friend and artist whose world of the American Southwest is the focus of one of these chapters.

In sum, as the title of this book intimates, a Christian vision of hope and racial solidarity rises implicitly from a theology of grace,
or, more concretely and explicitly, from experiences of friendship and grace across the color line. While itself based in Christology, or the revelation of God’s love in Jesus, the language of grace orients the Christian imagination before a theocentric horizon often neglected in exclusively Christ-centered or church-centered spiritualities. Bound up with risk, surrender, and trust, the experience of grace throws light on the neighbor as the person in whom we meet and serve God, such that we begin not only to acknowledge but to positively expect to discover God’s presence “out there” in the city, over there in that neighborhood or church, or, to be sure, in distant, unfamiliar countries—in short, all those places which conventional wisdom about the “real world” urges us to avoid.

Of course the Christian call to love reaches well beyond differences of culture, class, religion, race, and ethnicity. In chapters 7 and 8, I enlarge the field of imagination to consider how our assumed images of God, religious ritual practices, and cultural language-worlds shape the ways we perceive and manage difference not only with respect to race but also in the orders of gender, sex, and sexual orientation. The insight that I develop here in more explicit theological terms is implicit throughout the book: namely, that we are still learning how to give full voice to the mystery of the incarnation. In our stumbling efforts to realize the mystery of Love-becoming-flesh we must attend carefully to the Scriptures and appeal to reason but we also must drink deeply from the wellspring of human experience in all its mosaic, sacramental diversity. To do so is not an act of daring or theological development for its own sake; it is an act of trust in a God revealed in Christ to be Love, a covenantal God who breathes life into all things.

A Method of Catholicity

Theology at its best is a “catholic” conversation, attentive in principle to a universal horizon of voices, insofar as Christian and Catholic faith rises from the mystery of incarnation. God reveals God’s very self in and through all creation and consummately in the mosaic, infinitely diverse human community. As the Second Vatican Council expressed this principle so beautifully and fearlessly, Christianity in full bloom comprises a vision and way of life in which “Nothing that
is genuinely human fails to find an echo in [our] hearts.”¹ Throughout these pages the reader will encounter the perspectives of artists, poets, and theologians from many different ethnic and racial communities, including not a few Jewish, European, and Latin American voices. In the interest of economy of style, most of my scholarly resources are referenced not in the main text but in the endnotes. The reader need only “follow the notes” to meet some of the most prophetic and creative minds writing in the field of theology and spirituality, critical race theory, and social ethics today.

Though I do rely on experts in race theory, sociology, and the like, the questions I pose here are not primarily sociological or ethnographic but are theological, with a focus on spirituality and pastoral practice. To whom do we belong and are we responsible? Who is the “God” in whom we place our trust, and what does this God ask of us in building a world of greater justice, compassion, and solidarity? How does the memory of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection shape and expand our imagination, the very ways we see, judge, and act in society and in relationship to the natural world? Perhaps above all, for what do we dare to hope, and how might our hope translate into pastoral strategies for racial reconciliation and solidarity across the color line?²

Where I use the term “we”—especially hazardous in race discourse!—I have in mind the global ecumenical Christian community, inclusive of all races, which “we Christians” call, in a rather staggering but wondrous leap of faith, the One Body of Christ. If I presume to speak for people beyond my ken, even those who reject belief or institutional religion, I do so from the conviction that what unites the human family, both within and beyond the Christian fold, far exceeds that which divides us. I do so also because there are far too few opportunities and safe spaces to practice the art of listening across the color line, to share our stories, hopes, and dreams for the church and society in which we live. Everything gets politicized, too quickly polarized, and effectively reduced to zero. To “wade in the water” of race discourse is to expect and even welcome a certain troubling of the waters. The risk, I believe, is well worth my hope: namely, that this book might stimulate fruitful conversations and fresh thinking on a difficult topic, whether in private study or prayer, in classrooms, churches, and reading groups, or among friends and family around the dinner table.
A website has been developed with the generous support of Liturgical Press to serve the catholic and ongoing conversational aims of this book. The site, www.HopeSingsSoBeautiful.org, includes links to many of the works of music, art, literature, and film discussed in these pages, reflection questions for each chapter, and a blog feature that allows for the sharing of stories, related articles and links, and other resources. With input from a diverse range of contributors from my own Cincinnati-area community and friends and colleagues far and wide, we hope the website offers an additional venue for creative and practical support, especially for folks laboring in the trenches, as it were, seeking to build bridges between the many communities—pastoral, political, academic, ecumenical, interreligious—who hold a critical stake in the dialogue about race in US society today, in the churches, and indeed around the world.

**Racism and the Imagination**

It is sometimes said that the problem of racial justice becomes much more personal and urgent when you have your own “skin in the game.” Most white people remain blind to racism, as the logic goes, because whites in the United States and across the globe have the luxury and privilege of not seeing. They have no skin in the game. While I grant validity to the point in the realm of political self-interest, I reject the cynicism that would make the principle into a law. Self-interest, as I intimate throughout this book, does not describe our whole truth, our deepest truth as human beings, nor our deepest desires and motivations. Racism is not a black, brown, red, or white problem; racism is a human problem, crippling something far deeper in us than blood or family ties. The truth is we all have our own skin in the game. The tragedy is how little we care, and how often we fail, to realize it.

To say it more boldly, God, in whose freedom and likeness all human beings are made, has skin in the game. Racism, I will argue in this book, is the symptom of a profound poverty, a terrible captivity, of theological imagination. From a religious-ethical perspective we are called to a way of being in the world, a radically inclusive way, because of who God is and who God calls us to be. God invites, God demands, God needs our participation in the work of social
justice and racial reconciliation. At the same time, ethical commands of “should” and “ought” are not enough to heal the disease of racism. A disease of the imagination calls for responses that nourish, free, and enlarge the imagination; thus the artistic spirit that I aim to nourish and give free play in this book.3

I have already alluded to the fact that long before I had any direct encounters with peoples of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, music was my doorway to worlds otherwise hidden from me. From Stevie Wonder to the ragtime romps and plaintive ballads of Scott Joplin, whose artistry gifted me as a child with my first real revelations at the piano, it is from a lifetime of such experiences of being drawn, as it were, into the mystery of unity-in-difference—experiences that I deem trustworthy—that I write here, sometimes in a frankly personal key, and invite the reader to reflect on their own memories and experiences of grace across the color line.4

Finally I want to acknowledge two figures in the Catholic tradition who have deeply shaped my own religious imagination and thus my approach in these pages, if not always explicitly. The first is Thomas Merton, the American Trappist monk whose writings on the contemplative life and prophetic essays on race remain remarkably relevant today; the second is Ignatius of Loyola, whose lively incarnational spirituality tutors our imagination in the way of “finding God in all things.” The mystical tradition as witnessed in these two spiritual masters is fully engaged with the world; it is a paschal and prophetic option. It calls us to reflect deeply on our life stories, critically and prayerfully in light of the gospel, for signs of God’s grace as well as the call to repentance and conversion. With respect to race and all manner of differences, what I take from both Merton and St. Ignatius is the commitment to listen to the other receptively, contemplatively, as one in whom the very presence of God comes before us, challenging from difference and loving with freedom.5

I dedicate this book to my students, past and present, and to my four children, Isaiah, Grace, Sophia, and Henry. Their hidden future comes toward me in the present, beckoning me to be and become my better self. I am especially thankful to M. Shawn Copeland and Edward Kaplan for joining their voices with mine in this conversation; both have long been important teachers and role models to me in their lives of courageous and humane scholarship. I thank my wife
Lauri, who after twenty-plus years remains the most amazing grace of my life. I am deeply grateful to Liturgical Press for their commitment to new works in theology and spirituality, from the ground up, in service to the people of God everywhere. Above all, I thank the artists, poets, theologians, and ordinary people of faith who have inspired my thinking in these pages.
ENTRY POINTS

Whiteness is not my point of entry
But whiteness is my point of entry
Is my whiteness your point of entry?
Let my whiteness be your point of entry
I don’t mind (but I do mind)
Whiteness is not my point of entry
But surely, whiteness is my point of entry

~ Author’s notebook, University of Notre Dame, March 2004

None of us enters the conversation about race as a fully developed, completely integrated, whole person. Each of us needs to be challenged by each other, but we also need room to imagine and grow into a future different from where we are now and where we have been over the course of our lives. Of course, truthful, meaningful conversation in any human context, especially among strangers, is a kind of delicate dance, structured and spontaneous, tenuous and free,
a difficult breaking of silence and interruption of the status quo. Conversations about race are all the more disruptive, calling for a great deal more intimacy and risk than many of us are accustomed to sharing with strangers. To what degree are we prepared to make room in our consciousness for the stories of strangers, much less to linger together in the sheer expanse of our differences? Where we will find the kind of open, compassionate spaces needed for such conversation?

Perhaps in a monastery or a Quaker meeting house, where silence is the order of the day and one speaks only with great care and deference for the spirit of the other. Maybe in church basements and meeting halls or around dinner tables where the first and last item of “business” is simple hospitality and shared sustenance, and conversations unfold naturally when bellies and spirits are full. Maybe even in classrooms where teachers set aside their full agendas and open up circles in space and time where students can simply be and be themselves for a while, sharing their stories, hopes, and dreams for the future.

A tall order, indeed, but these are just the kinds of fertile playing fields we need to imagine and cultivate, where roots can be fertilized and new shoots of interracial encounter and friendship are given room to grow. Without question, no matter the setting, clearing a space for the conversation about race is a delicate gamble rooted in freedom and hope, and the determination to overcome fear and inertia and to act so as to make something different happen with words.\(^1\)

**Race and Academic Discourse**

Some years ago I attended a conference at the University of Notre Dame on the state of race relations in US society and, particularly, in the Catholic Church. The keynote speakers were superb, the breakout sessions intense and emotionally demanding. It was unlike any other academic conference I have attended before or since, engaging participants not only intellectually but addressing our hearts and moral imaginations in passionate, poetic, and often disruptive ways. It was one of the dozen or so times in my life I have been palpably conscious of my whiteness, sometimes uncomfortably so, in a sea of mostly brown and black faces.
For the bulk of the sessions I was content simply to listen, learn, and be challenged by the diverse perspectives offered by primarily black Catholic scholars but also by white, Native American, Asian, and Hispanic American scholars and conference participants. From beginning to end I felt a great energy pulsing and rising up in our shared desire to talk and learn from one another across the color line. Not a few times I found myself slipping between thought and prayer, one moment giving thanks for the breathtaking scholarship of a speaker or the courageous witness of a participant, the next moment praying for patience and understanding when someone—perhaps the same person—said something that caused my intellect to recoil, my pulse to quicken in protest. More than once it struck me that language itself, when it comes to race, can build up barriers as quickly as it seeks to break them down, even from the best of intentions.

During one of many presentations on the theme of “white privilege,” I scribbled the lines that open this chapter in the margins of my notebook. Is it a poem, a plea, a white man’s creed or screed about the hazards of race discourse? I’m not sure, but as I revisit the lines again today they still evoke something of the tension and ambiguity I feel about race discourse as it is often practiced in books and in much of academia today.

Not unlike the social construct of race itself, the term white privilege, for example, seems to risk substituting an idea and a cause, even a valid and urgent one, for persons. A great deal depends, of course, on how the term is introduced and used in a particular context and the perceived intentions of the speaker. Yet even in the best of conditions where a degree of mutuality and trust has been established, it is not too surprising that many whites—if those at the conference or more recently in my college classroom are any indicator—will hear the language of white privilege more or less as follows, especially when it serves as the sole entry point or defining framework for conversations about race: “You are white. Therefore you benefit from white privilege. Therefore you are the problem.” Never mind your name, your family history, your story. “Your whiteness tells me everything I need to know.” Presented carelessly, the construct risks overshadowing and effectively obliterating the persons in the room—and not, I think, just the whites.
Thus by a peculiar irony the usual white/nonwhite hierarchy is reversed and the white listener, reduced to silence, is spotlighted as the oppressor. In religious or theological settings the biblical prophets are often invoked to sanction the reversal, alongside the powerful theme of the “preferential option for the poor,” as developed by liberation theology and Catholic social teaching. But the problem of reception remains. What begins as descriptive language employed to shed a necessary and urgent light on societal injustice—“white privilege”; “white racist supremacy”; “white hegemony”—risks obscuring, if not erasing, the specificity and dignity of the persons such language aims to educate and transform. The irony, especially in religious settings, is the effective maintenance of race-based exclusionary practices and race-based censorship by means of language.

The problem, by now familiar, seems intractable. Where once upon a time (and often still) the literal blackness of the “Negro” constituted his or her inescapable point of entry into the public square—and thus his or her point of exclusion—today in academic and progressive religious circles whiteness is often foregrounded as an unjustly privileged entry point and therefore, functionally, if not ontologically, as a point of exclusion. “Your task today, thank you, is not to speak but to listen.” The circle remains closed, but now it is whites—especially white heterosexual males—who sit penitently on the outside, paying the painful but necessary price for four hundred years of black exclusion, silence, and suffering at the hands of whites “like me.” Thus the price of entry effectively precludes the possibility of real dialogue or conversation—if by dialogue we mean something like mutual vulnerability, self-disclosure, and risk, person to person, across the color line.

Is my whiteness your point of entry? There is, I dare say, an act of humility and surrender that recognizes the affirmative answer to this question in the eyes of the beholder and quietly concedes, “Let it be.” Let my whiteness be your point of entry. I don’t mind. I recognize my stores of unearned privilege. I accept my “guilt by common association” with white supremacy as it manifests in the academy, church, and in these not-so United States of America. I see, I understand, and I am sorry. But then, if truth be told, I do mind, because my whiteness and your blackness (that is, your nonwhite-ness) loom like an un Forgiving wall between us. The circle remains closed, and the best I can
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(or am allowed to) offer from this side of the color line is my silent lamentation for the fact.

On the other hand, this experience of being shut out or silenced—rendered visibly invisible—is not an occasional or isolated experience for so-called minorities or peoples of color in American society or in the academy. It is inescapable, lo cotidiano, woven into the fabric of everyday existence and survival. That whites are rendered uncomfortable by race discourse and find themselves squirming silently in their seats is not altogether a bad thing! Indeed, in such situations the terms of race discourse move quickly from abstractions into the realm of experience or realization. To be shut out of “mainstream” discourse is to feel something of what nonwhites are haunted and imprisoned by every day, even by means of the language we habitually employ to describe what is normal, mainstream, or good, and what is not. “Welcome, my friend, to the back of the bus.”

Still the question of the reception of the race critique both in and beyond the academy remains an important one. If race discourse as practiced among scholars is not going to remain merely self-referential preaching to the choir—even if the choir is slow to get it—one eventually has to ask how it will be communicated to ordinary white Christians in the pews. The question may be put this way: What response does race discourse seek from white Christians: guilt or relationship, hand wringing or solidarity? If the answer is truly the latter, then not only what is communicated but how matters as well. Whether or not the message is received will depend not a little on genuine understanding of, if not empathy or affection for, one’s particular audience.

Perhaps the clearest conclusion to draw from all of this is that the greater burden of responsibility for raising racial consciousness among whites and white Christians lies squarely on the shoulders of whites, not blacks or Latinos, Asians or Indians: white pastors and priests, politicians, teachers, lawyers, social scientists, and theologians. For fifty years and much longer, nonwhite communities have rightly been asking: Where are the prophetic voices among our white brothers and sisters?

We will return to the academic context before the end of this chapter. I turn now to a very different point of entry, above all a memory, very far from the hallowed halls of academia, when my wife and I found ourselves in the beautiful but tortured country of Haiti.
There is nothing especially unique or profound about the following story. In fact, its significance may dwell more in its banality—the everyday, unquestioned normalcy of the truth it describes—than in any intellectual, spiritual, or emotional meaning I attach to it. I think any reader from any background who has visited Haiti or other severely impoverished places outside of the United States, and not just as a tourist, may recognize something of themselves in the following account.

The American Embassy in Port-au-Prince is the requisite “point of entry” for tens of thousands of Haitians each year seeking exit visas to the United States, hoping to find work, visit family, or attend school. As such it is also a sobering checkpoint and heartbreaking symbol of exclusion, a narrow gate where hope flickers for a few moments and then dies, without comment, at the window of a dead-eyed government bureaucrat.

Before sunrise every morning long lines begin to form outside the embassy gate, hundreds of Haitians dressed in their Sunday best hoping to gain an interview with an official. Fathers with sons, mothers with daughters, young men and women, all standing patiently in queues that extend from the heavily secured entrance out to the plaza and into the busy streetscape beyond. They journey by buses, bicycles, hitchhiking, and foot from every part of the country. Each pays around $400—nearly a year’s wages in Haiti—simply for the privilege to apply for an immigrant visa to the United States; applicants for a nonimmigrant visa pay $150. Most scrape together what they can over the course of several years and borrow the rest from whomever they can to make the payment. No refunds are granted in the case of refusal. Of the tens of thousands who apply each year, less than two percent will be granted a visa. Yet day after day they come to wait in line.

My wife and I travelled to Haiti several years ago as prospective adoptive parents. We went with both excitement and trepidation to meet the two orphan adoptees with whom we had been matched, to help as we could at their orphanage, and to file the first of many rounds of paperwork at the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince. Our appointment, arranged by telephone months in advance, was at eight
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o’clock on a Wednesday morning. We had learned by now to expect the unexpected. Bouncing and careening our way to the embassy in our host’s thirty-year-old pickup truck, we were a nervous wreck but promised each other we would hope for the best and celebrate small victories. Caught up in a sea of my own concerns—Did we have the necessary paperwork in order? Are they really expecting us? Will they require some kind of “extra” payment?—I was unprepared for the sight that greeted us as we pulled up to the curb one hundred yards from the front gate.

The long lines of people in front of the embassy were one thing; their extraordinary beauty and dignity as they waited was quite another. As our host guided us unhindered across the plaza toward the entrance reserved for US citizens, I felt a sudden rush of shame. Ah, the VIP entrance, I thought, fixing my eyes ahead and then down at my feet to avoid the gaze of onlookers. But Lord, how I wished I could stop just for a moment to talk with a few of those waiting, to ask their names and hear their stories. To do so, of course, would have required an enormous amount of chutzpah. Given the circumstances, it also would have appeared ridiculous. I held my breath, swallowed my sadness, and gripped my wife’s hand tighter as we were ushered quickly into the doorway. The armed guards, serious and efficient young Haitian men, clearly saw and understood our station, the privilege written on our skin. They quickly parted a way through the crowd for us to enter.

For a flash I thought of the camel, the needle’s eye, and how difficult, Jesus said, it would be for the rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. But here in Haiti it was precisely the opposite. Was this the kingdom of hell, over which my wife and I were set as Lord and Lady?

Yet, truth be told, it did not look or feel like hell. What I saw were people, ordinary, beautiful people of every kind, waiting with dignity, courage, and something like hope. I dare not guess what they saw in me and my wife as we walked across the plaza and into the entrance. I can only hope that a few recognized something familiar and perhaps even worthy of trust: our humanity, our vulnerability, even our self-preoccupied hopes for our own family and a future a little closer to the scandalously inclusive reign of God. But that would require a different kind of seeing than what was “obvious” to everyone (including
me) on the surface of things: the rich, white American, strolling up
the plaza with his beautiful wife, entitled to see and do with the world
as he pleases.

Beneath the surfaces of the scene lurk many terrible ironies, not
least the fact that so many (black) Haitians would look with longing
toward (white) America for hope. There is certainly irony in the fact
that a “rich white” American couple would look to the shores of “poor
black” Haiti in their desire to adopt. Beneath the surfaces of our story
pulses the tragic weight of history.

When Christopher Columbus and his flagship Santa Maria ran
aground on Christmas day in 1492 on the island that would come to
be known as Hispaniola, an estimated quarter million indigenous
Arawak peoples resided there. The Arawak were initially tolerant of
Columbus, helping him to build the first Spanish settlement of La
Navidad. Within twenty years, however, the Arawak were almost
completely decimated by disease and brutal treatment under their
European colonizers, their numbers reduced to a staggering fourteen
thousand. Indeed within ten years of Columbus’ arrival, the Spanish
began importing African slaves to replace the dying Arawak. In so
doing, they established Hispaniola not only as a rich agricultural
 colony but also as a pivotal way station for the slave trade.

By the mid-seventeenth century the western third of the island
(today’s Haiti) had come under French control and was the most
lucrative colony in the West Indies, known to Europeans as “the pearl
of the Antilles.” Vast plantations of sugarcane raised by slaves of
African descent formed the backbone of a rich port economy of goods
flowing between the Americas and Europe, including the commodity
of African slaves crucial to the rising agricultural economy of the
American South. Thus within one hundred fifty years an ancient
indigenous culture was “disappeared” to make way for the white,
European, Christian, and peculiarly “American way of life,” built on
the backs of slaves, themselves torn violently from ancient home-
lands, religious practices, and the proud African cultures of their
birth. It was a pattern that repeated itself with devastating success
all across the New World.

The more piercing irony is yet to come. In 1802 a slave revolt led
by former slave Toussaint Louverture provoked Napoleon to send
twenty thousand troops to pacify the island that had produced so
much wealth for France. Met by fierce slave resistance and decimated by yellow fever, the French troops withdrew, and in 1804 the new nation of independent Haiti was declared. What might have become a flourishing independent black republic, however, was not to be.

The success of the slave revolution sent shock waves throughout the New World, especially in the American South where slave owners feared it would inspire a similar uprising. Pro-slavery factions pointed to the slaughtering of French whites during the Haitian revolution as proof that “violence was an inherent part of the character of blacks,” a logical fallacy not unfamiliar to us today, which ignores the violent and authoritarian rule of white people over enslaved and subjugated blacks for centuries. Following the revolution, European powers and the United States (led by Thomas Jefferson and other slave holders) refused to recognize Haiti; France demanded compensation for French slaveholders who had “lost their property”; and Haiti spiraled into a long history of unmanageable debt, environmental degradation, and corrupt leadership.

Herein lurks the onerous weight of what Catholic social teaching calls “social sin,” the historically entrenched web of institutionalized injustice against a whole people, and the present context in which tens of thousands of impoverished Haitians risk their hearts and fortunes every day against all rational odds for a chance to escape to the United States. Why risk such an irrational venture? The short answer, of course, is hope, hope defiant and beautiful, and the simple desire for a more humane future for themselves and their children. That hope-against-hope is made all the more poignant by the history of white, colonial, and Christian hubris joining the histories of Europe, the United States, and this Caribbean way station for African slaves once called Hispaniola.

As for me and my wife, why Haiti? The short answer also has to do with desires and hopes that elude rational explanation, including the gradual realization that our lives are somehow bound together with Haiti and, by some mystery, with the lives of these two beautiful children that we now call our own. I will say more about this in later chapters, but suffice it to say that “rich,” “white,” and “American” do not adequately describe our deepest identities as human beings, still less our felt calling as a couple, notwithstanding the empirical surface of things.
If anybody asks you who I am, you can tell them I’m a child of God. So goes the great African American spiritual, which I am thinking of now as I reflect on these things. It is a song I first heard in what may seem like the unlikeliest of places. Let us consider now a third point of entry and a body of music that claimed me some twenty years before Haiti. To my mind it both includes and transcends the racial dynamics of the previous two contexts we have considered.

**Race and the Song Circle**

In the summer of 1988, at the tender age of twenty-three, I packed up my belongings and left my hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, to study music at a small Buddhist college called the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University) in Boulder, Colorado. One of my first courses was a tour de force called “Building a Vocal Community,” taught by guest professor Dr. Ysaye Barnwell, long-time member of the all-female African American acapella singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock. For two weeks Dr. Barnwell took her fifty or so students—most of us white, middle-class, and somewhat fragile twenty-somethings still unsure of our place in the world—on an intense and wondrous ride into the terrible beauty of the African American spirituals tradition.

It is one thing to think and talk *about* race and race relations across the color line in the academy, society, and church. It is quite another to accompany a great storyteller, artist, and musician as she plunges you headlong into the deep river of black suffering, resistance, and grace. It was in this class, and indeed in Dr. Barnwell herself, that I first encountered the living God whose face happens to be black. It was here that I first contemplated the black Jesus, who still lives (and dies) deep down in the dangerous memories and slave songs of the African American community. I will never forget the power of Dr. Barnwell’s storytelling, her strength and gracious presence, and the haunting power of her voice, which stirred something ineffable in me. I can still feel the thrill of our final evening concert, in which we led the whole campus community in storytelling, song, and celebration of the living tradition we had begun to learn together.

Thomas Merton, the famous American Catholic monk and spiritual writer, once observed that the psalms hold a certain advantage
over the New Testament because we sing them. In singing the psalms, says Merton, “we lay ourselves open as targets, which fire from heaven can strike and consume.”9 Such is the case, I quickly discovered, with the spirituals. Black or white, yellow or brown, rich or poor, sinner or saint, one cannot hide from the particular beauty and haunting power of the spirituals. Moreover, by singing them with others and not just studying them alone in quiet libraries, we lay ourselves open to one another in ways we might never before have risked. Is there any act of greater vulnerability, and potential intimacy, than singing, full-bodied and shoulder to shoulder, with another person? In laying ourselves open we can truly be and become “a vocal community.”

But what claim, if any, can a white man have on the spirituals? None at all, save when someone from the black community graciously invites me, the stranger and oppressor at their gate, into the song circle. In truth, when I sing the spirituals, especially when I am encircled by five or ten or fifty others, I make no claim on them whatsoever, intellectually, spiritually, historically, or otherwise. It is the spirituals that claim me, or better, we. Paradoxically, I discover myself by losing myself in the song circle, by giving myself over to the memory and experience of the black community. And it is this particular community, represented by four hundred years of suffering, fidelity, and grace, which claims me. Not incidentally, herein lay a crucial difference between the academy and the church, the lecture hall and the church choir. Where the academy remains more or less beholden to “objective” analysis from a comfortable distance, a faith community not only allows but demands personal engagement and commitment, the kind in which we “lay ourselves open as targets.”10

Merton goes on to suggest that the peculiar ability of the psalms to ignite a fire in the listener can only be accounted for “by the fact that we, in the Spirit, recognize the Spirit singing in ourselves.”11 Their impact, in other words, is theological and not just psychological. No less is true of the spirituals. To sing the spirituals is to be drawn into the very life and pathos of God, poured out and enfleshed in the human community. In our singing and physically embodying them, the spirituals are not merely signs pointing to historical events from which we remain far removed. They become sacraments, instruments of real presence and grace for a people still on pilgrimage in history.
The false “I” of individualism and self-absorption—even my socially constructed identity of whiteness—gives way to make room for a new (and eternal) creation, the “we” of our shared life in one another and in God. If only for the duration of a song, the spirituals reveal “not merely what we ought to be but the unbelievable thing that we already are.” No less than the psalms, they make us to believe that “we are at the same time in the desert and in the Promised Land.”

Hope Sings, So Beautiful

I have described just three of many possible entry points from which to enter into the conversation about race. Each represents formative moments and graced encounters in my own life, and just so, each reflects my own limited horizon and biases. To be clear, as a white Catholic theologian and teacher I accept much of the discourse surrounding white privilege and believe it is necessary and even urgent to engage with this reality in a sustained way, as I do with my students. The term is more than a sociological construct insofar as it exposes (and seeks to dismantle) a painful general truth, if not the whole truth, which is empirically impossible to deny. Like racial bias itself, the fact of white privilege remains one of the greatest obstacles to societal justice, racial reconciliation, and, for people of faith, our shared life in God. It ought to make us very uncomfortable.

Academic discourse at its best refuses to smooth over or anaesthetize the sting of exclusionary practices and stubborn biases based on race. The scholar is charged to serve the truth in humility as best as he or she is able to judge it, and indeed to speak the truth defiantly wherever it is denied, manipulated, or paved over by the roar of more politically expedient concerns. Hope rings, so defiant, in lecture halls and scholarly discussions of race insofar as all hope begins with telling the truth. Understandably, sometimes necessarily, that refusal to sanitize difficult truths can sanction (or appear to sanction) a blunt reversal of power arrangements that leaves white folks like me sitting uncomfortably outside of the circle. But honesty also compels me to ask, at what cost? What are the costs when literal whiteness (or non-white-ness) remains the defining paradigm, the implicit entry or exclusion point, for the conversation? The circle remains closed, the wall remains standing.
In short, as a person of faith I grow uneasy when categorical descriptors, including racial ones, so define and circumscribe our conception of reality that they prevent our naming (and singing) the deeper mystery that binds us together as human beings, citizens of the world, and children of God. Whether we call that something more the Beloved Community, the Reign of God, the Body of Christ, or the hidden ground of Love, the point is that for people of faith, such a vision—and sometimes the transforming experience—of our shared life in God is no less real because it is hidden than are the twin evils of racism and white privilege. The act of faith as I imperfectly understand and try to live it involves a commitment to bind myself to the deepest, most real source of all that is, and to speak words of longing and hope from that place of covenantal relationship. There is a greater mystery at play in the sum of people’s lives than what lay under the control or purview of scholarly discourse. The mystery of a love that knows no human boundaries is no less worthy of expression because it remains so widely and painfully unrealized.

But then my experience in urban America and in places like Haiti confronts me with the realization of how my literal whiteness literally benefits me and my family, even where those benefits have not been asked for or have filled me with shame. To be human is to feel the sting of hope wherever hope has been too long deferred, and to protest whenever justice—right and equitable relationships between persons, communities, and nations—is too long denied. Hope stings, so deferred, because in so many ways we still stand gazing impotently across the color line, unable to remove the “beam in the eye of our global village.” When and where shall we find the resources to discover in the stranger, even in the oppressor at our gate, something of our very selves, our mutual vulnerability, our common dreams for life’s flourishing on this side of the heavenly banquet?

If only for the duration of a song I have felt these barriers fall and something new coming to birth between myself and one-time strangers as we enter the song circle together—something impossible by all lights of practical reason. Hope sings, so beautiful, when we find the courage to remove our masks, shed our pretenses, and allow ourselves to love and be loved in communities of storytelling and song. Hope sings sideways, not from above to below but from person to person when we take the time to share our stories, traumas,
disappointments, and dreams across the color line. In communities where we are welcomed graciously as persons with all of our beautiful differences, the anxious question of every spiritual pilgrim, “Who am I?” is transformed into the more patient and forgiving, “Whose am I? To whom do I belong?” Such is the gift of communities of faith and wisdom, where Christ meets us where we are, and invites us to fall in love with his suffering people. Such was the gift to me of Dr. Ysaye Barnwell and her freedom songs of resistance and hope.

There is a season for protest and lamentation, to be sure. But there is also a season for mutual risk and vulnerability, for shared labor and worship, and for concrete gestures of peace-making and justice-seeking across the color line. In which season shall we stake our lives? I don’t have a tidy answer. Both ways of being in the world, both styles of prophetic discourse, clearly find support in biblical, gospel faith. But it seems to me that the vocation of the Christian is to live fully situated inside this tension and not to flee from it. In other words, the unknowing itself is faith’s critical moment, where we stand together, as it were, at the foot of the cross, even while we anticipate and sometimes realize in one another the promises of resurrection.

I get that there is no cheap grace. I know for my part that I remain woefully out of touch with the greater part of black experience in America and live day to day unconscious of the scope of my privilege. But Christ stands with us in our poverty and, yes, I believe—“help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24)—even in our blindness and privilege. And the mercy of Christ makes up for it in kind in every one of these gaps: in the academy, where he sits “in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46); in the city streets and prisons, where he calls us to befriend those who live “among the tombs” (Mark 5:1-20); and in our churches, where his spirit sings, so beautifully, in the pathos of our hope.

May Christ be with us in our poverty, heal us in our blindness, and sing through us in our collective strength. Let hope come to sing in us, so beautiful.