



# Grieving Toward Justice: Grappling with Cycles of Harm and Paths to Healing in a White Body

## Citation

Lindeman, Harriet. 2024. "Grieving Toward Justice: Grappling with Cycles of Harm and Paths to Healing in a White Body." Master's thesis, Harvard Divinity School.

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Grieving Toward Justice:  
Grappling with Cycles of Harm and Paths to Healing in a White Body

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master Divinity  
Harvard Divinity School  
Cambridge, MA  
Spring 2024

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## *Acknowledgments*

I am grateful to all whose wisdom and accompaniment have helped shape this paper!

Thank you to Professor Dudley Rose for taking time from retirement to continue to support student work, and to Steve Rizzo for the encouragement and insight throughout this process.

In the course of writing, I have been circling back to formative moments from teachers and preachers I have encountered along the way. Much gratitude to Professor Phyllis Jackson at Pomona College, Dean Melissa Bartholomew here at HDS, and Pastors Nikki Young and Jay Williams of Union United Methodist Church, all of whose wisdom has been incorporated into this text! And to the other teachers and faith leaders who have shaped my thinking, including Rev. Matt Potts, Rev. Alanna Sullivan, Rev. Calvin Jones, and my “Mem-inarian” friends at MemChurch, and Dr. David Ragland at HDS.

I am grateful to the classmates at HDS who have been among my most impactful teachers, especially Morgan Curtis and Emma Thomas. And, to all whom I have learned from and worked alongside within SURJ Boston and our partner organizations. Thanks for reminding me that hope is a discipline, and helping me commit to the practice.

## Contents

|                                               |    |
|-----------------------------------------------|----|
| Acknowledgments                               | ii |
| Opening: Mourning Together                    | 1  |
| This Project                                  | 6  |
| I. Meeting Shame                              | 14 |
| II. Learning to Grieve                        | 20 |
| III. Trusting the Capacity for Transformation | 28 |
| IV. Belonging Beyond Whiteness                | 39 |
| Closing: Fighting for Sacred Life             | 44 |
| Bibliography                                  |    |

## **Opening: Mourning Together**

November 2021

A sea of bodies spreads over the hill. Visually, we are loud—people of all ages and kinds, colorful hats and scarves and coats against a dull sky. Still, the crowd is quiet. I am leaning forward to hear the speaker's prayer.

I recognize people who have driven down from the Boston area like me, and hear from speakers and groups who have traveled from across the continent to come together on this day. The United American Indians of New England have invited us to gather on the land of the Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe, named Plymouth by settlers, bringing us together to observe the National Day of Mourning.

Listening, walking, bowing heads, we mourn.

Turning toward human suffering, I open myself to grief. A heaviness, an ache, works its way through my body. The day calls us each to face the scope of the destruction of settler colonialism—the impacts past and present on living beings and ways of life that cannot be contained within one category or captured within one sentence. To feel the grief of knowing that this land, this Earth, has been irreparably altered and harmed. And for me, there is the gnawing grief of knowing that my ancestors and I bear responsibility for it all, and that there is nowhere on Earth I can exist without carrying this legacy.

Standing together, following the leadership of these Indigenous community

members, mourning does not feel like giving into despair. We are disrupting the ritual of Thanksgiving gatherings to pause and say *something happened here*. Killing and displacement and cultural erasure and abuse. It continues today. And, these leaders are calling us into different ways of being. In slowing down to acknowledge the depth of the violence underlying daily life on this continent, we can open ourselves to the longing for something new. We can ask ourselves how to find our part in breaking this cycle.

November 2022

The day has been bleak, relentless rain and mist and gray. Soggy ground gives under my feet as I walk through the cemetery. My classmates and I follow the lead of Dean Melissa, gathering in a half circle at the place where she pauses. We are gathered at the grave of Harriet A. Jacobs, after a semester spent reading her autobiography as a sacred text. The sun has been hiding all day, but now sends rays of light bursting through breaks in the cloud, the fallen leaves and stone around us glimmering with water droplets.

Harriet A. Jacobs has been dead since 1897, and yet she has become our teacher. Taking turns speaking aloud, we share our gratitude for her life, and our intentions for carrying our learnings into our own choices and actions.

Singing, laying flowers, breathing, we mourn.

Turning toward human suffering, I open myself to grief. Standing in the cemetery, I

recall the pain of Harriet's story, a whole breathing, feeling, living human being born into a lie naming her the property of another. Along her path toward freedom, she endured the constraints and abuses of enslavement, writing and sharing her personal narrative to fight for the abolition of slavery. On this day, I feel the grief of knowing that the bones of slavery still shape the world I move through today. The grief of knowing that my own ancestors claimed other sacred lives as theirs to own and control, that I am among those who have materially benefited from this violence. I can perceive the weight of hundreds of years of history and harm and disconnection, and within it all, here I am. One woman named Harriet, slowing down to lay flowers at the grave of another woman named Harriet. In mourning, in awe of her life and teachings, and in community with others.

November 2023

We are gathered outside of Cambridge City Hall. Some of us are cutting out people-shaped figures from paper and writing a name on each, others are writing on the sidewalks in chalk. We hold pages with long lists of the names and ages of those who have been killed in Gaza within just a few painful weeks. For hours we sit or kneel, first in the sun, then in the fading November light. With scissors, markers, and chalk, we have suspended our usual mode of taking in information, from the figures that collapse lives into factors of a thousand. I write name after name. I think of friends I have lost over the last couple of years. The bigness of their lives and the rippling impacts of their deaths reminds me that it's not that many little worlds together make something important and worth noticing or preserving. A single being, a single body, already contains a world, contains the depths of

grief and the heights of joy. As I write name after name, I try to take a moment to imagine each face, knowing I will never see the colors of the eyes in this little boy, the quirks in the smile of this woman my age.

Riding the bus up Mass Ave. early the next day on my way to lead Morning Prayers at Memorial Church, I look out the window as we pass City Hall. Already, the names written on the sidewalk are gone. It has not rained, and I know they have been intentionally washed away. I feel a spark of anger. And, in thinking back to the afternoon before, I recall how holy the act of writing had felt honoring the wholeness and specificity of each life. It was more than one person could have done. It took many hands moving together to be in this work of honoring, this way of loving, this practice of mourning.

Turning toward human suffering, I open myself to grief. Thousands of precious lives are already gone. Those left behind in Gaza are denied the space and safety to mourn and attend to their dead, stuck in the fear of ongoing attacks, repeated displacement, not enough to eat or drink. I feel the grief of knowing that this moment of violence emerged from decades of oppression for which my country carries culpability, and certain Christian institutions culpability. And none of it is leading to safety for Palestinians, for Jewish people, for anyone. The grief of knowing that right now, weapons doing killing were paid for by my tax dollars, approved by my elected representatives.

Mourning requires us to pause from the seemingly relentless motion of rhythms and responsibilities and routines. It can be frightening to welcome grief in. Messy and

unpredictable, grief can shake our sense of control within our own bodies and minds. And yet in each of these moments, opening myself to grief was opening myself to something real and raw and beautiful, too. The sacred within me recognizes the sacredness of each life that has been lost or marred by violence. Moving through the grief of a violent world together, we ask, *what if things were different?* We long for something new.

## **This Project**

“You can’t *master* anti-racism.” It was midsummer 2020, and so Pastor Nikki was addressing the congregation of Union Church via Zoom. We were scattered around the Boston area and throughout the country, sustaining the ritual of coming together on Sunday mornings through the early months of the pandemic, and now, through the uprisings following the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Pastor Nikki addressed the limits of White people’s attempts to shake off guilt by reading the right books, learning the right vocabulary, checking off the right to-do list of actions. Embedded in this reaction, she saw an attempt to remain in control, reinscribing the same dynamics of power and mastery that shaped Whiteness as a political category from the beginning.

Her words have stuck with me over these last few years, and I come back to them when I find myself wanting to outrun pain or guilt by reaching for mastery, or notice this instinct in other White folks. And so, I have felt some tension in taking on this project as a “master’s thesis.” I do not intend to perform or claim mastery. I have come to this writing as someone still muddling my way through questions of how to navigate life in this world shaped by racialized violence, in my own body, racialized as White.

These last three years in divinity school have coincided with my deepening involvement in racial justice organizing, primarily within the context of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Boston, which I introduce in more depth below. My work and learning in in school and movement spaces have been deeply integrated. As I come to the end of my time in divinity school, I see my ministry moving forward including a commitment to inviting other White people into the practice and posture of grieving White supremacist violence. I have approached this project as an opportunity to synthesize some of my own

learnings and experiences, bringing memories and reflections into conversation with the work of writers and organizers including James Baldwin, bell hooks, Resmaa Menakem, Valarie Kaur, and Judith Butler. I am hopeful that some of the ideas I explore will be meaningful to other White U.S.-Americans who are engaged or seeking to be engaged in working toward racial justice. This writing process has helped lay a foundation for learning materials and workshops I intend to bring into organizing spaces, so I have been rooted in and oriented toward that context throughout.

Reflecting on moments that have disrupted or shifted something in my conceptualization of my relationship to racialized violence, I am often brought back to my time as an undergraduate student in the classroom of Professor Phyllis Jackson. Dr. Jackson is an art historian and Africana Studies scholar who has spent decades of her life engaged in justice work outside of the academy. At the beginning of our class titled Black Women, Feminism(s), and Social Change, she said something like, “There’s been a lot of talk about trigger warnings recently, so here is mine: We are looking at experiences of intense violence in this class. You are humans. You *should* be upset.” It was such a simple statement, and yet the first time I remember being told my emotions were not superfluous or distracting when engaging with racism, but rather an essential reflection of my own humanity when encountering the suffering of others. As a White student grappling with my culpability within White supremacist violence, it was impactful for this Black elder and professor to say, you have work to do, and you can still connect to your humanity and open yourself to this pain. I *trust you* to grieve.

It was within this classroom that I was introduced to some of the foundational texts and analyses of Black feminisms, which guide the language I use to discuss interlocking systems of domination, intersectionality, and collective liberation. This is also the space in which I was first taught to capitalize Black and White as signifiers for racial categories with specific histories, rather than neutral descriptors, a norm I keep throughout this piece. There are differing norms for this practice, and discrepancies are visible where I have quoted from other texts.

People are born into this world. People die. Those left behind grieve. How do White supremacy and connected systems of domination distort this cycle? Scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues racism can be described as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>1</sup> Although there is a complex web of symbols and institutions in play, operating on interconnected psychological and systemic levels, the distilled impact of racism is premature death for those within certain groups. Discussing the connection between individual judgments and societal realities, Valarie Kaur acknowledges that there is an instinct ingrained in human bodies to draw lines between an “us” and a “them,” and “who we see as one of *us* determines who we let inside our circle of care and concern.” While this happens instinctually, these determinations are shaped by “dominant stories in our social landscape.”<sup>2</sup> In the United States today, this puts race (among other social categories) at the heart of this distinction. The work of dismantling the institutions determining who lives and who dies is integrated with the work of seeing the arbitrariness in the lines marking

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, American Crossroads 21 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, New York: One World, 2020), 17.

our circles of care. The creation of a society in which life chances are deeply shaped by racism has depended upon a story separating White bodies from bodies of color, allowing to justify a cycle of domination and violence over hundreds of years. If we are to commit to the work of healing, White people must open ourselves to feeling the pain of the violence we have inflicted. Individually and collectively, we must learn to grieve.

### My Context: Organizing with White Folks in SURJ Boston

When Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, I was in my last year of college. I found myself, like many around me, in a mode of frantic, reactive action. We were grappling with all that the victory reflected about U.S. society. Trump's message framing immigrants and bodies of color as threats to a great America had energized so many White communities. Concerns were spiraling about what a Trump presidency would mean in practice. There was the matter of government policy itself, and the anticipated impacts on those already most vulnerable within our society. And then, the corresponding emboldening of white nationalist violence. It was within this context that I first found myself gathering with other White people trying to discern our role within racial justice work. Resmaa Menakem speaks about this form of space, bringing people with a shared racial experience together to engage with one another about race, as essential. This community structure can support White people in moving from declarations of "I'm a good, individual White person" to figuring out how to "build culture around abolishing white supremacy."<sup>3</sup>

A group of other White students and myself came together to join a webinar from

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<sup>3</sup> "Resmaa Menakem — 'Notice the Rage; Notice the Silence,'" The On Being Project, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://onbeing.org/programs/resmaa-menakem-notice-the-rage-notice-the-silence/>.

Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). The program was designed to educate and mobilize White folks looking to use their resources and political power to mitigate potential harm following Trump's election. After moving to Boston in 2017, I ended up connecting SURJ Boston, and have now been an active member for the last few years. SURJ was founded by White organizers in 2009, with a mission of bringing White communities into racial justice movement work. This includes supporting folks in ongoing personal learning and reflection, but rather than stopping at education, SURJ chapters focus on actively mobilizing members to dedicate their financial resources, time, skills, and political power to dismantling White supremacy. SURJ Boston's model is built around "action partnerships." In each working group, members work directly with Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) led organizations to support projects, campaigns, fundraising, and direct action. This model seeks to allow for proactive work while centering accountability to BIPOC leadership.

One of my core roles within SURJB has been volunteering as a facilitator for our chapter's "base groups." Required as an onboarding process into chapter membership, we invite folks into reflection on their own racial identity, relationship to White supremacy, and intentions and capacities in taking on anti-racist work. With around a hundred participants over the last couple of years, and hundreds more on waiting lists to join, these groups have the potential for significant local impact.

At this point, I have co-facilitated three of these base groups, each time guiding around fifteen adults through eight two-hour sessions. Along the way, I learn about folks' motivations to integrate racial justice work into their lives. Some participants have already

been engaged in political organizing or activism for years or decades and are looking for a new way to plug in, whereas others have recently felt called to get involved.

I hear familiar themes from my own experience. The fear that it is impossible to do anything at all as a White person without causing more harm. A deep mistrust of our own intentions, familiar spiraling doubts around wanting to make things better for people of color without reifying saviorism, wanting to take action without taking too much space. Again and again, guilt comes up as part of the story. I sometimes hear folks desperate for an escape from the gnawing shame.

### Tensions in Grappling with Whiteness and Justice

When a group of White people are attempting to tackle racism, there will always be contradictions and mistakes. One of the guiding values of SURJB is “anti-perfectionism.” The accompanying description on our website reads, “We will stay committed to navigating through complexity knowing that if we wait until things are perfect we will never do anything. We will seek guidance before we take action and feedback after we take action and we will learn by doing.”<sup>4</sup> This acceptance of mistakes, orienting toward feedback and accountability as a core part of growth, has helped me shift from fear of messing up toward the courage to move through the messiness.

An ongoing question for me is how much space to give what we might call White feelings. It can be disruptive and distracting to center White people’s emotional response to racism, rather than the lived experiences of BIPOC communities. White people’s feelings have had altogether too much power in shaping lived realities in this country. And, it is

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<sup>4</sup> “Our Values,” SURJ Boston, accessed May 4, 2022, <https://www.surjboston.org>.

*because* White people's reactions to a given situation carry so much weight that this work is necessary. We must articulate the patterns and dynamics that have been normalized to find ways to disrupt them. Overcoming the white supremacy so deeply embedded in our society will require reimagined institutional structures, including widespread reparations and the dismantling of prison and policing systems. This structural change is intertwined with spiritual transformation. For this project, I engage with writers and organizers who integrate systemic-level thinking with attention to the human heart and spirit.

This call for White folks to look inward is not new. In his writing and speaking, James Baldwin repeatedly called White liberals to pause and reorient their focus toward themselves and one another. In his 1962 essay, "Letter from a Region in My Mind," Baldwin writes, "White people will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this – which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never – the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed."<sup>5</sup> Here, Baldwin emphasizes that White supremacist violence emerges as an externalization of White people's unmet needs, projected onto other bodies through the construction of Blackness. As a starting place, this analysis redirects our attention as White people grappling with racism from a savioristic orientation of wanting to *help* or *fix* people of color, to tackling the constructed boundaries that shape both external societal structures and internal worlds.

In the more recent *My Grandmother's Hands*, clinical therapist and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem argues that White-body supremacy has been constructed to provide White folks "a false sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, of being part of something

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<sup>5</sup> James Baldwin, "James Baldwin: Letter from a Region in My Mind," *The New Yorker*, November 9, 1962, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>.

intrinsically valuable.”<sup>6</sup> Within my own experience, moments in which I have been forced to reckon with my connection to racialized violence have disrupted the comfort I had taken for granted within my White body. This was destabilizing, my unconscious sense of being part of something “intrinsically valuable” shifting to an understanding of being part of something inherently violent. This shift left me feeling insecure in my own goodness and worth. Moving through these moments has led me to ask, how do we look with clarity at painful histories of violence and not get stuck in shame, guilt, or denial? Join me as I circle back to some of these moments in my own story, exploring moments of destabilization and the return to balance, guided by a thread of grief. Grief that is rooted in love. Grief that returns me to my own humanity. Grief that helps to dissolve the boundaries between circles of care and belonging, allowing movement toward new ways of being.

~Invitation to Reflection~

Hi there, Reader!

At the end of the sections that follow, these little boxes will invite you to pause and reflect on connections between the text and your own lived experience. You may want to spend a moment journaling in response, talking thoughts through with a friend or a group, reflecting while stretching or taking a walk—whatever will help you to bring these offerings into conversation with your own context!

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<sup>6</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 148

## Meeting Shame

I'm a tearful person. It wasn't out of character when I found myself on the floor of my dorm's hallway my first semester of college, sobbing. My back was against the wall, and I remember finding it hard to catch my breath and explain myself to my hallmates. These *particular* tears did feel new. We were all just returning from a lecture, part of our required first-year course. During the talk, a visiting speaker had delved into the history of American Indian residential schools, and the sickening violence committed against Indigenous children. I learned, for the first time, that Hitler and the Nazi party had explicitly modeled elements of their social hierarchy on United States policy.<sup>7</sup> And, the speaker emphasized that as students, sitting there on stolen land, we were not merely linked to these acts as a part of a shared history. We were actively responsible for continuing this colonial project.

This was about ten years ago now. In my memory, the couple hundred students left the theater nearly in silence, conversations building gradually as we spread out along the paths back to our various dorms. My hallmates and I were all around 18. The group, like our school, was multiracial but primarily White. I remember hearing defensiveness and indignance at the way we had been spoken to so sharply. *What were we supposed to do?* I remember some students simply expressing surprise at the things they hadn't known, and sadness, too. I don't recall the specific flow of thoughts or conversation that led me to this point, but I remember sinking to the ground with my back against the wall, and letting the tears fall.

At the time, I wasn't familiar with language with language like "White fragility," "White tears," or "White guilt." I just remember feeling overwhelmed. And stuck. In Resmaa Menakem's text *My Grandmother's Hands*, he describes the way in which tears can be a

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<sup>7</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 79.

distraction expressing, “I’m so fragile and in so much pain! Now soothe me!”<sup>8</sup> Certainly, my classmates’ instincts were to soothe me. I remember one friend criticizing the speaker’s harshness, trying to reassure me of my own values and good intentions. I didn’t know how to receive this comfort. I wanted to feel myself on solid ground again. At the same time, I was wary of my own temptation to seek comfort leading me to deny something true.

It wasn’t that I had been shielded from knowledge of the violence at the roots of United States history until this point. But now, I was being directly implicated, accused of carrying on this injustice. My whole body reacted. The Irish poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama has discussed the shame that people who have materially benefited from histories of violence carry. In a recorded conversation with activist Marilyn Nelson, he expresses,

I think shame’s first language is the body. And then we put language around it, and then we put protections around it, and then curricula and policy and elections around shame. But it begins in the individual language of the body. And it’s understandable that it is so seizing of us. It is like being arrested by something. I mean, it does stop you.<sup>9</sup>

That evening sparked one of my first experiences of this form of shame, arising from facing cruelty and being told I was culpable. If shame freezes us, what allows us to move through that place of paralysis? Not to avoid the pain, but rather to allow this time of pause, this disruption from business-as-usual, to be generative?

How do we understand the relationships between White bodies and pain, pain and shame, shame and grief, and grief and mourning? I am still working toward the language and practices that allow me to both acknowledge my embeddedness in violence and find my part in the work of healing. During the years following that evening, I ended up on the

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<sup>8</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 102.

<sup>9</sup> “Pádraig Ó Tuama and Marilyn Nelson – ‘So Let Us Pick up the Stones over Which We Stumble, Friends, and Build Altars,’” The On Being Project, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://onbeing.org/programs/padraig-o-tuama-and-marilyn-nelson-so-let-us-pick-up-the-stones-over-which-we-stumble-friends-and-build-altars/>.

floor (or a bed or a chair) crying and stuck again and again. I was fearful of being criticized by peers, being seen as bad, and beneath that, terrified the truth would be that I *was* bad. Within the culture of my undergraduate campus, I often felt that the only way to be right was to point out the most wrong—I found myself in that paradoxical place of desiring to prove my goodness by demonstrating awareness of my own White unsalvagability. I knew what to place myself in opposition to, but saw little ground on which to stand, nothing I could move toward without causing further harm.

When I did encounter language engaging with the emotional experiences of White people grappling with White supremacy, it was generally expressed through the emerging vocabulary of “White guilt,” “White tears,” or “White fragility.” As mentioned earlier, the language of “White fragility” has become a common starting place for discussing White people’s emotional reactions to conversations about racism. After introducing the term in 2011, Robin DiAngelo published her text *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* in 2018. DiAngelo grew up as a poor White American, and has become a writer and educator calling White people into anti-racism work. *White Fragility* quickly reached the New York Times best-seller list, and in 2020 became the best-selling book on Amazon, primarily reaching a progressive White audience.<sup>10</sup> On the whole, I find her arguments compelling. She effectively describes a dynamic in which White people’s demand to be comforted distracts energy and attention from the fundamental need to fight racism. She specifically links White women’s tears to the history of racial violence justified

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Bergner, “‘White Fragility’ Is Everywhere. But Does Antiracism Training Work?,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2020, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/magazine/white-fragility-robin-diangelo.html>.

in response to claims of harm from White women, including the horrific killing of Emmett Till. The persisting salience of this history cannot be dismissed or understated, and as a White woman I am committed to remaining conscious of, and resisting, this dynamic.

At the same time, DiAngelo's critique of a pattern of visible emotional reaction offers limited tools for moving through this place toward something different. One of her conclusions is that "the antidote to guilt is action."<sup>11</sup> I agree that genuine grappling with White guilt compels us to action. However, the framing of action as "antidote" suggests short-term relief for a negative sensation, so that one might take action until feelings of White guilt are soothed, and then step back until the next crisis stirs up guilt sharp enough to demand alleviation. As mentioned earlier, one of the moments that has stuck with me from these early years of working through shame was Professor Jackson's simple statement that when encountering racialized violence, each of us, as a human being, *should* be upset. When the dismissive "White tears" is our only framework for understanding White people's emotional responses to racial violence, it creates a false dichotomy suggesting that those who must atone for violence cannot simultaneously experience the simple human devastation of it, cannot genuinely grieve. This can close us off from the transformative possibilities of grief. How can we instead develop the language and tools to hold the coexistence of culpability and pain?

At some point in the midst of my undergraduate how-can-I-deal-with-my-own-Whiteness spiral, I heard a friend mention that she had been attending on-campus chapel services, and instinctually said I would love to come along. Growing up, my family and I were active in our United Methodist Church congregations. By the time I graduated from

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<sup>11</sup> Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 149.

high school, I was unsure whether or how I would stay connected to Christianity and faith. After that first Sunday, I began regularly attending chapel services, and eventually my friend and I began attending services at an Episcopal Church in a nearby town. Here, I would feel something in my body shift—my shoulders loosen, my breath deepen. We sang, we prayed, received and offered hugs. I found myself looking forward to the service each week, reluctant to head back to campus afterwards. I felt self-conscious about even mentioning this to other friends, and did not immediately understand what the space was offering me. But during a time when I questioned whether I could act without causing more harm, that anything I did as a White person was tainted by the history I carried, sitting in church on Sunday and being told I was a child of God was a radical reminder that sometimes, it is enough to just be. To look boldly at the suffering in the world and in our lives, acknowledge our imperfections, and still sing.

The ritual and language of worship helped soften my need to prove my own goodness to myself or to others. I could see that I was one human among many, worthy of love simply because I was born into this chaotic and beautiful world. From a place of trusting my belovedness, I could be open to genuine learning and repentance and transformation, longing to be in right relationship with humanity and creation. Integrated with the critical lenses I was developing in school, I could begin to see Whiteness as a system of power I have been born into, and have the responsibility to actively work toward dismantling, but not something essential to my being. It was through this time that I began to see the crisis of racial violence as a spiritual crisis, and the work of healing as spiritual work.

~Reflection~

- Pádraig Ó Tuama had said that “shame’s first language is the body.” Can you recall a moment in which you had an embodied reaction to shame? What sensations came up for you?

What, if anything, helped you to move through them?

- I share about church services as a spiritually grounding place, helping me return to a sense of goodness and worth. Of course, you may come from a different faith tradition or none at all. You may in fact associated Christian church spaces with experiences of shaming, especially for women and queer folks. Is there a space or practice in your own life that has helped you connect to the goodness within you and beyond you?

What shape does this take?

How does it feel to be there, or be in that practice?

## Learning to Grieve

**\*\*Content note:** While I do not include graphic details, the following section includes reflections on police violence against Black bodies. Explicit references are found on pages 23, 24, and 29.

### Black Lives Matter Uprisings of 2020

As the early days of the pandemic unfolded, I was as part of “Live-In Community” at Haley House. The community, located in Boston’s South End, was modeled on Catholic Worker houses of hospitality. Amidst the blurring days of lockdown rules and reactions and the disruption of one “given” after another, I remember the sharp jolts of anger and sadness as we learned about the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, of George Floyd, of Breonna Taylor. After weighing concerns about the risk of COVID spreading as crowds came together in protest, some of the other “live-ins” and I decided to add our bodies and voices to those saying, *we see this, and will not look away. Black Lives Matter*. On a Saturday evening in June, we headed toward a local march, and by the time we reached the crowd, there were thousands of people in the street. For months we had been living in lockdown. We had only spent time with small groups of people. The shock of empty streets and a quiet city had faded into familiarity. But here, there was so much life. Beautiful human beings with looks of pain and anger and focus in their eyes, all we could see of one another’s masked faces. Joining in, we moved with the river of bodies toward Boston Common, where the crowd opened into a sea of people dressed in black, rippling across the field closest to the State House.

Although we couldn’t hear everything those at the center were saying from where

we stood, the energy stayed connected, focused. Chants rippled from the center across the crowd. And then, there was a wave of motion as people began to bend down onto one knee. I had taken in images and read articles, talked with friends, been on Zoom calls held by local organizers for processing and planning. But something new moved through me as I joined with thousands of other bodies, kneeling to the ground in a motion of respect and deep sorrow. As the sun set, phone flashlights were lit and tears filled my eyes as I looked around the waves of humanity and light merging into a glow. All this life, coming together from isolation to say the name George Floyd. To say, the death of this one beloved man impacts each of us. The death of Breonna Taylor impacts each of us, the death of Ahmaud Arbery impacts each of us. And, we have not forgotten the lives and the deaths of Tamir Rice, of Michael Brown, of Eric Garner, of Sandra Bland, of too many beloved Black siblings.

There we were, mourning together. And within this sacred moment, I felt questions nagging at me--*how did we get here?* How could the officer who killed George Floyd, and those who stood by, be so disconnected from their own capacity to love? How could the men who killed Ahmaud Arbery be so removed from their shared humanity? How could the officers who killed Breonna Taylor in her own home be so devastatingly careless with the lives they burst their way into?

In some ways the story seems clear, an unwavering line traced through history. As legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris articulates in an article from this time, the economic regime within the United States projects a “raceless façade,” but, “the racelessness of the façade is a myth. We know this because the incommensurable weight of the unreckoning is pressing

down. The heft of history is too heavy to toss aside, to float away.”<sup>12</sup> There is a clear, sweeping story. And, within it are the lived realities, the hearts and souls and bodies and psyches of hundreds of millions of people, coming into contact with one another each day. That night, joining in this public act of mourning helped me to tune into my own grief. And today I wonder, if those with the power to kill had been connected to their own capacity to grieve, would each of these precious humans still be with us, be with their families and communities? Their names unknown to me?

~ Reflection ~

- Thinking and writing about this time brought up strong emotions for me. How is it feeling for you to read? Are you brought back to your own experiences of the pandemic, the loss of these lives, and the following protests?

I invite you to take a moment to breathe and do some quick head and shoulder rolls—or any other movement that feels good—before continuing.

## Denial of Grief and the Emergence of Whiteness

If we follow this thread of pain and failure to grieve and constructed boundaries back through the generations on this land, we find ourselves meeting the Puritans. Given the Puritan founders of Harvard, and the Puritans among my own ancestors, they are never too far out of frame, really. Tracing back to the context in Europe before light-skinned people arrived on these continents as colonizers in *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem offers a trauma-conscious interpretation of the development of Whiteness as a political strategy. Menakem argues that we can understand the violence the Puritans

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<sup>12</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, “Reflections on Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review Forum* 134, no. 1 (November 2020): 2.

inflicted on Indigenous bodies as a recreation of the violence that they had experienced in England. This cycle continued when “the concept of ‘the Negro’ was created to help white Americans deal with the hatred and brutality that they and their ancestors had themselves experienced for many generations at the hands of more powerful white bodies.”<sup>13</sup> The cycle of brutality continued, but a new “other” was there to receive the brunt force of it. By promising descendants of European colonizers the benefits of power and protection relative to Indigenous and Black bodies, Whiteness created allegiances between poor White Americans and the land-owning class. From this foundation developed what W.E.B. DuBois famously termed the “psychological wage” of Whiteness.<sup>14</sup> As Menakem notes, this kind of conceptual othering had earlier historical parallels, such as the dehumanization of the Irish under English rule.<sup>15</sup> Integrating a trauma-conscious lens, Menakem suggests that psychologically, the numbness allowing colonists and their descendants to engage in genocidal violence against the Indigenous peoples of North America could be understood to be connected to a dissociative traumatic freeze response.<sup>16</sup>

Even just recounting this analysis from Resmaa Menakem, a voice in my head worries, “Why am I centering the interiority of the colonizers?? Is this an impulse to defend and excuse their actions?” But, bringing this lens to the actions of colonizers does not minimize the harm caused, or absolve them from culpability. It opens new paths toward healing. Within this framework, racial justice demands the breaking of cycles of trauma

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<sup>13</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 688, [https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cbibliographic\\_details%7C4386923#page/688/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cdocument%7C4386940](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4386923#page/688/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4386940).

<sup>15</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Menakem, 64.

experienced and carried on by the White descendants of colonizers, alongside the intergenerational trauma experienced by people of color.

During my second year of divinity school, I participated in a student-led course exploring the spiritual dimensions of reparations work for White folks with inherited wealth. One of the student leaders introduced me to the idea that Puritan theology enabled genocidal violence through its denial of grief. As historian David E. Stannard discusses in his text *The Puritan Way of Death*, the Calvinist framing of death was inseparable from the theology of predestination, recognizing God's power to save a select group within an essentially sinful humanity. Puritan practice explicitly forbade funeral services or graveside prayer in rejection of the Catholic belief that prayers could affect the soul of the deceased.<sup>17</sup> In a Puritan framework, emotional displays of grief was anathema to Christian theology. If faith requires trust in God's plan, then elaborate demonstrations of mourning reflect a betrayal of this faith. This constraint around expressions of grief reinforces Menakem's analysis of the Puritans bypassing the processing of trauma. While the pain of loss was withheld at gravesites, internalized pain was channeled into the domination of Indigenous and Black bodies.

The avoidance of grief is woven into White American culture today. In *Bearing the Unbearable*, Joanne Cacciatore, whose scholarship and work focuses on traumatic grief, names this a "grief-denying" society. She argues that when encountering the grief of others, we are afraid the "emotional contagion of grief" will expose us to our own pain. And so, we

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<sup>17</sup> David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change*, 9. print (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 101.

react with attempts to “fix grief.”<sup>18</sup> This is both ineffective and misguided. When we repress our grief, the pain is internalized and emerges in ways that sustains harmful cycles.

However, Cacciatore argues, “When we have learned to fully inhabit our grief, we awaken to the suffering in others.” And from there, we are moved to actions “that serve to diminish suffering rather than amplify it.”<sup>19</sup> Menakem writes that when people make a choice not to pass on trauma to others, we can move from the dirty pain of numbness and denial to clean pain, which “has a healing and transformative capacity.”<sup>20</sup> Or, in Cacciatore’s words, “Grief transforms from the individual to the collective.”<sup>21</sup> Giving our own bodies over to the process of grieving allows us to be in relationship with the joys and pains of others.

Just as individual grief has the power to connect one to a collective, there is a connection between personal grief and the political dimensions of public grievability. Judith Butler’s scholarship discusses the political implications and transformative possibilities of grief. They argue that rather than a solitary experience, grief “furnishes a sense of political community” by illuminating humanity’s “fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” through relational connection.<sup>22</sup> Writing in the early 2000s, Butler looks at the newspaper obituary as site reflecting the public grievability of different lives, differently positioned within systems of power. There are not, they note, obituaries published for those killed by United States forces in war. “If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and

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<sup>18</sup> Joanne Cacciatore, *Bearing the Unbearable: Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017), 129.

<sup>19</sup> Cacciatore, 179.

<sup>20</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Joanne Cacciatore, *Bearing the Unbearable: Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017), 184.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (2003): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15240650409349213>.

preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition.”<sup>23</sup> Expanding this analysis to Palestinian lives lost during Israeli strikes at that time, Butler wonders, “What is the relation between the violence by which these ungrievable lives were lost and the prohibition on their public grievability? Are the violence and the prohibition both permutations of the same violence?”<sup>24</sup> Do the willingness to kill and failure to grieve share the same root source?

To grieve a life is to say that it mattered. If the Puritans had paused to grieve the lives of Indigenous people killed by settler violence and disease, could they ever have treated these lives as disposable? If enslavers had stopped to grieve the lives lost during the Middle Passage, could they ever have kidnapped human beings and forced them on to ships? Ever have brought parents and children, brothers and sisters, onto American shores and called them property? Butler’s “grievability” offers language for this interconnectedness of grief, the value placed on life, and discursive power. My ability as a White American to open myself to grief, to pain that has the capacity to dissolve boundaries between self and other, to dissolve the constructed circles around who is worthy of protection and who is a threat, is bound up in these layers of politics and power and storytelling and theology.

To gather in mourning, as we did in the Boston Common after George Floyd died, kneeling on the ground and holding lights in the air, was to say, this man was worthy of life and love. He was not born into this world as a potential threat to White bodies. He was born as a beloved human being. The sacred within us sees the sacredness within him, and aches at its denial. In publicly grieving, we are moving toward a world in which we allow ourselves to move through the pain of loss and commit to protecting one another while we

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<sup>23</sup> Butler, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, 24.

have life and breath. To feel the impacts of violence so that we may break out of the violence altogether.

~Reflection~

- Does the description of White U.S.-American society as “grief-denying” resonate with your own experience?

How may this have impacted your own comfort to acknowledge your emotional pain or grief? To encounter the pain of others?

- Think of a time in which a person, ritual, or space helped you feel safe while experiencing pain or grief. What made it effective?
- Public expressions of mourning are not innately aligned with internal experiences of grief.

In your own experience, have public memorial spaces facilitated personal experiences of grief for you? What has facilitated this, or acted as a barrier?

## Trusting the Capacity for Transformation

### Seeing and Loving Ourselves as Opponents

At that time in 2020, Black organizers had been working for years to establish the networks, skills, resources, and conceptual frameworks that would mobilize the masses to say BLACK LIVES MATTER. To say, we are called to the work of affirming sacred life and building a world that will protect and affirm it, too. In her 2014 article, Alicia Garza recounts developing #BlackLivesMatter as a political movement building strategy alongside fellow Black women organizers, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. The project began in 2013, and expanded during the 2014 Ferguson protests following the murder of Mike Brown. Garza emphasizes that this framework “affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum . . . It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.”<sup>25</sup> Rather than a spontaneous reaction to police violence, Black Lives Matter was founded upon generations of work, intentionally foregrounding voices underrepresented within previous movement spaces. Addressing responses that rejected or diluted the words “Black Lives Matter,” including the dismissive “all lives matter,” Garza explains,

#BlackLivesMatter doesn’t mean your life isn’t important—it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within White supremacy, are important to your liberation. Given the disproportionate impact state violence has on Black lives, we understand that when Black people in this country get free, the benefits will be wide reaching and transformative for society as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

<sup>26</sup> Garza.

Building on Black feminist theory articulated in the Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement, Garza acknowledges the connectedness of White supremacy and other systems of domination. She invokes the paradigmatic claim: when all Black lives are valued and free from systems of oppression, all other people realize freedom as well.<sup>27</sup>

How did we, as White people, get to this place in which hearing "Black lives matter" can feel so existentially threatening? To me, when I see someone unable to accept the words "Black lives matter," or accept an ethnic studies lesson in their child's school curriculum,<sup>28</sup> on some level I see the fear being forced to confront our own past and present. If Black lives matter, and this is what White people have done to precious Black lives, what does that say about who *we* are? And in a society dependent on punitive frameworks for dealing with wrongdoing and wrongdoers, if we acknowledge this harm, what would happen to us?

My mind returns to James Baldwin's claim that if White folks learned to love and accept ourselves and one another, the story and accompanying violence of racial hierarchy would no longer be needed. A critical element of accessing this love will be the tools for looking honestly at the harm for which we are individually and collectively responsible without getting stuck in defensiveness. I have found guidance in the work of loving those responsible for harm, including myself, in the work of Valarie Kaur and her model of "revolutionary love." Valarie Kaur is an activist, filmmaker, and civil rights attorney whose work is grounded in her Sikh faith. Seamlessly integrating the systemic and the spiritual, her vision of "revolutionary love" grapples with the transformation necessary within

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<sup>27</sup> "The Combahee River Collective Statement," web page, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, April 1977, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0028151/>.

<sup>28</sup> Ethan Chang, "White Parents Challenging Ethnic Studies," The Harvard Edcast, accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/edcast/22/10/challenge-ethnic-studies>.

political structures and within the human heart—wherever we are positioned within the matrix of power and domination.

“Revolutionary love” calls each of us to actively practice loving others (broadly speaking), loving opponents (defined in a fluid sense, including anyone we find ourselves in conflict with in a given moment), and loving ourselves. This frame understands love as a form of labor encompassing all human emotions, including grief. Kaur refers to grief as “the price of love,” and as a generative force in the work of building community and social movements.<sup>29</sup> While she lays out distinct practices for loving “opponents” and loving “ourselves,” as a White person grappling with my own connection to harm within the context of racial hierarchy, it has been meaningful to integrate these practices. If the very concept of Whiteness is oppositional to justice and culpable for harm, how can I lovingly navigate just being, well, me—A young person living as best I can in the body and world I was born into?

Seeing myself in the Dallas police officer Amber Guyger activated this sense of perceiving myself as “opponent.” In 2019, I read about the death of Botham Jean, whom Guyger killed in his own home. I was unsettled to recognize her as White woman like myself, rather than another man. During the trials that followed, one of the witnesses who testified against Guyger, Joshua Brown, a neighbor of Jean’s who was also a Black man, was shot and killed.<sup>30</sup> The following Sunday, I sat in the pews of the chapel at Union United Methodist Church, a historically Black—now multicultural and multiracial—community. At

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<sup>29</sup> Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Amir Vera, Hollie Silverman, and Ashley Killough, “Amber Guyger: Witness in Ex-Cop’s Murder Trial Was Shot to Death in Dallas,” CNN, October 7, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/05/us/botham-jean-neighbor-killed/index.html>.

the beginning of the service, Pastor Jay opened with an acknowledgment of the killing, describing this retributive act as a lynching. Before moving into the liturgy, he left us in quiet.

Sitting in the stillness of the sanctuary, thoughts chased one another around in my mind. It was so easy to recognize myself in the killer. I remember wondering if Black folks around me felt less safe and free because of my presence. I wondered if my own sadness would seem genuine. I wondered if it *was* genuine when I was also concerned about others' readings of my association with the cop—this seemed like a distraction from the stakes at hand. I felt uncomfortable. I thought about all the times I had been told White folks *should be* uncomfortable. And, I remember trying to just breathe and bear witness to the loss of these lives, and to the persistence of racialized violence over centuries. This imagined hierarchy that so deeply shapes safety and perceptions of threat, and the state-sanctioned power to determine who lives and who dies.

Whatever my muddled interior state, as I had been in Professor Jackson's classroom, here again I was invited into mourning. Within the service, it was a statement that we, as a faith community, were going to disrupt business as usual to hurt together. That each of our hearts had the capacity to be in this place of horror and open up to prayer. In both of these moments, a Black leader and teacher extended that space to me. Not absolving my complicity, but simply saying, I trust you to be human enough to be upset.

I returned home from church that day still unsettled. I had once again come up against the apparent contradiction of acknowledging culpability and sharing in grief. I saw myself belonging to a category of people responsible for harm, "opponents" to my own sense of justice. Valarie Kaur's guide to loving an "opponent" includes giving oneself space

to rage, listen, and finally, to reimagine.<sup>31</sup> Placing myself back in that moment in the church, what could it have looked like to turn this process toward myself?

***Rage.***

*Stuck in my own thoughts, I am angry at myself for making it about me when the true harm and danger is borne by those who are not White.*

*I am angry that I, as a White woman, am familiar with the internalized perception of men, and especially men of color, as threatening, while also knowing that we ourselves wield the power to harm.*

*I am angry that I can feel the wrongness of this racialized world deep in my bones, and don't know how to get out.*

*I am angry that I am part of this cycle I haven't chosen. And I am angry that it will keep on going with or without my consent.*

*The anger feels like an itchiness from being in my own skin, like a knotting in my stomach, a constriction in my chest and throat.*

*I could release some of this rage by running from the church down to the river, and finding stones to throw into the water. I could find a place to yell or sing out some of the churning energy. I could find a friend to vent to, perhaps another White woman who might be carrying similar tensions. I could find some space in which to journal and freely express what was bubbling up.*

*And through this, I could clear some of the murkiness and open up space for grief. Space to hold the memory of Botham Jean with care.*

***Listen.***

*I am noticing my own desire to be seen as good taking up more space than I want it to. What needs and fears are behind this? How might I tend to them?*

*Where am I noticing my own racism? What can I do with that information?*

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<sup>31</sup> Kaur, *See No Stranger*.

*How can I bring curiosity and wonder to myself?*

***Reimagine.***

*What does it look like to live in a world in which my skin is not immutably linked to violence?*

*I imagine sitting in a sanctuary alongside Black siblings and not worrying that I am tainting the space, making it feel less like the refuge “sanctuary” implies?*

*In this world, we are not mourning the death of another Black sibling at the hands of a White police officer. The cycle of life and death is no longer distorted by White supremacy, by imperialism, by gendered violence, by ableism, by capitalism. The appearance of one human does not signal “threat” to another. Community safety does not depend on individuals carrying weapons. When a life is lost to natural causes, or a rare act of violence, the community comes together to grieve.*

Valarie Kaur’s invitation to rage, listen, and reimagine distills a powerful path toward loving, and thus also a path toward grieving. It holds space for our body’s deepest emotional reactions, while guiding us in honoring the wholeness and complexity of other people. Brought to the moments in which self and opponent are merged, these steps can guide us toward a world in which the barriers between those in positioned in opposition to one another are dissolved. This model of love calls us to engage with ourselves and others who cause harm with trust in the potential for individual and collective transformation.

~Reflection~

- Are there contexts in which you have understood one or more aspects of your positionality to place you in opposition to justice or goodness?

What sensations do you associate with this experience?

- I have also found Valarie Kaur's invitation to love opponents through raging, listening, and reimagining to be generative for thinking about ancestors of whom I feel ashamed, whether specific people, or groups to whom I am connected.

Is there an individual or group within your family tree that evokes shame for you? Try spending some time journaling about your relationship to this figure or group, and then moving through these three steps, whether in writing, conversation, another form of expression, or some combination of these modalities.

## Prison Abolitionism and Transformative Justice

In some cases, Black Lives Matter protests have centered calls for the indictment of individuals within the court system. At the same time, the movement has expanded conversations regarding policing and the carceral system more broadly, and during the summer of 2020 helped to popularize conversations about dismantling policing and the prison system.<sup>32</sup> As I have spent time with prison abolitionist writings and learning spaces, I have come to see abolitionism as not just a reaction to a violent carceral system, but as a spiritual framework offering generative possibilities for all, whether privileged or oppressed by White supremacy.

Prison abolition is a decentralized movement, and the framework of abolition is claimed by groups and organizations with a variety of priorities, projects, and campaigns. In developing abolitionist language and theory, scholars and activists have emphasized that while the prison-industrial complex is the stated target, transformative change on personal and interpersonal levels is integral to this process. Writer adrienne maree brown describes existing carceral logic as a belief that “there's some way we can get rid of people who commit harm, and that will remove the harmful behavior and the harmful belief systems from our communities.”<sup>33</sup> In this way of thinking, blame is placed on individuals, and so, wrongdoing is addressed by taking a person away from the rest of society. Ultimately, in the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “abolition is about presence, not absence.”<sup>34</sup> Like Valarie

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<sup>32</sup> Mariame Kaba, Tamara K. Nopper, and Naomi Murakawa, *We Do This 'til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, Abolitionist Papers (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> “A Roadmap Away From ‘Cancel Culture’ and Towards Transformative Justice | KQED,” accessed December 10, 2023, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13893734/a-roadmap-away-from-cancel-culture-and-towards-transformative-justice>.

<sup>34</sup> “Ruth Wilson Gilmore — ‘Where Life Is Precious, Life Is Precious,’” The On Being Project, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://onbeing.org/programs/ruth-wilson-gilmore-where-life-is-precious-life-is-precious/>.

Kaur's call to revolutionary love, abolitionism invites us to reimagine society. Within prison abolitionist discourse, *reimagining* is reflected in the conviction that by creating a society in which needs are met, we are transforming the circumstances that lead to violence and harm in the first place.<sup>35</sup> The work of abolition is to strengthen the bonds among people, and develop the skills and resources to move toward repair and reintegration when these bonds are damaged.

My outward-facing work within SURJ Boston, our local chapter of the national Showing Up for Racial Justice network, has primarily been within our Prison Abolition action partnership. There are over 20 of us in the group, and together we support local organizations including Families for Justice as Healing (a Roxbury-based organization working toward the decarceration of women and girls in Massachusetts), Deeper than Water (a coalition of incarcerated and non-incarcerated community members working to improve health care access in Massachusetts prisons), and Cambridge HEART/ Holistic Emergency Alternative Response Team (a community member-led initiative developing alternatives to policing in Cambridge).

As group members, we each make a commitment to building relationships with one or more incarcerated community members. This may look like sustaining connection with a family member or friend, or getting connected to someone new as a pen pal. At a recent meeting, we spent time reflecting on sorrows and sources of grief we have encountered through these connections. One group member shared about the pain of witnessing an elderly friend being denied medical parole despite severe illness and insufficient care while incarcerated in the women's prison in Framingham. Another spoke about the frustration of

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<sup>35</sup> Kaba, Nopper, and Murakawa, *We Do This 'til We Free Us*.

witnessing a friend be reincarcerated following a minor parole violation. Many spoke to anger and exhaustion from simultaneously feeling deep responsibility and limited control. The harm done by the prison system has brought us into these relationships, opening us to shared grief.

And, as we navigate life and justice work alongside one another, we also share the joy of life-affirming connection along the way. We have witnessed incarcerated women testifying in a Massachusetts state hearing for the first time, to speak to a bill that will impact their lives most directly. We have marched in the streets with women whose voices we had once only heard via phone recordings from inside the prison at rallies. In fighting for a future beyond prisons, we are not “helping” people of color. It is humbling to learn from leadership of community members who believe that the transformative vision of abolition is possible. There is joy in being welcomed into roles accompanying and supporting this journey.

Carceral logic relies on a binary naming people as good or bad, innocent or criminal. Other ways of holding harm and human imperfection are possible. As bell hooks has wondered, when facing the wrongs of another, how do we “remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?”<sup>36</sup> When White folks are confronted with the culpability we hold for participating in White supremacy, our self-perception may shift to the “guilty” side of this binary. What does it look like to extend this understanding of the capacity to be transformed to ourselves? An abolitionist approach to harm holds transformative possibilities for White folks to be able to see ourselves as perpetrators of harm, and as beings (like any other) with the capacity to change.

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<sup>36</sup> Melvin Mcleod, “There’s No Place to Go But Up -- Bell Hooks and Maya Angelou in Conversation,” *Lion’s Roar*, January 1998, <https://www.lionsroar.com/theres-no-place-to-go-but-up/>.

Ultimately, faith in the capacity to transform ourselves and the capacity to transform society are deeply integrated. When I was first pushed to see myself connected to something inherently violent, I felt stuck. Faith practice helped to return me to a sense of fundamental worth. This lens of transformative justice and abolitionism has become foundational in renewing my sense of hope and possibility, allowing me actively seek accountability for the ways in which I am responsible for harm, and trust my capacity to be part of the work of building something new.

~Reflection~

- How does the language of trusting that each person carries the capacity for transformation land for you? When is this challenging?

Is there a time in which you wish someone had extended this trust to you?

- The concept of abolishing prisons can feel shocking and/or unrealistic. For me, it has been a process from thinking this sounded impossible to being moved by the radical possibilities the shift in framework opens up.

What is an experience you have had of something effectively challenging or shifting one of your deeply held beliefs or convictions? What allowed that shift to occur?

## Belonging Beyond Whiteness

I do not take it as a given that a group of White folks coming together to talk about race will get somewhere worthwhile. But there is vital potential in White folks proactively holding spaces in which to do some of the work of personal interrogation and learning, as well as building community with which to engage in sustained, long-term action. In that first White affinity space I joined as an undergraduate during the aftermath of Trump's election, a student read aloud oft-shared words from Indigenous Australian artist and activist Lilla Watson: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."<sup>37</sup> Intellectually, I got it. I could use language of intersecting systems of domination, understand that all freedom is connected. But ultimately it was easier to acknowledge the ways in which I benefited from racial hierarchy than to grasp what chains, exactly, were constraining me, and what it would look like to be liberated from them.

It was a couple years later, during another moment of public mourning, that this truth reached me on a more embodied level. In 2018, following the devastating shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, I joined a community-organized vigil at a local synagogue. Welcoming those who had gathered, a speaker said, "I dream of a world in which *my* people are safe because *all* people are safe." While the language of chains and freedom had continued to feel murky to me, I could access these simple words of safety, and the radical vision they offered. If my safety, my wellbeing, is at the cost of someone else's, it can never be complete or secure. If any human being is beyond the line of the circle of care, protection, and safety, that person could be me. If my lifestyle is dependent on the

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<sup>37</sup> "Lilla Watson," Lilla: International Women's Network, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://lillanetwork.wordpress.com/about/>.

suffering of others, some part of my own humanity is constrained by the chain of dissociation and numbness. *I am safe when all people are safe.* I have come to understand true safety as inseparable from true freedom. In safety, in freedom, we experience the ability to exist as our full selves, unconstrained by limits imposed by systems of domination. *I am free when all people are free.* For me, this outlook shifts the question from *how can I be a good White person?* to *how can I find my role in the collective work of building safety?*. Bringing trust in our worth and capacity to be transformed, we can let go of the need to prove ourselves good, and instead focus on bringing our offerings to a shared vision.

Following the 2016 election, Toni Morrison published a New Yorker article titled “Mourning for Whiteness.” In the strength and passion of Trump’s base, she sees people reacting to the perceived loss of the wages of Whiteness they had known. “So scary are the consequences of a collapse of white privilege that supports and translates violence against the defenseless as strength. These people are not so much angry as terrified, with the kind of terror that makes knees tremble.”<sup>38</sup> As mentioned earlier, in *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Menakem argues that what White-body supremacy provides White folks a sense of belonging. He elaborates, “It provides a false sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, of being a part of something intrinsically valuable.”<sup>39</sup> It is jarring when something breaks us out of this, to a realization that we are in fact part of something inherently violent. And to Morrison’s point, it can also be frightening to realize that Whiteness is not a guaranteed source of security.

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<sup>38</sup> Toni Morrison, “Mourning for Whiteness,” *The New Yorker*, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/toni-morrison-trump-election-making-america-white-again>.

<sup>39</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 148.

Over these past years of racial reckoning, some among us White folks have been clinging on to the promises of Whiteness, while others try to run from its stain. Clearly, we must reckon with this story that has become so integrated with our sense of self, but that cannot fulfill a promise of wellbeing and safety, and is built upon violence we cannot look at without paralyzing shame or denial. In Menakem's words, transformative change will involve offering "people better ways to belong, and better things to belong to."<sup>40</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates expresses a similar vision in *Between the World and Me*. He writes, "The new people were something else before they were White -- Catholic, Corsican, Welsh, Mennonite, Jewish -- and if all our national hopes have any fulfillment, then they will have to be something else again."<sup>41</sup> I often circle back to this passage when bringing White folks into conversations about our relationship to race. We have been born into a world in which our lineage carries symbolic meaning with profound and violent impacts. But, our people were something else before. Together, we can see the dismantling of White supremacy as what Resmaa Menakem calls culture-building work. We can be something else again. We can find something better to belong to.

Within our orientation "base groups" and other SURJB spaces, I hear folks circling back to expressions of guilt and shame. In these moments, I have been noticing the shift that happens when I invite people to reorient to the violence of White supremacy through a posture of grief. At times, this has been a simple, "I hear you expressing shame about your connection to this act (or system) of violence. What does it feel like if we pause and allow

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<sup>40</sup> Menakem, 148.

<sup>41</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (Waterville, ME: Thorndike press, 2016).

ourselves to feel the sadness of this harm (or loss)?" In my role as a facilitator, whether in base groups or other chapter spaces, I have also been exploring ways of proactively dedicating time to the expression and release of grief—whether integrated into regularly scheduled meetings, or designated grief-processing spaces. Moving forward, I intend to work with others within the SURJ Boston community to expand these grief-centered offerings, as necessary for a movement culture grounded in love for self and other.

As Pastor Nikki said that day, we cannot master anti-racism. As White folks, we *can* meet our shame and reground in our goodness. We can build the practices that enable us to hold that we are culpable for harm, and still have the capacity to be transformed—and be part of transformation bigger than ourselves. We can be upset by human suffering, and by our responsibility for it. We do not fight racism to cure White sadness. But, we can open ourselves to the grief that acts as a solvent, dissolving the boundaries constructed around belonging and care, holding each human being as beloved. We can allow ourselves to be humans connected to the humanity of others. The sacred within us can honor the sacred within others. We let our shoulders loosen, and our desire to demonstrate our goodness soften into the shared acknowledgement that the way things are isn't worth it. We can open ourselves to the longing for something new, for a world in which each of us have our needs met and our well being protected. We can find our place in the work to build it.

~Reflection~

- What gives you pause when thinking about White folks taking on racial justice work? What structures can you imagine could be put in place to help alleviate these concerns?
- Are there spaces in your life and work that allow you to shift from operating as an individual to being part of a collective? If not, what could it look like to find—or build—one?
- What has come up in connection with your own experience that would be worth spending some more time grappling with? What form will this take?

## Closing

This fall continually brought me into intimate encounters with grief. On October 18th, I found myself marching alongside over a thousand people, making our way from the National Mall toward a congressional office building. This was, of course, only a week and a half after the violence of October 7th, and the days in between had been a blur of rapidly unfolding events and narratives and reactions. And from the very beginning, the discourse was shaped by the messy politics of grief.

On this day in D.C., I was joining an action led by If Not Now and Jewish Voices for Peace, two Jewish-led organizations whose organizers quickly focused their energy toward a call for a ceasefire in Gaza. Signs and t-shirts read “Not in Our Name,” “Ceasefire Now,” “Genocide is Not a Jewish Value.” A chant moved through the crowd, hundreds of voices joining in to call, “OUR GRIEF IS NOT YOUR WEAPON! OUR GRIEF IS NOT YOUR WEAPON!” I took in these words, and tears in my eyes spilled over. Our grief is not your weapon. I, as a non-Jewish ally at the protest, was not centered in the “our” here. But these words carried so much. The pain of the loss of over a thousand Jewish lives on October 7th. The way in which this pain was, from the beginning, embedded in a context and history that can be narrated in so many ways. The weaponization of this pain to justify military mobilization in Gaza. At this point, this had already meant the loss of thousands of civilian lives. Each loss birthing new pain, new grief. And these Jewish leaders here were saying, no. We will not allow our grief to fuel this cycle of violence.

The ongoing violence since this time has shaped the ways I have focused my time and energy this year. I have many extended family members living in and around Jerusalem. In 2017, I spent two weeks in Aida Camp in the West Bank, and have stayed

connected to community there. When I see a video on WhatsApp of a young Israeli cousin singing, and Facebook pictures from the first day of preschool in Aida, I do not see these children living on two sides of a conflict. I see them as beloved children born into a story that says their safety is mutually exclusive. I see their safety as mutually dependent, as is the safety and freedom of any human. I have been grappling with my position and responsibilities as someone who has personal connections to loved ones in the area, and yet does not belong to the communities most directly impacted. My Whiteness, my Christianity, my U.S. citizenship protect me from directly experiencing the violence unfolding in Palestine. Protect me from the direct impacts of Islamophobia or Anti-Semitism manifesting elsewhere. At the same time, my Whiteness, my Christianity, my Americanness reflect my direct complicity in the cycle of violence we see playing out.

When I was hosted in Aida Camp, which is near Bethlehem, I saw metal canisters lying around. Picking one up, I learned these were tear gas canisters, which are regularly shot into the camp by Israeli soldiers. Printed on each canister were the words MADE IN THE USA. This image has stayed in my memory as a haunting reminder that my responsibility for this violence is not only abstract or symbolic. My tax dollars, the actions of my elected representatives, have provided weapons to sustain the violence of occupation for years, and are now enabling the relentless attacks on the people of Gaza. And, White European Christianity has helped create the stories and colonial structures at the root of this crisis.

Sitting with this reality, how am I to respond? I feel familiar shame rising from my stomach, shame that makes me nauseous, unsteady. I feel anger quickening my heartbeat, the tingling of energy searching for release. I feel grief. Grief that sits heavy in my core and

weighs down my limbs, constricting my chest. Grief that interrupts the pressure to move on with business as usual. Grief that finds its way out of my body and into the world as it makes my breath and words shake, finds a well somewhere in my body and draws up tears. Grief that I sometimes hold at bay, but that finds its way back in, again and again.

Not too long after October 7th, we lost a family friend, Jen. She died of pancreatic cancer, at home in Iowa. Her death was not connected to loss of lives in Palestine. And yet, in my body, in my consciousness, it has all become integrated. Through the raw grief in saying goodbye to Jen, who has been in my life since birth, I have been grounded in the bigness of a single life. Her absence reshapes the world of her husband, Steve, of my mom, her best friend for over 40 years, of so many of us who love her. I carry this rawness in my body as I read growing numbers of deaths, and try to grasp the scope of each world shattered by each loss. This grief is a bridge of connection, allows numbers to stay human, to stay whole. Grief emerges from love and helps me to hold these losses with love.

Grief compels me to ask, what if the value of these lives had been recognized by those with the power to kill before they were taken? As long as White supremacy and other forms of domination persist, they will impact who lives and who dies. How can we move to a world in which all lives are seen as grievable and thus worthy of life, in which the outcomes of ideologies of domination never unfold? In my own context, I believe there is power in inviting White U.S. Americans to reconnect with our grief, in private reflection, in community, and in public mourning spaces. Beyond our inherited position as oppressors, we can see the goodness in ourselves, the goodness of others, and let pain of harm done reach our numbed hearts. To build culture that acknowledges that while we have been born into a system of harm, we can still access our humanity enough to see and grieve the

sacred life of another. We cannot undo what has happened, but as we grieve the impacts of violence woven into our past and present, we can lay a loving foundation for new ways of sharing this world.

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