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## Responding to the War Against Black Bodies

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# Responding to the War Against Black Bodies

Zakiya N. Jackson

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Since the controversial killing of unarmed Trayvon Martin in February of 2012, heightened attention has been given to the killing of black men and women, especially by police officers. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a current movement that arose in response to police brutality. For some, this movement hits close to home, perhaps because they are a black person or they have close relationships with black people. Perhaps either their mother or father is a cop, or they worry about how this impacts their lives. For some, BLM may not be as close to their hearts but they are curious about how to authentically represent Christ in the midst of chaos and confusion.

Graciously, God offers us hope, context, and a path forward, even in such tumultuous times. The best responses often require a learning journey. The following processes are important when we embark on the journey to understand the current war on black bodies: understanding the evolution of slavery, honestly evaluating our own self-identity and increasing our capacity for learning, lamenting corporately and individually, revering the *imago Dei* in every human, and committing to vulnerability and discipleship from the margins. This doesn't happen in a pretty order. Sometimes, it is hard, messy, and disjointed. But it also leads to deep joy and fellowship and allows us to offer our best to God and our community.

## **Understand the Evolution of Slavery**

Understanding the history of slavery is critical to understanding the treatment of blackness in the United States. Many people seem to believe that when slavery ended, racism ended. Others believe that when the Civil Rights Movement successfully championed voting rights laws, the struggle ended. However, a change in the law does not mean a change in behaviors, hearts, and minds.

Bryan Stevenson is a civil rights attorney, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, and a person of deep Christian faith. He speaks on the evolution of slavery throughout history. Bryan's ability to legally defend clients successfully is deeply impacted by the common narratives around race that presume people of color to be guiltier than white people. These popular narratives are racial biases that directly and indirectly say things like:

- Black people are more likely to do criminal things.
- Black people are stronger, bigger, more aggressive, and must be fought harder to ensure safety.
- Black people need to be punished more severely than others, because ultimately, they aren't as good as white people.

To better understand these narratives, let's explore the evolution of slavery as presented by the Equal Justice Initiative. The following is an adaptation (with embellishment) of the short video, available online, called "Slavery to Mass Incarceration."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Bryan Stevenson, "Slavery to Mass Incarceration," *The Equal Justice Initiative*, YouTube [https://youtu.be/r4e\\_djVSag4](https://youtu.be/r4e_djVSag4).

In 1619, the first Africans were brought to Virginia as servants but quickly descended into slavery as the region's economic system became dependent on forced labor. The institution of American slavery developed as a permanent, hereditary system centrally tied to race. Millions of black people were forcibly taken from Africa on a horrific journey across the Atlantic—and millions died. Slaves were denied their legal rights or autonomy, and slave owners had complete power over them as property. In order to justify owning another human, a narrative of racial difference developed that undergirded the false ideology of white supremacy. White supremacy cannot be undone without the undoing of the narratives that support it.

American slavery was often barbaric, grotesque, and violent. The romanticized versions often presented in modern times are wrong. In addition to the harsh realities of slave labor, slaves were also often abused, maimed, or killed for not working fast enough, visiting family members, or learning to read. Reading was not permitted for most slaves as it was considered a deterrent to controlling them. Enslaved people were also sexually exploited. This is true in the case of my own family. My great-great-grandfather was a Scottish immigrant slave owner, who sexually exploited my great-great-grandmother. That exploitation resulted in the birth of my great-grandfather. It seems that as a child he was forced off the plantation because the slave masters did not want the visual evidence of my ancestor to be present any longer. This trauma is not an uncommon story of blackness in America.

By 1808, slavery was largely considered a gross human rights violation and the United States banned the further importation of slaves from Africa. The practice of slavery remained and demand increased tremendously, fueling the domestic slave trade. Between 1808 and 1860, for example, the slave population in Alabama grew from less than 40,000 to 435,000. Nationwide, there were approximately four million slaves in 1860. These enslaved people were auctioned and traded at slave markets along with livestock, inspected and handled like the animals, regardless of age or gender. Slavery traumatized and devastated millions of people, and families had no capacity to stay together. Consequently, about half of all slaves were separated from their spouses and parents.

After slavery was prohibited in 1865, it evolved. Violent mobs of angry white people oppressed the newly freed citizens for decades through abuse, murder, and torture. For one hundred years, black people were legally separated and segregated, with legal rights such as voting, education, and basic dignity denied. We were sometimes lynched for not saying sir or ma'am to white people or in other ways upsetting white people. We were often harmed for minor offenses or for protesting. That's eerily familiar to the reason the black teenager Jordan Davis was killed in a gas station parking lot in November of 2012. He was playing loud music with friends, which upset the white man who killed him.

Through the first Civil Rights movement, segregation laws changed—but legally authorized racial bias persists today. African Americans are six times more likely to be sentenced to prison than white people who commit the same crime. One in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison. The War on Drugs in the 1980s contributed greatly to this war against black bodies, as evidenced by the detailed exploration of our criminal justice system by attorney and author Michelle Alexander. Her book, *The New Jim Crow*, and Bryan Stevenson's, *Just Mercy*, plainly outline how black people are often presumed guilty through racial bias and/or receive harsher punishments. Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative believe that racial bias remains a serious problem that is a result of the narratives and practices developed during slavery that were never dismantled. I believe that as well. Modern-day slavery of black people is our criminal justice system.

This is the war against black bodies—the racial biases fueled by white supremacist narratives about our inferiority, weaker intelligence, and less valid humanity that allows police officers, attorneys, and neighbors to decide without penalty that our lives and livelihoods are disposable. The war was also manifest as realtors took advantage of black people moving north during the Great Migration through redlining.<sup>2</sup> Present evidence of the war are Sandra Bland, Renisha McBride, Rekia Boyd and other black

2. See Ta-Nehisi Coates's "A Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

women who are killed after being pulled over for a traffic violation, asking to use a cell phone, or simply walking. We see the war in our education system through the achievement gap as a child's ability to have a good education is usually dependent on their zip code. Such biases are manifest in a plethora of ways, and I feel them every day.

### **Honestly Evaluate Self-Identity and Increase the Capacity for Learning**

At the root of matters of race and ethnicity in the United States are emotions, feelings, and beliefs about others and ourselves. This means that copious amounts of self-reflection is needed. To understand the war against black bodies, self-evaluation makes the work more manageable and meaningful. Here are some questions to ask:

- Does it make me angry or nervous that someone might think I've said or done something racist? Why?
- How do I react when I am nervous or angry? Am I still able to learn, or am I consumed in defending myself?
- Do I have satisfaction in not being associated with other white people? Other black people? Other Caribbean natives? (Insert whatever term you self-identify with.) Why?

These questions begin to help us understand ourselves as we learn things that may surprise us about race in America. As you reflect on how you act when you are unsettled, inquire with someone close to you who will give constructive feedback. As you become aware of areas to grow, determine a plan to increase your capacity for learning. For example, if you are inclined to be defensive, give yourself the homework assignment of understanding how your value as a human is not connected to being right all the time. This could be done through a biblical study, accountability group, therapy, or something else that helps you better understand and solidify your own self-identity. Though this is a lot of work, the quest for understanding is not just an academic endeavor; it requires emotional, spiritual, and mental discipline.

The deeper the self-exploration goes, the more we are able to understand the anatomy of our own fears and insecurities. This can help us recognize when we over-spiritualize our fears and regard them as facts (i.e., because you are afraid of tall black men, you treat it as fact that tall black men are dangerous). The killer of Michael Brown described him as looking like a "demon." Dr. Christena Cleveland and Adam A.T. Thomason both address how we let fears infiltrate our common narratives of others.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes these fears create preferences, and we treat those preferences as absolute truth. This is a dangerous but common practice that must be undone to truly resist the war on black bodies.

### **Lament**

The progeny of white supremacy we experience today in police brutality, mass incarceration, and a deeply broken education system is a cause for lament. Lamenting is a biblical principle, a spiritual discipline, and a pathway to restoration. A deeper understanding of the evolution of slavery is profoundly stirring. It has the capacity to turn our world upside down, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and religious beliefs. As Christians, however, the grief might be particularly striking—as many admired forefathers steadfastly upheld slavery or even regarded it as Christian piety. Other Christians spearheaded abuses throughout the Jim Crow era, while faithfully saying their prayers and raising their children in their likeness. We ought not assume that in 2016 we aren't capable of similar injustices. And for this, we lament.

It is tempting and easy to skip lament. We learn of tragedy and respond with money or programs or advice. None of those responses are inherently bad yet they don't make anything automatically better. Lament allows us to sit still and feel the pain, collectively and personally. The stillness allows us to deal

3. For more, see Dr. Cleveland's book *Disunity in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013) and A. Thomason's Q Ideas talk "System Preferences" at <http://qideas.org/videos/systemic-preference/>.

with ourselves and to reflect on the magnitude of the problem. Lament can lead to confession, which as believers we know is part of the formula of lasting change. To respond without lament is to offer a Band-Aid solution to cancer. To respond without lament likely makes the response more about feeling better than empowering change.<sup>4</sup>

What do we do with lament? We do not rush it. We feel the sadness and sit quietly with it. Sometimes as we reflect, it will lead us to confess our sin in supporting systemic injustice. And we find ways to heal. Three strong, black voices in racial justice come to similar conclusions about the war on blackness, though they come from different angles. Psychologist and professor Joy DeGruy Leary,<sup>5</sup> attorney Bryan Stevenson, and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates all speak to the importance of healing in order to see true racial justice. They say that acknowledgement is part of the healing process. Their admonishments for healing are directed to all of us, with our various levels of involvement in the sustaining of white supremacy. The pedagogy of the oppressed helps us understand that oppressors and oppressed alike are wounded.<sup>6</sup> Oppressors are oppressed themselves, and the oppressed often become oppressors. This is why we need lament that leads to confession. The war on black bodies has taken a deep spiritual and psychological toll on our collective psyche. We find biblical support in I Corinthians 12.26–27: “If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. All of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it.” Lamenting is required if we truly believe we together are Christ’s body.

### Revere *Imago Dei*

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.” So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen 1.26–27)

*Imago Dei* takes our breath away, fills us with wonder, causes us to tremble, confuses us, excites us, and liberates us. Whatever our reaction, the Bible tells us that *imago Dei* embodies all of us. Each person is formed in the likeness of God and is an image-bearer. When this truth arrests our hearts, it changes everything.

I cannot easily ignore what is happening to other members of the body of Christ if I believe in *imago Dei*. It pushes me to believe that what happens to an unarmed black man selling cigarettes matters. Eric Garner’s inability to breathe matters to me. I can challenge myself to understand things that are confusing if I believe in *imago Dei*. I can push myself to do the self-evaluation it requires to engage in racial justice if I believe in *imago Dei*. If I regard Michael Brown as fully human and an image-bearer of God, it pushes me to reflect differently on why he was shot more than ten times. *Imago Dei* pushes me to think about little black girls being slammed to the ground while they try to go swimming or they sit in class. It leads me to ask questions like:

- Was excessive force used because she is black?
- Would a white boy have been shot 10+ times?
- Do I believe they deserved that treatment? Why?
- What does it mean to honor the *imago Dei* in Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Dajerria Becton, Sandra Bland and other slain black bodies?

4. Christian professor Soong-Chan Rah offers an important look at the role of lament in movements and in the church with his book *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

5. See more from Dr. DeGruy Leary at her website <http://joydegruy.com/>

6. See Paulo Friere, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970).

Some of the black bodies, souls, humans listed above did things that are illegal; others did not. Regardless, the *imago Dei* in them should shape how we responded to them. It should shape how we treat anyone, friend or foe.

The *imago Dei* in all people is also a cause for celebration. It is a joyful, beautiful connecting point. It is a place to gather and rejoice, to heal, to play and protest and love together. Surrendering to the truth of *imago Dei* is not horrifying. Change is not awful. The difficulties that must be overcome are minimized by the glory we are able to partake of when we uplift each other's humanity and glorify God. The work of activism is not only lament; it is not only tears. It is for freedom we are set free, and the sweetness of that liberation is a joy that cannot be replicated. Each victory in the battle to end the war on black bodies is hard fought and should be acknowledged with great cheer. We have to remember that we are fighting to create a world in which all of us are free. One where black lives (also) matter and freely reside with other lives that matter too.

### **Commit to Vulnerability and Discipleship**

One of the tactics used to uphold white supremacy is deferring personal responsibility for it by blaming others for the issues at hand. Blame is not the same thing as accountability. Dr. Brene Brown teaches that blame is simply the discharging of discomfort and pain. She says it has an inverse relationship to accountability.<sup>7</sup> Accountability requires vulnerability. We often miss our opportunities for empathy because we are busy engaging in the blame game. If we want the war on black bodies to end, we must reject the temptation to trivialize trauma with blame.

Here are things we might say when we are focused on blame as pertaining to racial justice:

- Slavery ended over one hundred years ago. Why are we still talking about it? (It makes me uncomfortable to talk about it so I want to find a way to minimize its importance.)
- Not all white people owned slaves. (You can't blame my people for this because we were too poor to own slaves.)
- I have black friends and I love all people. (Having black friends means I don't do anything wrong.)
- What about black-on-black crime? (I don't want to address racism so let's talk about a different problem.)

If we decide to focus on accountability and vulnerability, those same words could shift into the following:

- Even though it intimidates me, please help me understand the evolution of slavery and how it impacts race today. I'm confused.
- Please help me understand how white supremacy impacts all white people, even those of us who don't feel like we have a lot of power.
- I have black friends and family and I love them. Are there still things that I might do that would hurt them or even be racist that I am unaware of?
- Where can I learn more about the war on black bodies? How can I understand better what black people are experiencing?

The second list of questions requires a risky commitment to vulnerability. We might learn things we do not like that require us to change. It might disrupt some of the order in our lives. This is why the self-evaluation is so important. Taking risks is safer when we have a sense of our identity. It is also safer in community. Having loving people in our lives to tell us the truth when it hurts is vital. It is more bearable when people walk alongside of us while we labor. It also gives us people to celebrate our victories with.

7. Brene Brown, "Brene Brown on Blame," RSA animation short, YouTube, February 3, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZWf2\\_2L2v8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZWf2_2L2v8).



In the church, we are familiar with the importance of discipleship. We understand that growth is greatly enhanced with mentors, pastors, friends who will pour into us as we grow in our likeness of Christ. For those of us wanting to respond well to the war against black bodies, it behooves us to have people discipling us who are suffering in ways we are not. For white people, that means sitting at the feet of a black person and other people of color. More than reading a book, this means engaging in a personal relationship. For men, it means sitting at the feet of black sisters in Christ. Listen to us. Hear our pain. Be silent sometimes. For hetero-normative people of color, it might mean sitting at the feet of a queer person of color. It might mean sitting at the feet of a person of color who has less financial capacity than you do. Commit to being disciplined by people who are closer to erasure than you.

### **One Day We'll All Be Free**

Wars must come to an end. Even wars that have lasted for over four hundred years. There is a growing movement of believers in Christ who are joyfully, steadfastly, and persistently pursuing freedom for black bodies. We are black daughters and sons who love to play in the sunshine and sing about Jesus. We are Afro-Latina mommas who want our children to be safe, no matter what street they are on. We are Korean-American aunties who believe our humanity is all tied up together. We are white women who mourn over the repugnance of death in our streets, bullets aimed at little boys we've known for years. We are black men doing all we can to keep our families alive. We are hopeful and afraid, determined and tired. We are out here. We ask that you continue on the journey with us, or start for the first time if you haven't yet. We are solidifying our own identities, we are understanding the evolution of slavery, we are revering the *imago Dei* in black people, and we are committed to vulnerability. We are dreaming and resisting. We believe that one day we'll all be free.

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