

Jonathan Tran

ASIAN
AMERICANS
and the Spirit of
RACIAL
CAPITALISM

Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism



REFLECTION AND THEORY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism

JONATHAN TRAN

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For Carrie

*The Harvest is truly plenteous but the labourers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.—Matthew 9:37–38 (KJV), quoted in Oliver Cromwell Cox's *Caste, Class, and Race**

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Preface and Note on Method

I felt an almost unbearable tension—it was as if I were two persons, two faces of a Janus head. One profile stared disconsolately into the past—the fretful, violent, confining past broken only by occasional splotches of meaning, and by the love I had for my family. The other gazed with longing and apprehension into the future—a future glowing with challenge, but also harboring the possibility of defeat.—Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*¹

Writing about race is a polemic, in that we must confront the white capitalist infrastructure that has erased us, but also a lyric, in that our inner consciousness is knotted with contradictions.—Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*²

The problem is that the anxieties never go away. Every capitulation to the “white gaze” comes with shame; every stand you take for authenticity triggers its own questions about authenticity. And once you feel comfortable with the integrity of your work, someone says something that flips everything around, and you’re right back staring at your own lying face.—Jay Caspian Kang, “The Many Lives of Steven Yeun”³

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare what race and racism come to in America. Unfortunately, these realities were quickly folded back into the lies Americans keep telling themselves. The disproportionate prevalence of illness and death among African Americans exposed baseline injustices that race as a fiction covers over.⁴ Instead of confronting the structural and

¹ Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 106.

² Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World Publishing, 2020), 64.

³ Jay Caspian Kang, “The Many Lives of Steven Yeun,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/magazine/steven-yeun.html>.

⁴ For health disparities across minoritized groups, see “COVID-19 Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities” (CDC, December 10, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/index.html>. For parallel trends in the pandemic’s disproportionate effects on employment, see the US Bureau for Labor Statistics’s monthly “jobs report”: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release.htm>.

systemic racism COVID-19 forced into the open, Americans reverted to familiar myths about race, fantastically believing that a person's race—rather than where she lived, how she worked, and whom she knew—determined whether she lived or died. Even scientists, heralded as the pandemic's brave heroes, couldn't help but resort to weasel words like "unknown or unmeasured genetic or biological factors" in diverting attention away from the uncomfortable truth that material inequalities in housing, education, employment, and healthcare straightforwardly explained the pandemic's wildly disproportionate numbers.⁵ Structural and systemic inequalities make it clear that African Americans live, and have continuously lived, in perpetual pandemic conditions, an obviously monstrous reality save for the fact that in America black lives are given to mattering less.⁶ Rather than confronting this hard truth, we use race to allay ourselves by mythologizing matters. Defaulting to race to explain both the disease and its outcomes demonstrates how—and how well—race and racism work in America.

The pandemic coincided with a massive public reckoning of the nation's racist history. The deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Brionna Taylor, and George Floyd at the hands of police got people in the streets and, at least for a moment, provoked a conversation about whether police and prisons are the best way to deal with historic inequalities. Amazingly, these protests and conversations carried forth with almost no mention of the thousands of incidents of racism simultaneously perpetrated against Asian Americans now blamed for what was variously dubbed "The China Virus," "Kung Flu," and a new "yellow peril."⁷ While some attention was given to the pandemic's anti-Asian

⁵ Clarence Gravlee, "Racism, Not Genetics, Explains Why Black Americans Are Dying of COVID-19," *Scientific American*, June 7, 2020; Merlin Chowkwanyun and Adolph L. Reed, "Racial Health Disparities and Covid-19—Caution and Context," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 383, no. 3 (2020): 201–203. Gravlee cites both Kristen M. J. Azar et al., "Disparities in Outcomes among COVID-19 Patients in a Large Health Care System in California," *Health Affairs* 39, no. 7 (2020): 1253–1262; and Manish Pareek et al., "Ethnicity and COVID-19: An Urgent Public Health Research Priority," *The Lancet* 395, no. 10234 (2020): 1421–1422. None of this is to deny that human biology epigenetically codes for propensity to illness and death. It is that none of that has anything to do with race. When we describe the relationship between genes and phenotype in terms of race, we mythologize a concrete phenomenon. The only way one can coordinate genes to race is to impose relationships that do not exist (e.g., making more than can be made of the relationship between genes and geography; grouping together phenotypes that don't go together; ignoring genetic diversity).

⁶ Elizabeth Wrigley-Field, "US Racial Inequality May Be as Deadly as COVID-19," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 36 (August 21, 2020): 21854–21856.

⁷ Nina Strochlic, "America's Long History of Scapegoating Its Asian Citizens," *National Geographic*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/09/asian-american-racism-covid/#close>; Colby Itkowitz, "Trump Again Uses Racially Insensitive Term to Describe Coronavirus," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-again-uses-kung-flu-to-describe-coronavirus/2020/06/23/0ab5a8d8-b5a9-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff_story.html;

American racism, that story played out as if disconnected from the broader conversation. On the rare occasion when the two were related, there was no question about which mattered more and who deserved the public's attention, as if keeping both in view (much less getting to the deep connections and important differences) proved too much to ask.⁸ A sad reality, made sadder by the realization that American antiracism requires acquiescing to such race-ranking procedures (with woke Asian Americans policing less-woke Asian Americans), as if Asian Americans quietly waiting their turn is the public face of racial solidarity.⁹

And then there is what is likely the pandemic's most urgent lesson—say, its planetary instruction—though one Americans seem intent on squandering. The pandemic is the direct result of human overreach, the unrelenting commodification of human and non-human life through global systems of extraction and expropriation.¹⁰ As a *New York Times* op-ed prognosticated months before COVID-19 upended the planet, “We cut the trees; we kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets. We disrupt ecosystems, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need a new host. Often, we are it.”¹¹ The terrors of American chattel slavery as well as those campaigns of terror that first branded Asian migrant workers “yellow perils” likewise originated with dominative exploitation and their categorical justifications (human v. non-human on the one hand, white v. black, brown, and yellow on the other). These are shared fates.

And ones the current antiracist discourse obscures. Accordingly, this book seeks to tell a different story about race and racism than the one usually told about racial identity and its many antagonisms, and our remaining prospects for racial solidarity and racial uplift. Whether the story I tell, which will be filled out in the many pages to come, challenges or complements or simply

Anita Jack-Davies, “Coronavirus: The ‘Yellow Peril’ Revisited,” *The Conversation*, August 3, 2020. For databases of reported incidences, see <https://stopaapihate.org/reportsreleases/>.

⁸ See, for example, Taylor Weik, “The History behind ‘Yellow Peril Supports Black Power’ and Why Some Find It Problematic,” *NBC News*, June 9, 2020.

⁹ For a helpful read on this, see Anne Anlin Cheng, “What This Wave of Anti-Asian Violence Reveals about America,” *New York Times*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/21/opinion/anti-asian-violence.html>.

¹⁰ As just two examples, see Xing-Lou Yang et al., “Isolation and Characterization of a Novel Bat Coronavirus Closely Related to the Direct Progenitor of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus,” *Journal of Virology* 90, no. 6 (2016): 3253–3256; Sara Platto et al., “Biodiversity Loss and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Bats in the Origin and the Spreading of the Disease,” *Biochemical and Biophysical Research Communications*, 2020.

¹¹ David Quammen, “We Made the Coronavirus Epidemic,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/opinion/coronavirus-china.html>.

complicates the usual one is for the reader to decide. At minimum, it is the story through which I think about these matters.

I grew up at a time in America when open racism was broadly accepted and expected. America in the 1970s and 1980s was coming to terms with the civil rights movement, and hence awakening to the nation's long history of colonialism, settler expansion, land enclosure, genocide, chattel slavery, Chinese exclusion, Jim Crow, lynching, internment, segregation, and so on. For many parts of American life, civil rights and all that the movement stirred bore little significance, and life for them went on as it always had. At least that seemed the case for the people around me. As a recent immigrant from Vietnam, I felt the force of this following me throughout my childhood. The period witnessed America's war on drugs and the growth of the carceral state, of the ghettoization of urban life and the evisceration of rural communities, each exercised through systemic racist domination of housing, education, employment, the environment, and everything that sustains life. The period also saw the triumph of neoliberal capitalism, that political economy (with its left-branded identity politics and contraction of class considerations) born of the belief that the market and the state needed each other if elites were to survive eventualities like the civil rights movement and all it symbolized. Heady days to be sure.

Being a young Vietnamese immigrant in this period was pretty simple. You survived. In my case, that meant hiding and running from the racial bullying that chased me everywhere as our family migrated through poverty in pursuit of whatever version of the American Dream distantly directed our lives. Words like "Nip" and "Chink" daily told me who I was, that I did not belong, and that my kind were not wanted. I ended up in a lot of fistfights, sometimes after kids called me "Bruce Lee"—apparently, the irony escaped me. Back then, you did what you needed to do. Now when I think about the violence, it terrifies me, both the need to survive and the things done to survive. In the preceding decades, before my family's arrival, America had fought three costly wars with people who looked like me, first with Japan, then with Korea, and finally Vietnam, each with diminishing success.¹² As soldiers returned home to America in 1975, 120,000 Vietnamese war refugees, my family included, came with them. Even as a child I could tell that it was hard for most Americans to understand what to do with the Vietnamese

¹² For my interpretation of the war, see Jonathan Tran, *The Vietnam War and Theologies of Memory: Time and Eternity in the Far Country* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

showing up in their neighborhoods, schools, and churches. To them, we Asians seemed to sit somewhere between American defeat and American redemption, embodying the whole range of what the Vietnam War came to represent. Defeat or redemption—depending on the day, life as an immigrant could go either way.

As a child I suffered being Asian American at a time when Asian Americans were viewed as perilous. I had few friends, having already moved thirteen times during our first decade in America. By then I had experienced enough accepted and expected racism that race would forever color my life. I had been taught by Americans (non-white as much as white, I should say) that being Asian American was bad. I had been taught by my family that being Asian American was good, and indeed, worth fighting for, literally and otherwise. If I learned to detest those Asian Americans who looked down on Asian Americans, who were embarrassed by their own kind, likely I was projecting my own tendency for a socially taught self-hatred.

Things began to shift as my family found some semblance of financial security. My brother and sister made their way to university and college, which eased, no matter how hard I made it on myself, my own way into university and the middle class. My mom's success as a real estate agent allowed me to stay at the same high school for four years—an eternity compared to all the change we had seen prior to that. Although my high school academic record could not outrun the difficult early years, those four years created enough of a foundation for me to find my academic and professional footing in college, and eventually within American religion.

Early in high school, I had a friend named Cliff. Actually, Cliff was my only friend. Among the poorer kids at Katella High School, we found each other in large part because we each had no one else. Cliff and I had only each other, but that hardly mattered to us. We made a life of it, playing games we made up, the rules of which only we knew, catching bugs in the stream running through the apartment complex where I lived, riding on the handlebars of a bike we somehow both owned, together making do as kids often do. Cliff was poor, really poor. At the time, he and his family lived in—or rather, out of—the Motel Tampico, all their worldly possessions kept in trash bags for easier transport when the motel kicked them out, as it regularly did, because they couldn't pay the weekly rent, which they regularly couldn't. Cliff was one of the very few black kids at Katella, which was mostly white, increasingly Latinx, with a handful of Asian Americans, typical of many Southern Californian schools at the time. Cliff and I had a lot in common, but some

of the differences were pretty pronounced. While my family was, like many immigrant families, moving out of poverty, his family seemed stuck in a system intent on keeping black people poor. I could look around and find others who looked like me at Katella—some, to be sure, members of gangs or dropping out of high school, but also among the academic types headed for college. Cliff looked around and saw no one like him, and the images offered by the broader society made his prospects pretty dim. We were both poor, but I, despite myself, had lots of opportunities. Cliff, despite himself, had few.

Over the years, like many friends, we drifted apart. Cliff's family moved in and out of the motel and I found a home among the college-bound kids. Still, we always had that connection, of having found a place with each other when we had no place with others. Whenever we ran into each other, I felt that connection. Still now—decades later—I feel it. At one point, I believe I was fifteen, Cliff asked me for help. He was being harassed by a group of racist skinheads at Katella. He told me that they regularly chased him after school, bullied him on campus, making learning impossible, and that he was scared. I remember he cried as he told me. I had seen these kids around. They never bothered me, probably because I wasn't black and because as a fringe group, they didn't bother the more established groups like the kids I hung around at that point. It greatly distressed me that skinheads were picking on Cliff, but I did not know what to do. If the teachers Cliff told were powerless to protect him, what could I do? I felt as scared and helpless as I had all those years growing up and moving around. So, I did nothing. Or nothing significant. I think I told Cliff that the skinheads would move on and find someone else to pick on and that he would be okay. I told him, in other words, that he needed to survive and that he would. Later we lost touch. I never found out what happened, never bothered to ask, perhaps scared that things had gotten worse, likely frightened by the responsibility that would come with the answers. Maybe the skinheads backed off. Perhaps Cliff's family moved on from Katella and his troubles. I don't know. I only know that I did nothing, when I might have done something.

I've often thought about that childhood, its desperations and terrors, when thinking about whether the current conversation on race and racism gets us very far, or if it instead leaves us cornered. For a long time as an academic, the conversation's antiracism served me well enough. I fell in, which meant focusing on racial identity, pushing for diversity, working through a white/black binary, and contenting myself with the idea that those it ignored would

eventually get a hearing.¹³ I put aside any sense that American antiracism marginalized those already marginalized by racism or that Asian Americans troubled its dominant narratives. For instance, the transnationality of Asian American history brings to the fore racism's international character, certainly localized to specific dominative conditions but always tied into world systems.¹⁴ American antiracism would have me believe otherwise. Despite the internal contradictions, I held to the antiracist line of thought for the simple reason that I had already committed so much to it. I gave a ton of energy to writing about and working on issues of racial equity and diversity in my scholarship and at my university.¹⁵ I occupied roles in the institution that allowed me to mentor scores of students, and I made it a point to work with non-white students as often as I could. I considered it a responsibility and a privilege to use whatever advantage I had to benefit the cause of racial minorities, assuming leadership positions, serving on committees, building relationships, pressing administrators. While neither my scholarship nor my roles specifically focused on race and racism, those topics and texts came up consistently, as they always had. I created my department's first course on race and racism, led institutional efforts against racial bias, sent emails to provosts and presidents, pushed for hiring and retaining minority faculty. I even won the university's "Diversity Award," something I joked rotated between the handful of us active faculty of color. All in service to an antiracism that I thought I could not fail to follow.

Over time, however, it became harder to ignore suspicions that the way we talk about race and racism, where so much is given to racial identity, is problematic, that there is something off about the idea that who I am reduces to what I am racially. Racial identity as a basis of common life increasingly struck me as at once too easy and too hard, too easily settled and too conceptually unwieldy. I also worried that our vaunted hopes for cross-racial solidarity rested on a mistake—a belief in distinct racial kinds—that would in

¹³ Throughout, I use "white/black" to describe what many call the "black/white binary" in order to signal the reality (described in Chapter 3) that African Americans had little agency in its founding.

¹⁴ Chapter 3 turns to Oliver Cromwell Cox's "world-systems" approach.

¹⁵ For instance, Jonathan Tran, "Living Out the Gospel: Asian American Perspectives and Contributions," *Annual of the Society of Asian North American Christian Studies* 2 (2010): 13–56, 69–73; "The New Black Theology," *The Christian Century* 129, no. 3 (2012); "The Wound of Tradition," in *The Hermeneutics of Tradition: Explorations and Examinations* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 226–252; "Asian Pacific American Heritage Month Celebration Lectures," *Annual of the Society of Asian North American Christian Studies*, 2015, 55–84; "Cosmetic Surgery," in *Asian American Christian Ethics: Voices, Methods, Issues*, ed. Grace Y. Kao and Ilsup Ahn (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 245–266; "Moral Innovation and Ambiguity in Asian American Christianity," *Theology Today* 75, no. 3 (2018), 347–357.

the end defeat itself. Mostly I thought it odd that antiracists showed so much confidence in racial identity. But these were unformed thoughts kicking around inside my head amid what felt like settled agreements about how we should talk about race and racism. This dominant narrative held as antiracism's *sine qua non* the establishing, securing, and asserting of racial identity, its self-interpreting and self-realizing singularity. It took its cues from urbane notions of diversity and representation and specialized in wokeness and whiteness, sophisticated discourses pressed into service by ordinary processes like research agendas and institutional diversity awards. Like everyone in the academy, I wanted this story to be true and just assumed that it was, no matter the minority reports suggesting otherwise. What else could I believe considering what I had already given myself to? I also sensed that others had questions, but that the reigning academic orthodoxy made it difficult for those questions to find the light of day.

The questions reached a tipping point, especially after a deep dive into the literature confirmed old suspicions and illuminated unexplored pathways. Black Marxism was a revelation, combining rigorous critical analysis with practiced commitments to liberation. So was an ethnographic turn in religious studies, which mixed easily with long-standing theological investments in radical democratic theory and the procedures of ordinary language philosophy.¹⁶ Once there, provocations like that of Jay Caspian Kang opened things up: "Asian-American" is a mostly meaningless term. Nobody grows up speaking Asian-American, nobody sits down to Asian-American food with their Asian-American parents and nobody goes on pilgrimages back to their motherland of Asian-America.¹⁷ As did Paul Gilroy riffing on "strategic" uses of race: "I feel uncomfortable with that idea, because once some of these images, some of these rhetorics, some of these political ideas are out of the box, they are loose in the world. And it's delusional to imagine that you can orchestrate them, even for the good."¹⁸ Now on a different path, it became increasingly clear to me that something was wrong, that our collective thinking about race and racism had grown stale, even decadent, and that

¹⁶ See Jonathan Tran, "An Atheistic Sense to Stanley Hauerwas' Theology," *Review and Expositor* 112, no. 1 (2015): 119–132; "Linguistic Theology: Completing Postliberalism's Linguistic Task," *Modern Theology* 33, no. 1 (2017): 47–68; "Assessing the Augustinian Democrats," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (September 2018): 521–547; "Cora Diamond's Theological Imagination: Review Essay," *Modern Theology* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 495–507.

¹⁷ Jay Caspian Kang, "What a Fraternity Hazing Death Revealed about the Painful Search for an Asian-American Identity," *New York Times*, August 9, 2017. See also Kang's "The Many Lives of Steven Yeun," *New York Times Magazine*, February 3, 2021, quoted to start the Preface.

¹⁸ Paul Gilroy, "The Absurdities of Race," *London Review of Books*, August 18, 2020.

the hope of developing an effectively liberative agenda that began and ended with racial identity was not only a losing proposition but a cursed one. I wondered about a different conversation, or at least other ways of entering into the current one, prior pathways that had been forgotten (or prematurely dismissed) and new thinking yet to be had. Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* showed me that such a massive undertaking could be done, and what goes into doing it well.¹⁹ Pondering the options, I knew enough to know that the answer could not be postracialism and its blindness to the realities of racialization. Critical theory had shown us how race had been ideologically invented for the purpose of dominative exploitation. The lesson to be learned from that discovery could not be willful ignorance of the ongoing consequences of domination. But neither could it be a renewed commitment to racial identity. The latter fails to grasp the meaning of race ideology just as the former draws the wrong conclusion from it. We would need something beyond the Scylla of postracialism and the Charybdis of doubling down on racial identity.

Pressing beyond the limited options, this book reframes conversations about race and racism from racial identity to political economy. In framing matters in terms of political economy, *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* reaches back to a trusted mode of analysis that has been obscured by the prevailing antiracist orthodoxy. Approaching race through political economy will not get at everything that racism is and does, but it gets at what can be managed, and in the last resort lived. Accordingly, this book invites readers into a different *life* with race and racism, reimagining what they are and are doing. What that life involves is laid out in the following pages. Present throughout are my family and our migration from poverty to wealth, our version of that dream still directing our lives. Informing the book's many arguments are America's wars with Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, and the nation's long history of colonialism, settler expansion, land enclosure, genocide, chattel slavery, Chinese exclusion, Jim Crow, lynching, internment, segregation, and so on. And there is Cliff, my powerlessness and cowardice then, and the desperation we bear and the hopes we risk. This book circles back on a story, of doing something, of acknowledging something, or failing to, in light of a story I have come to live.

¹⁹ Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2013).

Note on Method

To make its argument, *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* employs extended case analyses (participant observation, interviews, oral history, archival research, etc.) of two case studies: a Chinese migrant settlement in the Mississippi Delta (1868–1969) and a religious base community in the Bayview/Hunters Point (BVHP) section of San Francisco (1969–present). The book focuses specifically on those racially identified as Asian American (and how racial identification relates them to others) in order “to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro’ and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future,” as sociologist Michael Burawoy classically put it.²⁰ While focused on groups (i.e., the Delta Chinese and Redeemer Community Church), the book more broadly examines racial capitalism’s ecological processes and commitments (i.e., the Delta Chinese business model and Redeemer’s “deep economy”) at the sites of their structural and systemic unfolding (i.e., the Deep South after Reconstruction and southeast San Francisco after the civil rights movement). Hence, while situated within material histories replete with requisite characters, settings, and plotlines, the book aims toward what sociologist Matthew Desmond calls “relational ethnography,” interested in “fields rather than places, boundaries rather than bounded groups, processes rather than processed people, and cultural conflict rather than group culture,” thereby “focusing on the internal logics of distinct but interconnected social worlds.”²¹ It attempts to diagram the internal logics of racial capitalism’s social worlds—its “processes and commitments”—as they come about in the historical and ethnographic analyses (see Figures 2.1, 2.2, 5.1, 5.2, 6.1 and 6.2). The book’s central ideas (i.e., identarianism, political economy, racial capitalism, aftermarkets, antiracism, Asian Americans, and so on) operate throughout as holding concepts awaiting narrative display which the case studies provide. The narratives put the concepts in motion and the concepts illuminate narrative features that assist in making the larger argument.

While neither an oral historian nor an ethnographer (*Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* presumes itself neither an oral history nor an ethnography but a work of constructive theology), I have tried to ground

²⁰ Michael Burawoy, “The Extended Case Method,” *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 1 (March 1998): 4–33 (5).

²¹ Matthew Desmond, “Relational Ethnography,” *Theory and Society* 43 (2014): 547–579 (548 and 557).

my study in oral history and ethnography and answer the evidence using the book's interpretive paradigm.²² Part I's materials draw primarily from oral histories, either those in the extant record or those I collected myself remotely with living members and descendants of the Delta Chinese community. Part II's materials draw extensively from video interviews with people at or associated with BVHP's Redeemer Community Church, Dayspring Partners, and/or Rise University Preparatory School (Rise Prep). From December 2019 to February 2021, I conducted more than fifty video interviews, each averaging over ninety minutes. The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the entirety of that research period. Though unanticipated, COVID-19 conditions benefited the research's implementation and substance. The Redeemer church community (including Dayspring and Rise Prep) went online just days before my scheduled March 2020 in-person visit. While I had to forgo that and other scheduled in-person observations, I was able to participate in the church community's online life through the entire period, averaging ten hours a week in various Zoom-based activities (Sunday services and adult Sunday school, midweek fellowships, special events, etc.). The pandemic also had the effect of highlighting certain realities and introducing others that aided in understanding the Redeemer community specifically and BVHP and San Francisco generally. Of course, besides any benefits, COVID-19 severely hampered my ethnographic approach since nothing can replace in-person participant observation. Ending any illusion that what I've done here counts as "an ethnography," I can simply say that I will never know all that

²² The following informs my theological approach to ethnography: Christian Scharen and Anna Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011); Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott, "Ethnography Is Dogmatics: Making Description Central to Systematic Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 3 (2000): 339–364; Luke Bretherton, "The Tasks of Christian Ethics: Theology, Ethnography, and the Conundrums of the Cultural Turn," in *Everyday Ethics: Moral Theology and the Practices of Ordinary Life*, ed. Michael Lamb and Brian A. Williams (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 171–191; Luke Bretherton, "Coming to Judgment: Methodological Reflections on the Relationship between Ecclesiology, Ethnography and Political Theory," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 2 (2012): 167–196; Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Todd David Whitmore, "The *Askēsis* of Fieldwork: Practices for a Way of Inquiry, a Way of Life," in *Qualitative Research in Theological Education: Pedagogy in Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2018), 76–99; Todd David Whitmore, "Crossing the Road: The Case for Ethnographic Fieldwork in Christian Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 2 (2007): 273–294; Todd D. Whitmore, *Imitating Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019); Mary McClinton Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For my account of ethnography as a corrective to antiracism's theoretical vagueness, see Jonathan Tran, "(Post)Critical Political Theology and the Uses and Misuses of Whiteness Discourse," *Political Theology*, April 20, 2021, 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2021.1912449>.

I missed.²³ Inclined toward the goals of relational ethnography, I make ample use of Parts I and II's research materials and situate them within larger analyses especially as related to matters of political economy. Throughout, I cite specific dated interviews when directly quoting sources, but otherwise leave uncited references gleaned from general research observation.

Finally, *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* attempts to speak to discursive worlds that often do not know or do not trust one another: race theory and Christian theology. When they have talked, the conversation has tended to go one way: Christian theologians adopt and advance race theory's theoretical concepts and empirical studies. There are good reasons for the one-way traffic. Race theory's established record of research (especially class-conscious strains of "critical race theory") makes it clear that Christian theologians have much to learn. Moreover, it is not clear that on these matters anyone should trust Christian theology, which has been so deeply mired in racism that anything it offers sounds suspicious. And yet I have tried to speak to both worlds in both directions using both languages. Given the ambitions of my argument, one then wonders about the intended audience. The interventions I try to make in race theory (related to racial capitalism, the model minority myth, "aftermarkets," the white/black binary, Afropessimism, critical whiteness studies, etc.) and the empirical research I conduct would suggest my target audience to be scholars of ethnic studies (specifically Asian American studies and African American studies), American history and political science (principally political economy), and some types of literary studies and sociology. Yet everywhere I am commanded by theological convictions and sensibilities. These are the soil out of which the argument grows. On occasion the discursive flora and fauna of theology appear in these pages. To those unversed in theology the theological interventions (related to "divine economy," "anti-doxology," θεία οὐκονούα, Delta Chinese religion, Redeemer Community Church's oddball ecclesiology, etc.) can seem like weeds and pests that are best uprooted or driven out. But they are native to the mixed ecology I am trying to cultivate. Conversely, the Christian theologian might have a similar reaction but in the opposite direction. She wants to see a greater density of explicitly theological

²³ On the limitations and benefits of digitally based ethnography, see Gary Alan Fine and Corey M. Abramson, "Ethnography in the Time of COVID-19," *Footnotes of American Sociological Association* 40, no. 3 (June 2020): 8–9; Alder Keleman Saxena and Jennifer Lee Johnson, "Cues for Ethnography in Pandamning Times: Thinking with Digital Sociality in the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Somatosphere: Science, Medicine, and Anthropology*, May 31, 2020, 1–12.

flora and fauna, for the discussion to be more clearly marked as Christian territory. To each I must insist that the conceptual work necessary for my argument requires speaking both languages and inhabiting both worlds. These are the conditions for the cross-pollination and mutual adaptation I believe get us clearer about the world in which we find ourselves. If I had to systematize the relationship with theology, I would begin with race theory's empiricist commitment to facts:

1. Empirical facts *qua* facts speak for themselves.
2. Given enough time and pushed far enough, empirical facts admit of—analytically and synthetically (logically and experientially), using the old distinction—theological facts (i.e., facts about the world reveal facts about God).
3. Therefore, while theology sits in the background of valid arguments about race, it need sometimes come to the fore.

As a work of “constructive theology,” this book thinks theologically (delimited as 1 to 3) about race and racism and so enjoins itself to race theory’s established facts. Which audience, then, do I intend, race theory or Christian theology? Both. For each, this final methodological note can serve as an interpretive key to what follows.

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in-laws, the Cheung family, have over three decades given me an inside look at Chinese America. I am grateful to them, especially to Mom and Dad for making me an honorary Cheung. Sadly, Dad died unexpectedly during the project; we miss him dearly. My greatest thanks go to my wife, Carrie, to whom the book is dedicated. Back in the day, she was my high school sweetheart and the reason I started going to church. Today she is my best friend, the best person I know, my coconspirator in raising two children who remind us daily of the world's endless goodness, and, Lord willing, the person I'll grow old with. I could not ask for a better life.

Introduction

After racism, what force will serve its many functions?

—Derrick Bell, “After We’re Gone”¹

Ethics works with *ideas of temptation*, ideas of there being tempting but terribly misleading paths of thought.

—Cora Diamond, “Truth in Ethics”²

I’m an American citizen trying to get rid of as many categories as possible that classify people in ways that make it easy for them to be oppressed, isolated, marginalized.

—Jorge Klor de Alva, “Our Next Race Question”³

This book contrasts two approaches to race and racism. The first I will call *identarian antiracism*. Identarian antiracists proceed with the notion that there are specific kinds of races (e.g., white, black, and Asian American) and that each person possesses—whether or not she can articulate it—a racial identity. This approach includes a variety of views about the nature of race. Some identarians believe race is an innate property of persons.⁴ In this view, I am, for example, Asian American insofar as my ancestry can be traced to Asia, I am phenotypically identifiable as Asian, I share history and habits with other Asians, and so forth. Other identarians believe that the kind of race one “is” depends on the sort of socialization one has undergone; rather

¹ Derrick A. Bell, “After We’re Gone: Prudent Speculations on America in a Post-Racial Epoch,” *Saint Louis University Law Journal* 34, no. 3 (1990): 393–405 (404).

² Cora Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 294.

³ Jorge Klor de Alva, Earl Shorris, and Cornel West, “Our Next Race Question: The Uneasiness between Blacks and Latinos,” in *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 489–494 (492).

⁴ Such a view would take its cues from updated construals of biological race, like that of A. W. F. Edwards, “Human Genetic Diversity: Lewontin’s Fallacy,” *BioEssays* 25, no. 8 (2003): 798–801.

than being born a certain race I am, through processes of socialization, made—"racialized" is the operative term—a race.⁵ In this case, my life in America (say, the ways others identify, talk about, and relate to me, the way systems categorize me, and how resources are offered or denied to me, etc.) makes me in a relevant sense Asian American.⁶ To be sure, these views are not mutually exclusive since one's phenotypical features can lead to being accordingly racialized. Whether I am born Asian American (where racial identity denotes a *natural* kind) or become so (denoting a *social* kind), identitarian antiracism proceeds with the idea that I am *racially* Asian American.

Notice that I said that identitarian antiracism *proceeds* with a notion of racial kinds and identities. Which is not to say that it *starts* with it. Identarianism works out from, without working out, a notion of racial kinds and identities. This is because its primary concerns are political, not metaphysical, and it seeks above all equitable relations between those it takes for granted as racial kinds. It cares about what people are inasmuch as perceptions of what they are determine how they are treated. In other words, identitarian antiracists are concerned with race because they are concerned with antiracism. Their anti-racist political commitments require that they take on board in some form or fashion the notion of race—including its many problems. The politics allows identarians to look past the problems. It also permits identitarian antiracism

⁵ See the definitive articulation, now in its third edition: Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁶ Throughout this text, I use "Asian American" in an intentionally broad way, assuming the widest possible sense. Not only has it been contested through its history, but the term started as an act of political contestation by student activists in the 1960s. My use presumes that history, while remaining agnostic about what it normatively entails (i.e., who and what counts as "Asian American"). Indeed, my larger argument attempts to rethink the representational politics the term too often invokes. While this book focuses almost exclusively on specific Chinese American experiences (since an argument can only carry so many stories), its implications ramify to and from "Asian Americans" in this broad sense. For instance, while I have no space to pick up issues related to the Asian subcontinent or the Indian diaspora, I would like to think that my argument finds resonance with South Asian theorists Vivek Chibber (in terms of political economy), Veena Das (in terms of ordinary language philosophy), and Jhumpa Lahiri (in terms of literary notions of exile) even if I cannot here engage their work on South Asians. See Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2013); Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Penguin, 2016); Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland* (New York: Vintage, 2013). On Lahiri, see also Kalyan Nadiminti, "A Betrayal of Everything": The Law of the Family in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 2 (2018): 239–262; Adriana Elena Stoican, "Diffused Gender Codes and Transcultural Outcomes in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*," in *Gender in Focus: Identities, Codes, Stereotypes and Politics*, ed. Andreea Zamfira, Christian de Montlibert, and Daniela Radu (New York: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2018); Moussa Pourya Asl, Nurul Farhana Low Abdullah, and Md. Salleh Yaapar, "Mechanisms of Mobility in a Capitalist Culture: The Localisation of the Eye of (Global) Authority in the Novel and the Film of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," *KEMANUSIAAN* 23, no. 2 (2016): 137–159.

its diversity of metaphysical views about the nature of race (i.e., whether it is a natural kind or a social kind, etc.). Identarian antiracists can afford to look past the problems and remain agnostic on the metaphysical questions because they are most concerned with the problematic political questions. They adopt the notion of race not because they have worked it out, but because their politics requires it.⁷ These are important but often overlooked features of identarian antiracist thinking.

Identarian antiracism portrays racism as the personal and systemic denigration of racial kinds by other racial kinds, focused specifically—for better or worse—on the harm black people suffer at the hands of white people. It seeks to acknowledge and address these denigrations, a task it pursues by investigating the conditions under which they occur. Its constructive vision entails lifting up those who have suffered racism. This commits identarian antiracism to the work of establishing, securing, and asserting racial identity, work which programmatically comes under familiar banners: diversity, inclusion, representation, multiculturalism, and the like. The constructive vision comes with the deconstructive need to subvert, destabilize, and attack racial kinds deemed responsible for harming others (i.e., whites and others party to their racism). As this book shows, the constructive vision along with the deconstructive tasks have the combined effect of further solidifying (even with the metaphysical agnosticism) the reality of race. In other words, identarian antiracism racializes.

Religion does not play a necessary role in identarian antiracism. Which is not to say that it cannot play an important role. The deconstructive tasks might interrogate various religions for supplying racists or racist systems with ideological reasons and motivations for their racism. For example, one might point to Gnosticism's disembodying tendencies or Christian antisemitism as evidence for religious complicity.⁸ Conversely, the constructive vision can be aided by utilizing certain theological formulations in order to establish, secure, and assert specific racial identities, especially when those identities have been harmed. For example, one might highlight Jewish scripture that sides YHWH with the oppressed (Exodus 3:7) or Islamic teaching that declares "a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority

⁷ On "the development of difference discourse" see Richard T. Ford, *Racial Culture: A Critique* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 44.

⁸ For analyses along these lines, see Thomas E. Hill, Jr., and Bernhard Boxill, "Kant and Race," in *Race and Racism*, ed. Bernhard Boxill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 448–471.

over white except by piety and good action.”⁹ Religion can play a role, but it need not. Identarianism can go about its business without ever mentioning religion, religious commitments, or religious people. Identarian antiracism can be as agnostic on religion as it is on the metaphysical status of race. Neither is crucial for its primary concerns.

Identarian antiracism is an approach to racism that begins and ends with racial identity, prioritizing (white) racial identity as racism’s starting point and championing (non-white) racial identity as antiracism’s end game. In the academy and beyond, identarian antiracism is the dominant approach to race and racism. Its dominance rises to the level of established doctrine. Hence, one can call it the orthodox view.

To get a sense of how identarianism as an antiracist mode of analysis works, as well as the alternative approach espoused by this book, consider the matter of gentrification. In both the academic and popular imagination gentrification is often construed in narrowly racial terms. Whites push black people out of black neighborhoods. Gentrification is presented here as an instance of the far-reaching powers of whiteness and antiblackness. This is an identarian story, cast as it is with the requisite racial *dramatis personae*. When ethnographer Derek S. Hyra recounts the gentrification of the Shaw/U Street section of Washington, D.C., he explains things in these terms. His *Race, Class, and Politics in Cappuccino City* proposes “a plausible explanation for the arrival of some Whites in traditionally low-income African American communities.”¹⁰ Hyra zeroes in on a “living the wire” mentality whereby consumptive whites, enticed by the allure of stereotypically black-branded culture (“the wire” refers to a popular HBO series about inner-city Baltimore), move in on historically black communities, snatch up property, appropriate culture, and price African Americans out of house and home. The 2019 film *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* dramatizes a similar account, whereby adventurous *cum* progressive-minded whites take over Black San Francisco, not despite its black cultural heritage but rather because of it.¹¹

⁹ “The Farewell Sermon” (لوداع خطبة), Khutbatu 1- Wadā’) delivered March 6, 632 (Ninth Day of Dul- Jijjah 10 AH). For a recent analysis, see Mohammad Omar Farooq, “The Farewell Sermon of Prophet Muhammad: An Analytical Review,” *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 9, no. 3 (2018): 322–342.

¹⁰ Derek S. Hyra, *Race, Class, and Politics in Cappuccino City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 103–104.

¹¹ Directed by Joe Talbot, written by Joe Talbot and Rob Richert, and distributed by A24, the film is based on the life of Jimmie Falls, who also stars as the film’s main character. I return to this film in Chapter 4.

Yet, like Richard Rothstein's much celebrated *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Hyra's book describes racism's entanglement with housing markets without examining what such arrangements accomplish, without ever questioning what racism is *for*, leaving the impression that whites participate in racist systems solely for the purpose of harming black people.¹² Like *The Color of Law*, Hyra's identitarian analysis misses what racism is—that is, what it does. Historian Destin Jenkins puts it this way: “If government was the tool by which segregation was created, who—or what—was the hand that wielded it? Curiously, *The Color of Law* ignores the obvious answer: capitalism. The book's focus on law and policy shifts attention away from surplus value and patterns of extraction and exploitation, instead of focusing on these dynamics as an integral part of America's democratic, law-making system. We might well view residential segregation as the domestic expression of the racial capitalism of the 20th century.”¹³ *Cappuccino City*'s focus is narrower still. Hyra attends to capitalism and issues of class, but his emphasis on white and black racial identity confuses matters, thereby failing to deliver on what such attention should do for any analysis of race and racism: illuminate the intrinsic relationship between racist domination and political economic exploitation.¹⁴

Hyra recognizes that the phenomenon he labels “living the wire” represents an inversion of market forces that previously redlined African Americans out of the U.S. housing market—hitherto their presence diminished property value; now (at least in this case) it elevates it. Yet, instead of interrogating a market logic whose governing principles use racial categories to judge value, he seems content with ridiculing those governed by it.¹⁵ Hyra's insightful observations regarding the commodification of black culture fall short of realizing that racial identity and commodification go

¹² Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017).

¹³ Destin Jenkins, “Who Segregated America?,” *Public Books*, December 21, 2017. On gentrification, see Japonica Brown-Saracino, “Explicating Divided Approaches to Gentrification and Growing Income Inequality,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 43 (2017): 515–539; Lance Freeman, “Displacement or Succession? Residential Mobility in Gentrifying Neighborhoods,” *Urban Affairs Review* 40, no. 4 (2005): 463–491.

¹⁴ For the black Marxist C. L. R. James, “The race question is subsidiary to the class question, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental [is] an error only less grave than to make it fundamental”; *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 283.

¹⁵ Which is not to excuse those worth ridiculing, but only to force a broader recognition that as Cornel West and Stanley Hauerwas say, “capitalism tends to produce rather s-h-i-t-t-y people”; Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 409.

hand in hand.¹⁶ The notion that gentrification is a function of whiteness and antiblackness is only plausible if one ignores the material determinates of black displacement.¹⁷ As D.C. community organizer Alex Baca recounts, “While media attention often focuses on those few places that are witnessing a transformation, there are two more potent and less mentioned storylines. The first is the persistence of chronic poverty. Three-quarters of 1970 high-poverty urban neighborhoods in the U.S. are still poor today. The second is the spread of concentrated poverty: Three times as many urban neighborhoods have poverty rates exceeding 30 percent as was true in 1970, and the number of poor people living in these neighborhoods has doubled. The result of these trends is that the poor in the nation’s metropolitan areas are increasingly segregated into neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. In 1970, 28 percent of the urban poor lived in a neighborhood with a poverty rate of 30 percent or more; by 2010, 39 percent of the urban poor lived in such high-poverty neighborhoods.”¹⁸ *Cappuccino City*’s strangely individualist approach would leave unscathed entire structures and systems that utilize racial identity to facilitate African American eviction and foreclosure: explosive income inequality that concentrates wealth just as it concentrates poverty; a gold-rush approach to development and management scaled absurdly high and siphoned away from neighborhoods by the financial speculation of big money; a lack of sound government policy incentivizing infrastructure investment for existing communities, meaning that those actually committed to sustainability die the death of a thousand permits; gerrymandered political schemes that suppress communal agency long before impossible rent hikes rob people of homes; and so on.¹⁹ At the end of the day it is the

¹⁶ See Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4–5.

¹⁷ In technical terms, problems arise whenever regression models treat race as an independent variable, leading to standard confusions between correlation and causation. With identarianism the problem is especially acute because the antiracist aims of its regressive form of analysis posit (self-selecting) identification as *sui generis* and therefore empirically meaningful. This methodologically operationalizes what I earlier called an overlooked feature of identarianism, proceeding as it does with a notion of racial identities as self-interpreting. For an analysis of the tautological explanatory logic of such arguments, see Adolph Reed, Jr., and Merlin Chowkwanyun, “Race, Class, Crisis: The Discourse of Racial Disparity and Its Analytical Discontents,” *Socialist Register* 48, no. 1 (2012): 149–175.

¹⁸ Alex Baca, “Challenging the Cappuccino City: Part 2: The Limits of Ethnography,” *City Observatory*, February 2, 2018. cityobservatory.org/challenging-the-cappuccino-city-part-2-the-limits-of-ethnography/.

¹⁹ See Daniel Herriges’s four-part *Strong Towns* series on gentrification, starting at “By Any Other Name: Gentrification or Economic Exclusion?,” October 10, 2017, <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2017/10/9/by-any-other-name-gentrification-or-economic-exclusion>. See also Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Modern Library, 2011); Matthew Desmond, *Eviction: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Broadway, 2017). My note about the

persistence and spread of poverty and their antidemocratic antecedents and effects, and their structural and systemic consequences for black life, not the influx of an abstract whiteness, that displaces.²⁰ But that story, one senses, is less tantalizing than the one Hyra tells about white hipsters.

These determining factors don't always add up to the "*de jure*" forms of racism Rothstein's *The Color of Law* sensationalizes, but together they conspire against African American communities. Here is a picture of racism featuring no one group of individuals (e.g., red-faced sheriffs armed with firehoses and attack dogs, well-meaning mortgage lenders, or white progressives "living the wire") but rather a whole network of oppressions carrying the force of history. The problem with the identitarian mode of analysis is that it encourages one to look for the presence of certain racial personalities possessed of certain racist attitudes when one should be looking at structures and systems that often remain faceless and are no less deadly for it. The problem isn't that in focusing on white gentrifiers Hyra "plays the race card" (as some might complain) but rather that he plays it too narrowly and thereby distracts from the fact that the whole deck of racial capitalism is stacked against anyone relegated to the bottom of the race-based political economy. Hyra turns what needs to be a broadly racial capitalist story (as Jenkins mentions) into one narrowly confined to racial identity. In failing to situate consumer preference within the concrete workings of capital—in failing to ask what redlining and displacement practically accomplish, what they profit—we are left with the sense that the problem lies with white people as such, a mythologized account of gentrification that has the practical effect of leaving the concrete reality of racism beyond reach and redress. This tendency of emphasizing racial identity to the exclusion of political economy is what I mean by identitarian antiracism, what I call academic and popular antiracism's reigning orthodoxy.

This book challenges the orthodox identitarian view by offering a political economic approach to race and racism. Unlike the orthodox view, my approach does not press the case for racial kinds possessed of racial identities. In fact, it considers orthodox antiracism's intense focus on racial identity a

"individualist approach" relates to what Asad Haider calls contemporary antiracism's "individualist method" in *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (New York: Verso, 2018), 24.

²⁰ Regarding the relationship between poverty and gentrification, see Lance Freeman, "Displacement or Succession? Residential Mobility in Gentrifying Neighborhoods," *Urban Affairs Review* 40, no. 4 (2005): 463–491.

serious impediment to the work of democratic life on the one hand and political liberation on the other. Instead of an approach to racism that emphasizes racial identity front to back, my approach foregrounds the political economy by which racial identity came to matter at all.²¹ It presents a genealogy whereby the ideas of race and specific racial kinds were originally established and continue to be used to facilitate domination and exploitation of a uniquely political economic variety. The story has two parts. In the first part, Americans at the end of the seventeenth century devise race in order to ideologically justify political economic domination and exploitation. The claims were thin, no more than skin deep, but because they were embedded within processes and commitments that needed them to be true, they stuck. This is the part of the story that concerns racism. A second, equally complicated part of the story concerns contemporary antiracism's fixation with race. This book captures both parts in a continuous narrative. It relates the story as one where (1) racial capitalism originally created racial identity—a black race derivative of a white race—in order to facilitate political economic domination and exploitation and (2) antiracists now commit themselves to appropriating racial identity—and its founding white/black binary—for antiracist purposes. Given all that academic research has uncovered about the capitalist origins of white supremacy, there should be little question about the historical correlation between American capitalism and American racism (a correlation captured in this book under the designation “racial capitalism”). There should be, however, considerable debate about the strategic benefits of continuing to operate in terms of race identity, about whether race can be carried forward as unproblematically as antiracists seem to suppose. What

²¹ In referring to “political economy” as a mode of analysis opposed to identitarianism, I draw from the following: Judith Stein, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others: The Political Economy of Racism in the United States,” *Science & Society* 38, no. 4 (1974): 422–463; Barbara J. Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Barbara J. Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 181 (1990): 95–118; Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2014); Adolph L. Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Adolph L. Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Adolph Reed, Jr., and Kenneth W. Warren, eds., *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). While I do not reference these thinkers and texts often, mainly because I do not tarry with any interlocutors for long, they have deeply shaped my approach and arguments. Those I do spend time with (namely Cedric J. Robinson in Chapter 2, Oliver Cromwell Cox in Chapter 3, and C. L. R. James briefly in the Postscript) came to me through them.

we need, and what the genealogy demands, is an open and honest debate about whether race language can become more than it was set out to be at the foundations of American life. This book develops arguments for that debate.

As said in the Preface, the lesson to be learned from this genealogy (origin story, if you will) is not one that champions postracial color-blindness, the fantasy that results when one fails to differentiate race from racialization.²² Decades of serious thinking about race teach us two things. First, we have every reason to question the view of race as a natural kind, the case for which has shown itself to be fatally flawed.²³ Second, we have little reason to question the racializing effects of racial capitalism, the evidence for which is all those structures and systems racially categorizing people in order to facilitate dominative exploitation. Postracial color-blindness confuses the two, thinking that because race is not a natural kind, race concepts should be abandoned, even those that track the damage done by racial capitalism.²⁴ Regarding racial capitalism, postracialism promotes willful ignorance, which ends up serving racial capitalism.²⁵ Identarian antiracism, though, contributes its own confusions. The deconstructive need to track racialization combines with the constructive vision of establishing, securing, and asserting identity to produce concepts that naturalize race all over again (e.g., “whiteness” and “blackness”). Because identarian politics necessitates adopting race concepts without working out everything taken on board, this newly naturalized notion of race is left standing as an overlooked piece of orthodox

²² Promoting or rejecting “color-blindness” often begs the same old questions, as to *what* one is or is not blind to, one’s color as a natural or social endowment. Unfortunately, recourse to ethnicity runs into the same sort of problem, where culture, nationality, language, and so on get racialized in ways that suggest something of a natural kind. It is possible for race to serve as one among other identifiers, each serving to contextualize the next. This just has not generally been the case in America.

²³ Renewed attempts to correlate genetic variation and geographic location simply miss the point that such correlations do not rise to a typology bearing the considerable meaning assigned to it by historical race thinking. For a recent examination, see Angela Saini, *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (Boston: Beacon, 2019).

²⁴ Richard T. Ford talks about limiting race consciousness to a “remedial function” which would “limit the formal acknowledgement of race to its most formal and culturally empty definition” in *Racial Culture: A Critique* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 13. Ibram X. Kendi puts it this way: “It is one of the ironies of antiracism that we must identify racially in order to identify the racial privileges and dangers of being in our bodies” in *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 38.

²⁵ For thoughtful discussions of postracialism, see Paul C. Taylor, “Taking Postracialism Seriously: From Movement Mythology to Racial Formation,” *Du Bois Review* 11, no. 1 (2014): 9–25; David A. Hollinger, “The Concept of Postracial: How Its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions,” *Daedalus* 140, no. 1 (2011): 174–182; Kathryn T. Gines, “A Critique of Postracialism: Conserving Race and Complicating Blackness beyond the Black-White Binary,” *Du Bois Review* 11, no. 1 (2014): 75–86. For a picture of the “obliviousness” of color-blindness in a community otherwise committed to racial justice, see Mary McClinton Fulkerson’s *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

dogma. Embracing racial identities that come downstream from racialization amounts to an intimate embrace of the political economy that produced them. We should avoid both confusions. Rather than willful ignorance, we need to keep track of racial capitalism's many effects. Rather than naturalize race, we need to avoid dogmatic concepts that capitulate to racial capitalism's identitarian schemes. While they might seem mutually exclusive, postracialism and identitarianism reinforce one another. What we need—what would constitute a genuine alternative to both—is consideration of political economies that do not leave us with postracialism and identitarianism as our only options. Deracialization, not postracialism, should be the goal. Until that goal is met, it is unclear what racial identity comes to other than the furnishings of a political economy that continues unabated in its domination and exploitation.

Properly undertaken, the debate about identitarianism would raise hard questions about whether racial identity can be appropriated in the way antiracists want to believe it can. Can we, for example, talk about “yellow power” as some Asian American antiracists did in the 1960s without capitulating to the political economy that coined “yellow peril” in order to exploit Chinese migrants in the 1860s?²⁶ Identarians have designs here of hijacking a concept meant for harm and redeploying it for good, reverse-engineering its use from dominative exploitation to political liberation. Can we not appropriate for good that which was meant for evil?²⁷ Conducting this debate is not the primary point of this book, which offers proposals beyond identitarianism. At minimum, those committed to keeping racial identity on the table will need to theorize its possibilities through its political economic origins. If I am right about identitarianism's dominance within contemporary antiracism, it will be these questions

²⁶ Regarding “yellow power,” see Rychetta Watkins, *Black Power, Yellow Power, and the Making of Revolutionary Identities* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); Jeffrey O. G. Ogbay, “Yellow Power: The Formation of Asian-American Nationalism in the Age of Black Power, 1966–1975,” *Souls* 3, no. 3 (2001): 29–38.

²⁷ See Linda Martín Alcoff, “Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?,” in *Hispanics/Latinos in the United States: Ethnicity, Race and Rights*, ed. Jorge L. A. García and Pablo de Greiff (New York: Routledge, 2000), 23–44. Because “reference is mutable” and “the meanings of race are subject to some movement” then “perhaps the meaning of race is transformable” (*ibid.*, 41 and 40). Alcoff does a fine job of probing these questions, though it is telling that her analysis barely makes mention of determinate factors that both purposefully created race and continue to determine the conditions of its use. She does acknowledge that “when those prior meanings are centuries old and globally spread, they are going to be hard to dislodge” (41). But the processes and commitments that created race “centuries” ago are still with us, and “globally” as she says, and so cannot be treated simply as relics of a bygone age.

about the legacy of racial identity that become for many readers a particular bone of contention.²⁸

This book takes the position that while antiracists would understandably want to take the path of appropriating racism's central concepts, racial identity cannot be so easily appropriated. It cannot for the simple reason that the same political economy that deployed racial identity in the first place still determines the conditions of its use.²⁹ Even if that were not the case, and I try to show throughout that it is, it is nevertheless surprising how rarely antiracists acknowledge the commanding role racial capitalism has played throughout American history. The omission suggests that identitarian antiracism does not fully appreciate the stakes of the matter, nor the possibilities that remain.

Of course, the mere coincidence of racial identity and racial capitalism is not enough to prove that something untoward has occurred. An argument will need to be made. This book offers one such argument for the claim that racial identity remains wedded to racial capitalism, and it submits those racialized as Asian Americans as evidence for the claim. In relationship to Asian Americans, identitarianism comes up short in two telling ways. First, American race politics constructs race in a manner that marginalizes Asian Americans. Here I refer to the racial binary (between white and black) that governs the lives of those it identifies as Asian American. The *racial* binary limits their existence to a racial existence: who they are reduces to who they are *racially*. At the same time the racial *binary* determines the substance of that existence: who they are reduces to who they are relative to a *white/black* binary. Because race is presumed to work for those identified as white and black (i.e., those who are conceptually prioritized by the binary), it is presumed to work for others. Even if it doesn't. It should be no surprise then that orthodox antiracism ends up marginalizing those already marginalized by

²⁸ The following discussion is helpful on this score: Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?," *Noûs* 34, no. 1 (2000): 31–55; Sally Haslanger, "Future Genders? Future Races?," *Philosophical Exchange* 34, no. 1 (2004): 2–24; Charles W. Mills, "Notes from the Resistance: Some Comments on Sally Haslanger's *Resisting Reality*," *Philosophical Studies* 171 (2014): 85–97.

²⁹ See Nancy Leong's arguments along these lines in "Identity Entrepreneurs," *California Law Review* 104, no. 6 (2016): 1333–1399; *Identity Capitalists: The Powerful Insiders Who Exploit Diversity to Maintain Inequality* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021); and "Racial Capitalism," *Harvard Law Review* 126, no. 8 (2013): 2151–2226. Leong's "racial capitalism" concept works conversely to mine. While I argue that race justifies capitalist exploitation, Leong argues that race itself gets exploited as capital. As she shows through her discussion of commodification's "troubling consequences," the concepts eventually converge (Leong, "Racial Capitalism," 2198–2212). "Identity Entrepreneurs" offers particularly troubling examples of race commodification.

racism.³⁰ Over the course of the book, I offer a number of examples, some quite involved, along these lines.

Second, as an explanatory concept racial identity explains very little about Asian Americans.³¹ Conceptually, racial identity is notoriously unwieldy. Yet identarians insist on using it in order to get at highly complex phenomena like racism, nativism, political community, democratic life, moral agency, and the like. The strategy of using unwieldy concepts to explain complex phenomena results in outcomes that are unsurprisingly mired in analytical problems. While indications of these problems are everywhere present, this book takes up the task of carefully laying out the evidence and delineating the question-begging structure of arguments that begin with racial identity (e.g., “Because of whiteness, white people. . . .”). Failure to pay heed to these problems puts antiracism on the wrong path. My argument proceeds as if that path has become so confused and convoluted that any hope of dismantling racism now involves dismantling significant aspects of antiracist thought. If we have reached a point where we need to, as Eddie S. Glaude suggests, “begin again” (more precisely, continuously begin again), then we need to venture rethinking even our most cherished concepts, including those related to racial identity.³² Throughout my argument, Asian Americans play a central role in challenging antiracist orthodoxy. Their experience within the dominant discourse shows that identarianism harms more than it helps (or that it harms at least as much as it helps but the harms do not so easily register). They similarly demonstrate that identarianism’s intense focus on racial identity severely limits its explanatory power (i.e., racial identity tells us little more than *that* and *how* persons are racially identified). Racial identity misconstrues identity, and therefore persons, making of identity’s translational, provisional, and pragmatic character something essential, permanent, and ideal.³³ Emphasizing race above all other forms of identification—where

³⁰ In terms of the binary, see Juan F. Perea, “The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The ‘Normal Science’ of American Racial Thought,” *California Law Review* 85, no. 5 (1997): 1213–1258; Linda Martín Alcoff, “Latino/as, Asian Americans, and the Black-White Binary,” *Journal of Ethics* 7, no. 1 (2003): 5–27; Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–138. I return to these in Chapter 3.

³¹ For an especially helpful discussion, see Ki Joo Choi, *Disciplined by Race: Theological Ethics and the Problem of Asian American Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019).

³² Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020), 142–145.

³³ For an account that ties identity to translation and translation to ordinary language (which very much informs this book’s philosophical approach), see Naoko Saito’s work, specifically “Ourselves in Translation: Stanley Cavell and Philosophy as Autobiography,” *Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 2 (2009): 253–267; “Philosophy as Translation: Democracy and Education from Dewey to Cavell,” *Educational Theory* 57, no. 3 (2007): 261–275; “Quiet Desperation, Secret Melancholy: Polemos

one's racial identity determines everything about one's identity—then has the effect of misconstruing how identity works altogether. Racial identity misleads not only about race but also about identity, not only about racial persons but persons as such. As a whole, the book argues that replacing identitarian antiracism with an antiracist approach focused on political economy gets us closer to overcoming racism.

By explaining race and racism in terms of the historical and material contexts that produced and perpetuate race thinking and racist arrangements, political economy better explains what racism is, how it works, and what liberation entails and constrains. Relying, as identitarianism increasingly does, on vague concepts like “whiteness” (i.e., that which determines history without answering to it) might be rhetorically useful, but it will not in the end get us very far. Rather than limiting ourselves to racial identity and rather than deploying concepts that float free of history, we might consider approaches that help us understand why racial identity came to matter at all. By narrating identitarian antiracism in continuity with racism's fixation with racial identity (that is, by telling both parts of the origin story), my political economic approach tries to understand the reigning orthodoxy better than it understands itself.

Correspondingly, because it does not press the case for racial identity, it does not, as the identitarian binaries do, prioritize some people to the exclusion of others. In my approach, each racialized person counts the same, as racialized and therefore commodified. There is not in this approach some conceptually privileged racialized group (some uncommodified racial group), either on account of access to power or proximity to suffering. To be racialized just is to be commodified. As a result, this non-identitarian view of persons creates space for coalitional solidarity since your belonging to a group is not made to depend on your belonging to a certain race (which will segregate you from some just as it will join you to others). Belonging instead involves shared patterns of common life by which you and others mutually discover who you are. Coalitional solidarity premised on racial identity turns the degree of one's racial suffering into the basis for one's belonging,

and Passion in Citizenship Education,” *Ethics and Education* 6, no. 1 (2011): 3–14; “Truth Is Translated: Cavell's Thoreau and the Transcendence of America,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2007): 124–132; “Philosophy, Translation and the Anxieties of Inclusion,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 52, no. 2 (2018): 197–215; “Translation on Its Own Terms? Toward Education for Global Culture,” *Ethics and Education* 12, no. 1 (2017): 18–22; “Becoming Cosmopolitan: On the Idea of a Japanese Response to American Philosophy,” *Transactions of the Charles Pierce Society* 47, no. 4 (2011): 507–523.

with predictable results—only certain races count. When race (e.g., “whiteness”) serves as the common enemy around which a coalition is built, then racial identity (i.e., one’s suffering owing to one’s race) becomes the criterion for participation. Just as race narrows what counts as suffering, so it narrows pathways for shared forms of life. When identity precedes liberative politics, it too often precludes it. Racial identity becomes a conversation stopper. When identity instead arrives as an achievement of shared struggle in revolutionary forms of love, identities (who and what we are) form around common liberative agendas.³⁴ Inasmuch as racism stems from a baseline commodifying political economy and insofar as that political economy seeks to dominate and exploit everyone and everything, antiracism will need to provide remedies wide enough to overcome it. Identarianism’s individualizing approach will not do. If we hope to succeed, we will need others.

Christianity as Political Economy

Religion plays a central role in the story I tell. This importantly differs from identarian antiracism, which offers religion only a supporting role. This book attributes the difference to the fact that religion largely takes political economic form. Whatever else it might be in its various forms, religion names a structure of valuation predicated on the absolute value of God and the relative value of creatures, an infinite relationship of exchange between the one and the many. The valuation can issue in or from stratified social relations reflecting how that exchange is politically imagined.³⁵ It is religious imagery that Isabel Wilkerson draws on while portraying American racism in terms of caste: “A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups,” enduring “because it is often justified as divine will, originated from sacred text or the presumed laws of nature, reinforced throughout the culture and passed down through the

³⁴ Along these lines, see Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1988); Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, “Confounded Identities: A Meditation on Race, Feminism, and Religious Studies in Times of White Supremacy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 2 (2018): 307–340. For an account of love as a democratic virtue in relationship to race and racism, see Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 79–88.

³⁵ See Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

generations.”³⁶ Systems of religious valuation can certainly go badly, as they do in Wilkerson’s America. But they need not. Religions can invest value in those deemed valueless by society, certifying that investment by grounding it in God. Over the course of its long history, Christianity has gone both ways, in each case to startling effect.

Christianity thematizes valuation in terms of desire. It imagines creation as ordered toward the satisfaction of creatures, creation’s very existence evidence of divine gratuity and pleasure. According to orthodox Christian theology, creaturely existence ensues as reciprocal gift giving where each one is given to the other and all come from and return to God. The Christian gospel offers a profoundly human drama where much, though not everything, turns on the question of whether persons live into the gift-structure of creation or pursue distorted desires to the detriment of creation. For Christianity, however, distortion and damage are only part of the story, which is first and foremost a story about divine charity and its capacities for taking into God’s life even distortion and damage. Christianity refers to this infinite love as θεία οὐκονοία, the divine economy.

Notice that the Christian story I briefly outlined recasts in theological terms the story I previously told about racial capitalism’s political economy. Christianity redounds to its own political economy, first by making economy a general feature of creaturely existence and second by relating the kingdom of God to the economy of God, speaking of God’s reign as God’s grace.³⁷ Racism and racial capitalism—epitomized but not exhausted by white supremacist Christian religion—are distortions of God’s kingdom and economy, rejections of divine rule and divine desire.³⁸ Traditions of Christian thought cast these distortions in terms of a relentless *libido dominandi*, and Christian

³⁶ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 17. I have occasion in Chapter 3 to assess the benefit of caste-based analyses of race and racism. I argue there that Oliver Cromwell Cox has given us good reason to doubt it. For a review along these lines, see Charisse Burden-Stelly, “Caste Does Not Explain Race,” *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*, December 15, 2020, <https://bostonreview.net/race/charisse-burden-stelly-caste-does-not-explain-race>.

³⁷ On the economic account of creation, see Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 220–222.

³⁸ For accounts of the decline and endurance, respectively, of white Christianity, see Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 45–110; Ryan L. Clasen, *Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans? Party Activists, Party Capture, and the “God Gap”* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 134–157; of the white working class, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020). For a complicating account, see Richard Alba, *The Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, Minority, and the Expanding American Mainstream* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

scripture describes their normalization and naturalization thusly: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12, NRSV).³⁹ Domination and exploitation are political economic terms, which, when theologically cast, denote something about the *privatio* of the divine gift. Fallenness characterizes a scenario where creatures have turned in on themselves and therefore catastrophically “thingify” one another while desperately extracting that which can only be given.⁴⁰ Sin is disordered desire, deformations of the body’s grace, “anti-doxology” as I later say.⁴¹

The theological casting helps avoid flattening everything to *homo economicus*. This is a problem with many Marxist renditions of liberation, championing class warfare without a moral vision broad enough to make revolution more than resistance, proclamation of something that comes on the far side of revolutionary struggle, or, better yet, witness to something original, something in the natural order of things, and so revolution as recapitulation.⁴² Christian theology (what Augustine of Hippo called, in relationship to deformations like white supremacist Christianity, “true religion”) envisions creaturely existence in terms of depth, ever-deepening—involving, revolving, evolving—participation in the divine life as the consummation of creaturely longing.⁴³

Within this forward-looking vision, theology offers an explanation for the dominative relationships that ensue when creatures turn in on themselves and so need, as part of the gift-structure of their lives, to see themselves as

³⁹ Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 30–74; Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 76–110.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go from Here?” Accessed September 10, 2019, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/where-do-we-go-here-address-delivered-eleventh-annual-sclc-convention>. For earlier mention of “thingification,” see Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42.

⁴¹ Rowan Williams refers to the human’s non-instrumentality as “the body’s grace.” Available at “The Body’s Grace,” accessed September 2019, <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the-bodys-grace.pdf>. See Chapter 5’s discussion of “anti-doxology.”

⁴² For accounts of Marxism’s reductive tendencies, see Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 24–29. For better Marxisms, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2016) and Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁴³ St. Augustine, “Of True Religion,” in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. John H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), 218–253. For a recent antiracist analysis of Augustinian theology, see Matthew Elia, “Ethics in the Afterlife of Slavery: Race, Augustinian Politics, and the Problem of the Christian Master,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 2 (2018): 93–110.

good. This deepens the analysis of extractive commodification one gets with Marxist critiques of capitalism. It shifts the role ideology plays from mystification, as is the case with scientific Marxism, to moral justification. Those who exploit others do not simply want to get away with their exploitations but feel compelled to employ dominative conditions in order to smooth things over. “Conscientiously moral human beings,” social anthropologist Audrey Smedley said about the colonial context of racial slavery, “do not conventionalize such habits of thought and behavior without a rationalizing ideology. Even as laws were enacted and customs created, the colonists were inventing ideologies to mirror, explain, and justify them.”⁴⁴ Regarding the contemporary context, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor likewise writes, “Capitalism is an economic system based on the exploitation of the many by the few. Because of the gross inequality it produces, capitalism requires various political, social, and ideological tools to divide the majority—racism is one among many oppressions intended to serve this purpose. Oppression is used to justify, ‘explain,’ and make sense of rampant inequality.”⁴⁵ In the Christian version of the story, persons, as part of a good creation, begin in goodness and henceforth incline toward goodness. When involved in evil, they find ways to account for their actions as less (or more) than evil. By lending exploitative behavior a veneer of respectability, racism justifies commodification.⁴⁶ Notice the sequence. It is not that an initial metaphysical classification—say, about another’s human status—leads to exploitation (i.e., “Because it’s not human, I can exploit it.”). Rather, the exploitation is already underway and induces, quoting Vivek Chibber, “an endogenously generated pressure to *create* a justifying discourse.”⁴⁷ The exploiter wants to think well of his actions. Weaponizing folk prejudices around ethnic difference and innate constraints of biological preference, he describes those he exploits in ways that make his actions seem less like exploitation.⁴⁸ As his actions take place in structures and systems that naturalize his behavior (structures and systems that, using Smedley’s term, “conventionalize” exploitation) the conditions for domination are met,

⁴⁴ Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), 108.

⁴⁵ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 205–206.

⁴⁶ See Jodi Melamed’s description of racism as “enshrining” commodification in “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85 (77).

⁴⁷ Vivek Chibber, “Orientalism and Its Afterlives,” *Catalyst*, Fall 2020, <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol4/no3/orientalism-and-its-afterlives>, emphasis in the original.

⁴⁸ On natural preferences, see Mona Sue Weissmark, *The Science of Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 28–113.

joining the justifications seamlessly with the behavior, allowing the exploitation to go on without thought, and without end.⁴⁹

Religion allows us to see how the *libido dominandi* emerges from the creature's distorted desire for goodness. It goes further than those social theories that allow capital's evils to drive the narrative. Capitalism itself takes many forms, at turns benevolent, nationalist, exploitatively constructive or destructive, globalizing, protectionist, statist, and so on.⁵⁰ That capitalism can offer better versions of itself is obvious, and for my approach beside the point. Because justification is religiously salient in the way I have laid out and because religion is crucial for making sense of racism, then a religious approach only needs an account of capitalism pointed enough to make legible racism's justificatory role. The religious account of desire and justification and the social critique of racial capitalism combine, in this book, to reveal racism's horrors. The theologically framed view from political economy helps one see, for instance, that the horror of racial capitalism does not lie in the notion that some identified others as less than human and so enslaved them, a myth that might be guiding orthodox antiracism's preoccupation with identity—as if establishing, securing, and asserting racial identity will protect injured races from further harm, and as if establishing, securing, and asserting racial identity did not permit some to harm others in the first place. Rather, the horror comes in the fact that slavers knew full well that slaves were human (for those with eyes to see, nothing could be clearer) and yet enslaved them. This reminds us that the various rationales given for chattel slavery had little to do with the ontological status of enslaved persons, and everything to do with the inhumanity of enslavers.⁵¹ We would do well to remember this as we

⁴⁹ For excellent accounts of religiously driven justificatory modes of thought, see J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). Interpreted in relationship to the exploitative regimes they serve, the modes of thought delineated in these studies theologically set the conditions of domination that facilitate exploitation. On the relationship between exploitation and domination, see Nicholas Vrousalis, "Exploitation, Vulnerability, and Social Domination," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2013): 131–157; Nicholas Vrousalis, "Exploitation as Domination: A Response to Arneson," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 54, no. 4 (2016): 527–538; and Emmanuel Renault, "L'exploitation Comme Domination," *Cahiers d'économie Politique* 74, no. 2 (2018): 85–100.

⁵⁰ See Luke Bretherton's delineation of capitalism's "multiple and overlapping forms" in Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 323–358 (specifically 347–348). In terms of a necessary relationship between capitalism and racism, see Nancy Fraser, "Is Capitalism Necessarily Racist?," *Politics/Letters* 15 (2019), <http://quarterly.politicsslashletters.org/is-capitalism-necessarily-racist/>.

⁵¹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 372–373 and Cora Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 276–306.

embark on an account of race and racism where the primary danger will not be losing sight of the humanness of those who suffer racism (for those with eyes to see, nothing could be clearer) but losing track of the humanity of racists, and hence their capacity to dehumanize themselves (i.e., to close their eyes to the world). The question turns then from anthropology and ontological status to political theory—and for my purposes, ecclesiology—and the social forms necessary for bringing the world into focus.

The theological account of creation's natural sociality likewise combines with the coalitional solidarity I mentioned earlier. Together, they offer a revolutionary political economy capable of calling time on racial capitalism. For Christianity, a genuinely political economy—where individual desire and communal flourishing serve one another—shares patterns of common life built into the divine economy. It only requires the *ecclesia* to make good on what the “called out ones” already claim as true.⁵² Once again, this marks an improvement on the Marxist analysis with which my argument shares much in common. Marxism, like Christianity, calls for collective revolutionary action but, given its ambivalence about ethical life (discussed explicitly in the Postscript to this book), too often lacks the determinate forms of life necessary to get revolution off the ground. Christianity is different in this way, not so much waiting for the revolution to start, but laying claim to one now two thousand years old.

The Book's Outline

My argument about political economy unfolds through two case studies. The first involves a history of the Delta Chinese who settled in the South after Reconstruction. The second involves an ethnographic study of a contemporary religious community, San Francisco's Redeemer Community Church. Together, the studies demonstrate how racial capitalism works, how it racializes Asian Americans, and how it might be overcome. The two studies (comprising Part I and Part II of the book, respectively) are meant to substantiate the earlier claim that compared to identarianism, a political economic approach better understands and better liberates those oppressed

⁵² For an example, consider Darren W. Davis and Donald B. Pope-Davis, *Perseverance in the Parish? Religious Attitudes from a Black Catholic Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 95–107.

by racial capitalism. If, as I argue, racism as racial capitalism utilizes racialization to justify dominative exploitation (employing parallel dynamics of exploitation-racialization-domination and use-identity-justification described in Chapter 2), then antiracism entails two fundamental tasks: first, diminishing racialization's ability to facilitate domination, which involves deflating identitarian (racist and antiracist) modes of analysis, and, second, displacing exploitation as the basis of political economy, which involves highlighting alternative idioms by which political economy is imagined. Part I tackles racialization and Part II tackles exploitation. The two-part story I tell intersects with a number of parallel discourses: racism and antiracism, identarianism and racial capitalism, Marxist social theory and Christian practice, religion and theology, the Delta Chinese and Redeemer Community Church, the political economy of racial capitalism and the political economy of the *θεία οικονομία*, Asian Americans and African Americans, and religion and public life.

Let me lay out the chapters' respective arguments. Chapter 1 begins my history of the Delta Chinese. Revisiting nineteenth-century debates about Chinese exclusion will underscore how little antiracists can afford to separate racial identity from political economy. Obscured, racial capitalism puts racial identities in competition with one another. The model minority myth, first deployed by wedging African Americans against Asian migrants, proves to be especially instructive for how racial capitalism (especially in its transnational framing) manipulates racial identity and identitarian thinking. A fuller account of racial capitalism is then offered in Chapter 2 where I continue with the Delta Chinese. Once settled in the Mississippi Delta an innovative business model will bring them wealth and, coincidentally, lead them to Southern Baptist religion. The business model will also commit them to exploitative relationships with their neighbors. I portray this relationship as part of racial capitalism's aftermarket legacy and place it on one side of the book's narrative arch. The fate of the Delta Chinese displays the possibilities and challenges that arise when racial capitalism's political economy comes into contact with a political economy that ran idle for the Delta Chinese Christians. Chapter 3 next examines what happens when identarians use racial identity to the exclusion of political economy in order to explain phenomena as complex as the Delta Chinese. The fact that identarians can only see the Delta Chinese through a "becoming white" trope demonstrates the conceptual costs of subordinating political economy to racial identity. I argue that antiracists who complain about the "white/black binary" while simultaneously entertaining

becoming-white tropes involve themselves in performative contradictions since the trope is the narrative form of the binary—just as the binary is, and historically has been, the logical form of race thinking.

Part I's three chapters reveal what identitarianism encourages us to think about Asian American life. Staging Asian American antiracism as a fight against the model minority myth, as related in Chapter 1, teaches us to abstract race and racism from political economy. Chapter 2 reveals the consequences of that abstraction. The moral benefit of the Delta Chinese business model was that one could take advantage of racial capitalist aftermarket opportunities without thinking oneself a racial capitalist—that is, without having to view one's success in America as having anything to do with American racism. Chapter 3 then shows how identitarian theorizing conceptually closes the loop. Once the Delta Chinese, as just one example of Asian American existence, are theorized in this abstracted way, they are sealed off from questions of political economy. What matters about them then is their racial identity.

The three chapters that comprise Part II turn to Redeemer Community Church, a contemporary religious community in San Francisco, California, largely, but not entirely, comprised of those identified as Asian Americans. For two decades, Redeemer has attempted to live into what it calls “the grace economy” contrasted with “the mammon economy.” This has resulted in sustained experiments with radical economic sharing, communal living, intentional friendship, racial reconciliation, personal accountability, political solidarity, financial investment, institution building, and community organizing—all weaved together through religious life. Continuing claims made in Part I, my ethnographic study focuses on three aspects of the Redeemer community. Chapter 4 examines how Redeemer imagines the land it occupies. By choosing to settle, and remaining while others leave, in the Bayview/Hunters Point neighborhood (historically a site of blatant environmental racism) and committing itself to local relationships bound by neighbor love, Redeemer inverts the commodifying logic of settler expansion. Chapter 5 talks about Dayspring Partners, through which Redeemer offers an ecological account of political economy whereby creatures live into increasingly wide ecologies befitting their respective modes of existence within the trinitarian life of God. Here one encounters what I call “deep economy”—the divine economy as ecology, God's justice and mercy reverberating through the depths of creation. The opposition between this chapter's deep economy and Chapter 2's aftermarket racial capitalism structures the larger argument

I make in this book. Chapter 6, lastly, describes how Redeemer challenges a familiar script for being Asian American. Rise University Preparatory, a neighborhood school started by the church, becomes Redeemer's answer to racial capitalism's stronghold on education and the vexed Asian American presence therein (a leitmotif appearing throughout the book). The school's aspirations bring to the fore questions of hope and so the chapter concludes with an extended engagement with Afropessimism. I end the book with a postscript on the limits of Marxism and the revolutionary promise and demands of the church.

Redeemer Community Church presents a full-bodied example of what it looks like to imagine community, politics, and identity as instances of a liberative political economy, and the real challenges that come with doing so in the shadow an exploitative political economy. The ethnographic research turns up both realities, liberation and its many difficulties. Especially interesting are the ways Redeemer's Christians negotiate racial identities that put them at odds with a political economy that otherwise identifies them. That the liberative moments in their story do not fail to arrive alongside the difficulties demonstrates how much we need accounts of moral psychology sophisticated enough to see liberation for what it is. Examining the two case studies, with their varying degrees of proximity to our own contexts, allows us to test whether our moral concepts are rich enough to avoid the virtue signaling we antiracists are prone to.

PART I

THE DELTA CHINESE

The socalled [*sic*] ‘racial problem’ is not a problem amenable to solution: it is not a problem at all: it is a cruel way of life for which, if we wish to survive as a free nation, a new way of life must be substituted.

—Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*¹

What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable. . . . The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support.

—Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”²

It’s not that you should talk about culture less. You can talk about it all you want. But understand the role that it’s playing. . . . If you’re interested in culture, go and study culture. But don’t give it a causal role that it never had. Not only is that analytically problematic; it very quickly leads to these very ethnicized, racialized conceptions of the East and West which is an absolute barrier to progressive politics.

—Vivek Chibber, “The Legacy of Orientalism and Edward Said”³

¹ Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 173.

² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, The Crossing Press Feminist Series. (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–111 and 112.

³ *The Legacy of Orientalism and Edward Said*, Jacobin Talks, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPYX21BamPQ>.

The history of blacks in the West and the social movements that have affirmed and rewritten that history can provide a lesson which is not restricted to blacks. They raise issues of more general significance that have been posed within black politics at a relatively early point. There is, for example, a potentially important contribution here towards the politics of a new century in which the central axis of conflict will no longer be the color line but the challenge of just, sustainable development and the frontiers which will separate the overdeveloped parts of the world (at home and abroad) from the intractable poverty that already surrounds them. In these circumstances, it may be easier to appreciate the utility of a response to racism that doesn't reify the concept of race and to prize the wisdom generated by developing a series of answers to the power of ethnic absolutism that doesn't try to fix ethnicity absolutely but sees it instead as an infinite process of identity construction.

—Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*⁴

Christianity and Marxism are the most vulgarized, distorted traditions in the modern world, yet I believe the alliance of prophetic Christianity and progressive Marxism provides a last humane hope for humankind.

—Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*⁵

Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more. We search for them in a world beside our own, then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts.

—Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Refugees*⁶

⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 223.

⁵ Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 95.

⁶ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Refugees* (New York: Grove Press, 2017), 22.

1

Remythologizing the Model Minority Myth

The Chinese Question

Who that has seen the lovely little villages of New England, composed of the residences of mechanics who, from their daily toil, have been able to educate their children; who that has seen one of those little cottages, with the children gathered around the fireside, and the little piano, and everything that denotes comfort and peace and happiness, can find it in his heart to consent to bring coolie slaves there to live on rice and reduce the wages so as to throw those people out of employment? Is that right?

—Senator William Stewart, 1870¹

If we do not wake up to our opportunities, do not put brains and skill into common occupations by whatever name called that are immediately about our doors, we shall find that a class of foreigners will come in and take our places, just as they have already done in relation to certain industries.

—Booker T. Washington, 1902²

At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own—with no help from anyone else.

—*U.S. News & World Report*, 1966³

¹ *Congressional Globe*, 41 Cong. 2 sess., 1870, pt. 6: 5152.

² Booker T. Washington, *Booker T. Washington Papers. Volume 6, 1901–2*, ed. Louis R. Harlan, Raymond Smock, and Barbara R. Kraft (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 556.

³ “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.,” *U.S. News & World Report*, December 26, 1966.

This opening chapter does two things for my larger argument about political economy. First, it begins what will be over the next three chapters an involved engagement with the Chinese American presence in the Mississippi Delta (1868–1969). I will portray the Delta Chinese as instructive of Asian American life. As will be shown, that life has been at turns courageous and cowardly, powerful and banal, exemplary yet ordinary, salutary though damaging, both inspirational and disappointing. The lessons the Delta Chinese have for us—their instruction on racial existence—deal with what racialization comes to, and so the fates (courageous and cowardly, powerful and banal, etc.) of committing oneself permanently to America’s preoccupation with racial identity. In this chapter I discuss “the Chinese question” as the background that will determine their settlement in the South and progression toward model minority status. In the next chapter I offer a fuller account of their lives once established in “the most Southern place on Earth.”⁴ I will present their grocery store business model as a moving picture of racial capitalism. In Chapter 3, I contend with the white/black binary and its becoming-white narrative form. I argue that becoming-white tropes, as appealing as they may be, ultimately affirm the stubborn binary and in turn reinforce the idea of race, consenting once again to the exploitative terms of its invention. In the current chapter, I am concerned with Chinese migrants before they settle in the Delta. Specifically, I examine Reconstruction-era debates about the profitability of Chinese labor. There we discover a revealing set of questions about race at a time when its previous meaning had been decoupled from those correlative forms of political economic life that gave it sense. Now race must be renegotiated, and some of those negotiations take place around the question of profitable Chinese labor relative to “freedman” labor and both in relationship to white supremacy. Racial meaning gets reformulated through a distorted dynamic between white ambition, perilous yellow migrants, and emancipated but still severely oppressed African Americans.

Second, this chapter takes and assesses a concept through which Asian American theorists contend with racism. The chapter engages “the model minority myth,” the idea that Asian American success propels Asian Americans to model minority status. I am less interested in the myth than its antiracist refutation. I argue that antiracist refutations meant to demystify

⁴ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Also see Vann R. Newkirk II, “The Great Land Robbery,” *The Atlantic*, September 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/09/this-land-was-our-land/594742/>.

the myth end up remythologizing a racial picture we would do well to avoid. The demystifying refutation maneuvers to expose how the myth, first, rests on false descriptive premises and, second, deploys those descriptions for the sake of disciplining other racial minorities. The refutation therefore demystifies the presumption of Asian American success in order to resist its racist disciplining. Refuting the myth is necessary and important. Yet the refutation uses a formula that interestingly reinscribes the very image it seeks to displace. While it foregrounds reasons to doubt the myth, it does so against the backdrop of its validity. It begins with an image of superiority that its antiracism deems necessary to rebuff, but the route the refutation takes (in order to gain momentum) keeps circling back to Asian American superiority as a point of departure. It ends up reinforcing the image over and over. The formula remythologizes the very thing it seeks to demythologize.⁵

Part of the reason the refutation cannot avoid its mythic framing, the reason it keeps coming back to the idea of Asian American superiority, is that it presumes that Asian Americans have been America's only model minorities. Unaware that others have been so scripted, and unaware that those scripts have been deployed *against* Asian Americans, antiracist thinkers pushing the refutations may at times actually believe what they refute. The refutations seeking to demythologize the model minority myth do so without sufficient attention to its broader history of production. Specifically, it proceeds ignorant of the fact that *African Americans* served as America's first model minorities and did so explicitly *against* Chinese Americans. This framing sits at the very inception of Chinese American life and sets the tone of the Asian American experience. African Americans were wedged against Chinese trying to enter the country, hanging the Chinese question on the black question. Those few Chinese who made their way past the wedges were then relegated to an existence confined by model minority mythologizing, which importantly did not begin with them but would get there soon enough. Ignorance of this history leaves the impression that Asian Americans are unique in being mythologized as models. As that impression is reinforced with each new iteration of the refutation (as Asian Americans suppose the myth says something about them rather than race thinking as

⁵ For an interesting parallel, see Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2013), "What is objectionable about postcolonial theory is not that it insists on 'provincializing Europe,' but that, in the name of this project, *it relentlessly promotes Eurocentrism*—a portrayal of the West as the site of reason, rationality, secularism, democratic culture, and the like, and the East as the unchanging miasma of tradition, unreason, religiosity, and so on" (291).

such) it increasingly takes on an air of truth. As to the larger arguments of this book, such thinking finds itself stuck in endless cycles of race-ranking as the myth mythologizes different races. I do not doubt the role white supremacy plays in this story, but in this chapter, I challenge the idea (universally present among its critics) that the myth only works one way.

The goal here is not just to point to a prior moment when the myth worked otherwise. My goal is to show how the myth always works otherwise, that, as a myth about race, it takes protean form, and necessarily trades in slippery descriptions, of all kinds and in every direction, each time in order to facilitate the continuation of racial thinking. The fact that African Americans are sometimes wedged against Chinese Americans like Chinese Americans are sometimes wedged against African Americans goes to show that continuing to think in terms of racial identity invites race-ranking. It is certainly the case that the model minority myth disciplines everything it touches. The question that is not asked often enough is what broader conceptual framework makes this possible. Accordingly, my aim will not be gaining sympathy for Asian Americans with the programmatic goal of occasioning better racial representation and inclusion. Trying to gain Asian Americans better standing only reprises the same form of competitive thinking. Rather, I mean to highlight the shortsightedness of believing race can be separated from the zero-sum political economy that produced it.⁶

The Myth's Cottage Industry

Most tie the emergence of the model minority myth to the World War II-era repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which would allow Asians over the next decades (especially after the 1965 Hart–Cellar Act) to immigrate to America in record numbers. Educational, professional, and financial success turned attention to these racial minorities who were soon held up as models for how racial minorities might comport themselves in America. Less attention was given to how intensely racism ensnared minority life that models were needed at all. In 1966, the *New York Times* ran a story titled “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” authored by University of

⁶ For an account of zero-sum thinking as internal to race thinking, see Heather C. McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021).

California sociologist William Petersen.⁷ He began the story by noting that Japanese Americans (here since the 1860s) have been subject to “the most discrimination and the worst injustices.” Not only did Petersen mean to compare other racial minorities, he named African Americans explicitly, placing them in the category of “the problem minorities” who cannot make their way out of crushing inequality without succumbing to “self-defeating apathy or a hatred so all-consuming as to be self-destructive.” The sociologist wrote, “For all the well-meaning programs and countless scholarly studies now focused on the Negro, we barely know how to repair the damage that the slave traders started.” He then turned to a racial minority that offered a different story: “The history of Japanese Americans, however, challenges every such generalization about ethnic minorities.” Notice that Petersen’s interests quickly move from Japanese American success to those minorities who seem constitutionally unable to succeed. Petersen’s article provides a detailed history of Japanese Americans who, “like the Negroes,” had suffered systemic and brutal racism. Petersen was especially intent on relating their World War II internment to chattel slavery, both instances of death-dealing and state-sanctioned racism. Despite this difficult history, Japanese Americans, connected as they were to their ancestor cultures, “could climb over the highest barriers our racists were able to fashion,” in turn providing an exemplar for minority life in America. They did so unimpeded by the racist barriers behind and in front of them, indeed succeeding in spite of them.

Ellen D. Wu describes other popular versions of the myth: “The *New York Times Magazine* emphasized that Chinese youths displayed ‘unquestioned obedience’ toward their elders, while *Look* magazine celebrated their ‘high moral sense.’ U.S. Rep. Arthur Klein of New York praised his Manhattan Chinatown constituents for their ‘respect for parents and teachers,’ ‘stable and loving home life’ and thirst for education.”⁸ Wu relates a pivotal moment in the myth’s disciplinary career: “In 1966, then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan defended his controversial claim that the too-strong emphasis on matriarchy in black ‘culture’ was to blame for the ‘deterioration’ of African American communities by pointing to the ‘enlightened family life’ of

⁷ William Petersen, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1966, <https://www.nytimes.com/1966/01/09/archives/success-story-japanesearmerican-style-success-story-japanesearmerican.html>.

⁸ Ellen D. Wu, “Asian Americans and the ‘Model Minority’ Myth,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/la-oe-0123-wu-chua-model-minority-chinese-20140123-story.html>. See also Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

the relatively well-to-do Chinese. The magazine *U.S. News & World Report* unequivocally made the same charged comparison: ‘At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own—with no help from anyone else.’” The myth wielded wide-ranging narrative power. Stories highlighting Japanese American, Chinese American, Korean American, and Vietnamese American success seemed to absolve America from excluding Chinese, interning Japanese American citizens, and warring with Koreans and Vietnamese. The success stories suggested that whatever those histories damaged had now been made well.

The model minority myth works like a forensic argument exonerating American racism:

- A. The existence of any successful minority group proves that racism is not so bad that no minorities can succeed.
- B. Asian Americans are a successful minority group, proving that racism is not so bad that no minorities can succeed.
- C. Asian Americans serve as a model proving that minorities *can* succeed and a model for *how* minorities can succeed.

The fact that Americans—both non-Asian Americans and Asian Americans—turned out to be so enamored by the myth suggests that they *wanted* to believe it. One should not miss the timing of those initial pieces, which arrived as civil rights rhetoric and protests tore across America. Americans needed to think better futures were possible for racial minorities. The myth served to assure Americans that the American Dream was alive. The myth made Asian Americans the Dream’s new public face. Especially attractive was the notion that Asian Americans achieved the Dream without complaining, Petersen making a point of highlighting the fact that only four of the 779 Berkeley student riot arrests involved Japanese Americans.

So successful was the myth that eventually an opposite worry crept in, no longer that racism locked minorities out of the American Dream, but that Asian Americans were somehow unfairly advantaged to it. Some worried that rather than modeling the American Dream, they might be keeping others from it.⁹ As the myth grew, Americans began to see Asian Americans as a

⁹ See Claire Jean Kim, “Are Asians the New Blacks? Affirmative Action, Anti-Blackness, and the ‘Sociometry’ of Race,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 15.2 (2018): 217–244.

problem. For instance, their presence at elite universities (which the myth, by its very nature, magnified) persistently troubled discussions of affirmative action.¹⁰ Once it was recognized that the myth could be turned against Asian Americans, antiracists took to refuting it.¹¹ Some saw the problems early on, recognizing that inasmuch as the myth dealt in generalities, it was already dangerous.¹² Others raised objections after witnessing the long-term consequences of projecting Asian American advantage.¹³ All told, the myth's refutation has by now become something of a cottage industry among Asian American antiracists.

In a recent and especially sharp analysis, Poon et al. carefully examine the myth and its refutations, which they refer to as a "counter-model minority myth project."¹⁴ They argue that critical race theory, more so than other modes of analysis, exposes the power the myth exerts on American life. Specifically, they discuss a "middleman minority thesis" in relationship to what political scientist Claire Jean Kim has described as "racial triangulation."¹⁵ They write, "the MMM [model minority myth], through the process of racial triangulation, bolsters cultural racism and color-blind racist ideology by discrediting one racially minoritized group's real struggles with racial barriers and discrimination through the valorization of oversimplified stereotypes of another racially minoritized group. Consequently, the MMM is not simply a stereotype of self-sufficient, high-academic minority achievement. Instead, it is a much more insidious racial device used to uphold a global system of racial hierarchies and White supremacy. . . . The MMM organizes the public's

¹⁰ For discussion on these questions, see the report by Althea Nagai, *Too Many Asian Americans: Affirmative Discrimination in Elite College Admissions* (Falls Church, VA: Center for Equal Opportunity, 2018), 1–23; Michele S. Moses, Daryl J. Maeda, and Christina H. Paguyo, "Racial Politics, Resentment, and Affirmative Action: Asian Americans as 'Model' College Applicants," *Journal of Higher Education* 90.1 (2019): 1–26; Davis Graham, *Collision Course: The Strange Convergence of Affirmative Action and Immigration Policy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Dana Takagi, *The Retreat from Race: Asian American Admission and Racial Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Claire Jean Kim, "Are Asians the New Blacks?"

¹¹ For example, see Robert S. Chang, "Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-Structuralism, and Narrative Space," *California Law Review* 81 (1993): 1241–1323.

¹² See Ki-Taek Chun, "The Myth of Asian American Success and Its Educational Ramifications," *IRCD Bulletin* 14, no. 1–2 (1980): 2–13.

¹³ See Frank H. Wu, "The Model Minority: Asian American 'Success' as Race Relations Failure," in *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 39–77.

¹⁴ Oi Yan Poon et al., "A Critical Review of the Model Minority Myth in Selected Literature on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Higher Education," *Review of Educational Research* 86, no. 2 (2016): 469–502 (470). Further citations will be noted in the text.

¹⁵ Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–138.

general interpretation of the role of Asian Americans within racial hierarchies and inequalities" (474 and 475). After reviewing hundreds of scholarly treatments, they found that the counter-model minority myth project generally took the form of disaggregating Asian Americans as a group in order to highlight how Asian Americans do not succeed at the rate the myth suggests. Poon et al. are especially critical of the project for failing to see the myth for the wedging tool that it is.

The myth, according to Poon et al., is and has always been a racist ploy so it is a mistake to take it at face value. They see as specifically problematic the project's tactic of using a "deficit framework" in order to invalidate the myth: "Employing a deficit framework, these publications tended to spotlight Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian Americans and the barriers and disparities they face to justify increased research on AAPIs [Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders]. Their explanations for why AAPIs remained invisible in education and research placed blame on a model minority stereotype of high achievement, which does not fit the deficit model" (481). The myth was never a serious construal of Asian American life and so attacking it by highlighting Asian American deficiencies rather than rejecting altogether the model's racist framing is to not only to miss what the myth is doing, but to take part in doing it.

In order to make their point, Poon et al. have to exaggerate the degree to which the counter-model minority myth project (by focusing exclusively on deficit framings) "lacked a critical perspective" (478). Clearly, the counter-model minority myth project means to check the myth's disciplinary power, believing that undermining its primary goals (as related to Asian Americans) has the effect of undermining its secondary goals. It is to say, "Insofar as *X* is not true in the first instance, neither can it be true in projected cases." Really what Poon et al. mean, and the most they can insist on, is that insofar as the counter-model minority myth project did not for its refutations rely explicitly (and as self-consciously) on the critical race theory they endorse, it fails to see the reasons for the myth's uncanny success, namely as a wedging tool used to uphold white supremacy. Their refutation differs incrementally, and stylistically, but otherwise does similar work. They are right about the project taking the myth at face value and about the problematic consequences of the deficit framing, but their own approach ends up creating problems of its own. Namely, in refusing deficit framing altogether they preclude questions of political economy, which, as I will argue later, is the most important thing about the myth. They are ultimately unable to grasp, much less refute, the

terms that make the myth work. This will become apparent as the present chapter proceeds.

In what follows, by turning to the early history of the Chinese question I make something of an end-run around both the myth and its refutations. The myth's problems have by now been well documented, reaching a point of saturation. A critical analysis of the myth's layered refutation is yet to be made. I attempt to do so here, with the larger goal of tackling not so much the myth and its fraught explanatory powers as its theoretical reception, less the myth's crude way of describing Asian Americans and more those concepts of race that inform its refutation. It is these concepts that I have in mind when I speak in this book of needing to intervene on antiracism's guiding concepts. In deconstructing the myth's critiques, I have no intention of defending the myth. I take for granted that the myth so lacks for analytical seriousness that its ongoing currency in American cultural life demonstrates just how idle antiracism has become. That we have not only taken the crude notion seriously but have required a cottage industry in order to refute it indicates that we have left the rough ground from which more serious arguments can be made. The model minority myth was always a banal story to begin with and so its repudiation, while politically important, does not require much imagination. We can be thankful for the myth's many refutations, but we also need to recognize that those, like many identitarian concepts, have come at the steep price of perpetuating larger race-based myths. To see how that is the case, let me now turn to the Chinese question as the context in which the Delta Chinese would arrive in the Reconstruction South. My hope is that this history will help us think better about the model minority myth, which begins at a time when African Americans are wedged against Chinese inclusion.

An Evening Redness in the West

In order to properly contextualize the Delta Chinese arrival in the American South, we need to start west of Mississippi with the lynching of seventeen Chinese men in the notorious Los Angeles slum "Calle de los Negros." The event, which came to be known as the Chinese Massacre of 1871, would end up the largest mass lynching in U.S. history and, incidentally, the last lynching Los Angeles would see. A mob of over five hundred people, including women and children, hunted down, tortured, killed, and mutilated the seventeen, along the way assaulting, robbing, vandalizing, and devastating the

rest of the fledgling two-hundred-person Chinese community in a city of nearly six thousand.¹⁶ The mob had been thrown into a frenzy after warring Chinese gangs ended up shooting two white men, one a police officer and the other a rancher who died as a result. Outcries that Chinese “were killing white men by the wholesale” ignited what had already been simmering contempt toward the Chinese. Consider one of the lynchings that took place that day: “Of all the Chinese in Los Angeles, Dr. Gene Tong was probably the most eminent and beloved among both his countrymen and Americans. He could have made much more money hanging his shingle in the American part of town. But Tong stayed in the Alley, dispensing both traditional and modern cures from a small shop in the decrepit Coronel Building. As Tong was dragged along the street, he tried to strike a bargain with his captors. He could pay a ransom, he said. He had \$3,000 in gold in his shop. He had a diamond wedding ring. They could have it all. Instead of negotiating, one of his captors shot him in the mouth to silence him. Then they hanged him, first cutting off his finger to steal the ring.”¹⁷ As they went about their work, the lynching mob could be heard saying, “Come on, boys, patronize home trade!”—a reference to white frustration with perceived crooked Chinese labor.¹⁸ Prior to the massacre, local papers had railed against the Chinese. For instance, the *Los Angeles News* regularly referred to the city’s Chinese, who had started arriving just a few years before, as “degrading beings,” “filthy and disgusting,” “animals,” describing them as “an alien, an inferior and idolatrous race,” “without one single redeeming feature,” “a people who are so utterly depraved and debased that no single thought or virtue or honesty ever entered their heads” and “a curse to our country, and a foul blot upon our civilization.”¹⁹ As such, life in America could be difficult for the Chinese. Outbreaks of violence were common and harassment regular, both leading

¹⁶ Scott Zesch, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

¹⁷ John Johnson, Jr., “How Los Angeles Covered Up the Massacre of 17 Chinese,” *LA Weekly*, March 10, 2011, <https://www.laweekly.com/how-los-angeles-covered-up-the-massacre-of-17-chinese/>.

¹⁸ See Zesch, *Chinatown War*, 142–143 and Paul M. De Falla, “Lantern in the Western Sky,” *The Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1960): 57–88 (85). Less than a week before the Massacre of 1871, the *Los Angeles Daily* reported, “The young moon, in setting, has presented a most peculiar appearance for the last few evenings, strongly resembling a semi-circular Chinese lantern of bloodshot hue, suspended in the air over the Western horizon” (October 18, 1871). Quoted in De Falla, 57. The current chapter’s subtitle similarly draws reference to Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Random House, 1985). See also Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 34–35.

¹⁹ Zesch, *Chinatown War*, 94.

up to and following the 1871 incident.²⁰ It is unsurprising then that the massacre went unprosecuted, the torturous legal proceedings resulting in what one sympathetic reporter described as “the most lame and impotent conclusion.” In the months following the incident, some papers even laid blame on the Chinese, accusing them of “butchering one another as well as those who venture to interpose to preserve the peace” and leaving a “stain upon the name of our fair city.”²¹

Amazingly, the Chinese Massacre of 1871 did nothing to quell anti-Chinese sentiment. If anything, the massacre inaugurated its golden age. A significant growth in Chinese numbers—the national population skyrocketing from 2,242 in 1866 to 18,021 in 1875—was matched by increasing efforts to turn back “the yellow peril.”²² The ten years following the 1871 massacre would see passage of a series of legislative actions culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a uniquely targeted system of statutory exclusions that would go on for sixty years until conditions changed under a U.S.-Chinese World War II alliance.²³

The specific time period should not be missed. Just as soon as emancipation, the Civil War, and the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, the nation found itself embroiled in a new fight over the meaning and implementation of that accomplishment. Reconstruction started unraveling before it began. In the face of violent reprisals meant to resurrect the Confederate South, ruling Republicans struggled to come to consequential agreements. Replete with multiple racist rhetorics, the period saw the postbellum reestablishment of white supremacy over against African Americans and nativist cries for home rule over against Chinese and Mexican Americans. Holding the dreaded status of permanent non-white immigrants, Chinese laborers were triply damned to the negative side of three choking distinctions: white versus black, citizen versus foreigner, and American versus Chinese. In the years after the Massacre of 1871 a mob in Rock Springs, Wyoming, attacked a Chinese mining community, leaving twenty-eight dead. Two years later, in 1887, as if the point needed to be made clearer, a similar incident in Hells Canyon, Oregon, resulted in another thirty-four deaths. In fact, of the three hundred lynchings that took place in California during the second half of the

²⁰ See Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 93.

²¹ Zesch, *Chinatown War*, 212. Zesch reports that by 1889 blame had shifted from the Chinese to “the usual scapegoats,” namely lower-class Mexican Americans (*ibid.*, 216).

²² No book did more to stoke anti-Chinese anxieties than P. W. Dooner’s notorious *Last Days of the Republic*, first published in 1880 (New York: Arno Press, 1978).

²³ Zesch, *Chinatown War*, 92.

nineteenth century, approximately two hundred involved Asians.²⁴ While the overwhelming majority of the period's five thousand lynchings involved African Americans, America's lynching tree could be as indiscriminating as American racism. During what came to be known as the "driving out" period, when whites physically forced Chinese out of towns across America, the Chinese Exclusion Act institutionalized anti-Chinese rhetoric which in turn extended the act's exclusionary and expulsionary reach, the mood and the measures seeming to reinforce one another other.²⁵ And to great effect, as the United States would see a significant drop in Chinese immigration. In the decades following Exclusion, the Chinese American population (according to U.S. Census data) declined from its 1880 height of .21 percent of the U.S. population (105,465 of 50,189,209) to .08 percent in 1920 (85,202 of 106,021,537).²⁶ Demonstrating just how successful the mood and measures had become, it was during this period of decline that yellow peril paranoia grew most intense. Exclusion solidified "yellow" as a reference to Asian Americans as perilous, eventuating in entirely new governmental apparatuses set up to control American borders and enforce Exclusion, which in time came to block immigration from all Asian countries. Years later, when the Magnuson Act (1943) ended Exclusion, anti-yellow logic and language predictably surfaced again to rationalize internment of Japanese Americans.²⁷

“The Chinaman in Miniature”

It is in this context that the Chinese would come to settle in the South. In the decades after their arrival, those who stayed would be stranded by the Exclusion Act. The measure served its purpose of blocking others from joining them. As will be described in the next chapter, official governmental policy and a broader cultural resentment combined to determine daily life

²⁴ See Paul R. Spizzetti, "Judge Lynch in Session: Popular Justice in Los Angeles, 1850–1875," *Southern California Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2005): 83–122.

²⁵ See Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War against Chinese Americans* (New York: Random House, 2007).

²⁶ See also Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860–1910* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 344n112.

²⁷ See Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 7–8; Daniel Widener, "Perhaps the Japanese Are to Be Thanked? Asia, Asian America, and the Construction of Black California," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11, no. 1 (2003): 135–181.

for the Delta Chinese.²⁸ Chinese had for many years been coming to the Americas, though circumstances unique to Reconstruction brought them to the South.²⁹ As to the first, Asians—and Chinese specifically—could be found in the Americas as early as the late eighteenth century.³⁰ The Chinese comprised just one of many options Europeans and Americans tried during their experiments with slavery and indenture.³¹ Indeed, the early presence of Asian labor worried proponents of American chattel slavery, likely as it was, slavers believed, to derail the political economy mounting around enslaved African and African American labor. In the years before their arrival in Mississippi, Chinese turned up all across America as migrant workers looking for opportunities unavailable in China. They worked gold mines, railroads, agriculture, laundries, lumber, households, and whatever else they could find. Their influx during the second half of the nineteenth century came at a unique moment for a country they hoped to inhabit only as long as necessary.³² American political economy, described in greater detail in the following chapter, was in the middle of a sea change—the forced manumission of African Americans and the abdication of slave labor. These changes brought their share of problems, and not just for the South, but for the global economy still dependent on King Cotton.³³ The slaves were gone, but the plantations remained, now devoid of laborers to plant and pick all that cotton. Various schemes were attempted (including devising new ways for extracting free labor from African Americans) to varying degrees of success. But nothing could match the productivity that had in the decades prior to the Civil War reset the national and world economy. Everything now depended on recent slavers finding new laborers.

²⁸ De Falla, “Lantern in the Western Sky,” 60. See also Stephanie Hinershitz, *A Different Shade of Justice: Asian American Civil Rights in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

²⁹ See Lisa Yun and Ricardo René Laremont, “Chinese Coolies and African Slaves in Cuba, 1847–74,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001): 19–122.

³⁰ See the collection, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi and Evelyn Hu-DeHart, eds., “Asians in the Americas: Transculturations and Power,” *Amerasia Journal* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 1–105.

³¹ Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Denise Helly, *The Cuba Commission Report: A Hidden History of the Chinese in Cuba, The Original English-Language Text of 1876* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 17.

³² See Kit Mui L. Chan, “The Chinese Americans in the Mississippi Delta,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 35, no. 1 (1973): 29–35 (31).

³³ Sieglinde Lim de Sánchez, “Crafting a Delta Chinese Community: Education and Acculturation in Twentieth-Century Southern Baptist Mission Schools,” *History of Education Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2003): 74–90 (74).

Planters saw an opportunity in the Chinese. The Chinese, as mentioned, had already been making their way in America as contract laborers. Chiefly in the West and sometimes in the South and as far east as Boston, they took work where they could find it. As migrant workers they were accustomed to the reality that as one source of work dried up, they would need to find others. Beyond the standard white supremacist nativism, the increased presence of Chinese workers made them victims of their success. Lower class white workers constantly harassed, harmed, and, as described, sometimes killed Chinese workers whom they saw as threats to their livelihood. They justified their violence with the usual tropes of race, nation, and religion.

Southern planters were especially keen on making the case for Chinese labor. But they would need to convince a region of the country that had long been steeped in racism and apprehensions about outsiders. The question was brought up for public consideration in a Tennessee courtroom in 1869. During a public presentation, Mississippi's General W. R. Miles, representing the Vicksburg Chamber of Commerce, brought back a report of "the Chinaman in miniature" which soon after was published in the *Memphis Daily Appeal*. Miles had just returned from an exploratory trip to San Francisco. His report discussed at length what the newspaper called "the Chinese immigration scheme" as a solution to plantation labor shortages. According to the general's speech, the matter was of critical importance to both the South and the entire nation, both of which were facing extreme production shortages, putting the nation in arrears and threatening America's global position. The scheme promised to return the South to national prominence and America to its rightful place of global leadership.³⁴

General Miles began by telling the audience, "I gave my attention to a close, searching, and critical examination of the capacity of the Chinaman to perform labor." Miles described the Chinese laborer accordingly: "noiselessly, silently, quietly, he performs the duty assigned to him, and with a wonderful degree of adroitness and skill." While Southern planters were particularly interested in field workers, Miles stressed their many abilities: "He distances all competition as a washer and ironer. He is an excellent cook. He is the best diningroom [sic] servant in the world. The most delicate and beautiful fabric I ever saw, he makes in the two woolen factories at San Francisco. . . . He performs with exactness and skill the most delicate duties of the shot tower; and

³⁴ "Chinese Labor," *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 1, 1869, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045160/1869-09-01/ed-1>.

in the rough, heavy work of the rolling mill and smelting furnace he seemed fully equal to any task assigned him.” Regarding their suitability for Southern plantations, Miles informed his audience, “He comes from a country where sugarcane, rice and cotton are largely produced. Neither our climate nor our productions would be new to him.” His combination of background and temperament make him an ideal Southern worker, “his patient, never-tiring industry, fits him eminently for this peculiar species of agricultural labor.” Miles completed his observations by saying, “After watching him closely, I came to the conclusion that whatever a white man or black man can do he can do also.”

Miles then described the particular details of the scheme, his plan for as many as eight thousand to ten thousand Chinese to come to the South, at the cost of \$600 to \$650 per laborer, \$200 upon arrival and “the residue at such intervals through the five years, monthly or otherwise, as may be agreed . . . between ten and eleven dollars per month, the hirer to supply the rations, the laborer to clothe himself and pay his own doctor bills.” Anticipating objections to the labor scheme, Miles pushed back on potential challenges, including those he knew would come from the federal government. He started by characterizing the arrangement as purely economic, one without long-term ramifications. Miles was seeking to alleviate widely held concerns about a permanent Chinese presence that could lead to enfranchisement. He explained to the audience that the Chinaman does not “believe in the right to expatriation, and only consents to hire for a term of years in order to earn in this country of high wages, during that term, a sum of money that will keep him through life in his country of cheap living.” Responding to rumors floating around places like Los Angeles about Chinese immorality displacing America’s Christian way of life, Miles cleverly flipped the script. Instead of dismissing worries about Chinese heathen immorality, he presumed it in order to place a missional banner over the whole scheme: “Have we not at large expense and costly outlay been sending the missionary to heathen lands to win the pagan from his idol worship and convert him to the true faith? May we not then bring the heathen to the missionary, and while the former by his labor shall be redeeming our land from its desolation, may not the latter by his teaching and goodly example of parishioners win him into the narrow path that leads to a happy immortality?”

Perhaps the most remarkable part of Miles’s presentation is how he related the Chinese to ongoing questions about African Americans, particularly whether a Chinese presence, especially a Chinese *labor* presence, would

benefit “the freedmen”—whose welfare he presented himself as especially concerned with. Miles’s appeal became most impassioned when it came to answering these concerns in a setting where, as the *Memphis Daily Appeal* reports, “many of the audience were negroes.” Miles began by acknowledging that Chinese labor represents a concession, saying, “I prefer black labor to any other. I know them to be better educated to our peculiar agriculture, and believe them to be altogether better suited to it than any other race of people.” But given reduced circumstances, lesser options had to be considered. He reminded his audience, “Less than one-half the annual crop made in the South before the war is now produced. Nearly all the black people of the country are tilling the soil. There is no more home labor to be had.” Black labor is preferable to Chinese labor, but black labor is no longer what it once was. “A chance is now offered to get this labor from Asia, and when the effort is made, not with a view of injuring anybody, but of benefiting everybody.” Responding to “the foolish assertion that we are trying to injure the black man,” Miles offered stirring personal testimony: “During the late war they behaved for the most part with great fidelity and affection. During my four years absence from home whether I was front with the colors or in prison they furnished support for and gave protection to those I left behind. And when, during my imprisonment, my children were left motherless in a land of strangers, these black people were as true to them as the needle to the pole. These people are now on my plantations, working industriously, doing well for me, and well for themselves. I would not put them aside for any other laborer on earth.”³⁵ Miles portrayed the scheme as win-win, *especially* for African Americans whom he claimed to speak for. Not only would the Chinese scheme not harm them, but, as he explained, “The black man is quite as much interested in the introduction of Asiatic labor as the white man. The black man is now free. He is a citizen of the country. He is interested in its progress, both as a matter of pride, and as a matter of interest. In proportion as population shall grow dense, and wealth increases, taxes will diminish. As the black man increases in means and gets lands, either for a term of years or

³⁵ Almost as if directly responding to General Miles, though with an opposite position regarding foreigners, Booker T. Washington, in his famous September 18, 1895, “Atlanta Exposition Speech,” proclaimed, “As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one.” Available at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/>.

in fee, he will want to hire labor, and he will want to hire the cheapest labor he can get.”

Part of what is remarkable about Miles’s appeal is that in his address, the recent slave owner, Confederate general, and Civil War prisoner of war shows no animosity toward “the freedmen.” So long as they are labor. Miles, like the planters he appeals to, is concerned with replacing the labor he, the South, and the nation ostensibly depend on. He imagines a scenario where the political economy that enabled the South’s slavery-driven market dominance, despite everything else, remains strong. And that the fate of America hangs, as it had prior to the Civil War, on that again being the case. He would prefer African American laborers, as he would just as well prefer slavery, but circumstances make that impossible. For Miles, the issue confronting the South has now presented itself clearly: Who can do the work? These are not questions about race *per se*—and certainly not about race as a freestanding category separable from the economy. The only disposition Miles reports to caring about is a disposition to the work, which he holds open not only for freed slaves and imported Chinese, but also for Northerners and European immigrants.

In viewing Miles’s appeal, one might be inclined to contrast him with Reconstruction-era Southerners intent on preserving whiteness and anti-blackness irrespective of political and economic considerations. One might even draw on popular images of Southern racists intent not only on continuing the racial arrangement the Civil War spoiled, but establishing it anew, more violently and unambiguously now that political and economic conditions suggested otherwise. Compared with these Southerners, General Miles looks progressive, both passionately concerned with the welfare of the freedmen and surprisingly hospitable to foreign pagans. But such a view, banking as it does on a hyperbolic image of racism, misses what racism *does*. My account does not require, as do those images of the prototypical Southern racist, visible expressions of ill will or the discovery of racist intent (whether in terms of disregard or some other mental state) which are largely beside the point. Miles’s entire appeal comes to the idea that Southern planters should use the Chinese for labor to which they are categorically suited—not as well suited, admittedly, as African Americans, but suited well enough. Miles does not begin with ontological concepts about racial essence but nevertheless ends up with a working ontology of Chinese persons, now imagined as specially prepared for these circumstances. What Miles still needs, if he wants to fill out the ontological picture, is more direct experience with Chinese

laborers. His political economic framing will provide the requisite interpretive lens through which the Chinese *qua* Chinese can become the things the labor scheme needs them to be. Observed under these terms the junk science of the day might even be able to read these determinations onto the Chinese anatomy. Time on the plantation as indentured servants or sharecroppers or coolies will confirm (as it will for mobs in Los Angeles, Wyoming, and Oregon) that the Chinese were made to serve the political economy in order that Southern fields might, as Miles so eloquently says, “again blossom like the rose.”

The Chinese Question

With appeals like Miles’s circulating at the same time that anti-Chinese sentiment was brewing, the federal government was forced to officially take up the question, which largely amounted to, “Are the Chinese worth it?” The Chinese question became a point of contention for a number of legislative tasks regarding enforcement of Reconstruction measures.³⁶ The congressional debates around Chinese inclusion rested on two premises, both of which kept coming up even though neither proved especially dependable once deliberations began in earnest. The first premise was embodied by the 1868 Burlingame Treaty the United States signed with China just a few years into Reconstruction. The treaty represented the government’s internationalist confidence that some measure of open trade served both American and Chinese interests. The second premise was embodied by the Fourteenth (passed 1866, ratified 1868) and Fifteenth (passed 1869, ratified 1870) Amendments and represented, through respective guarantees of citizenship and suffrage, the idea that the country had come to some resolution regarding race, namely that race should not disqualify persons from full participation in American life. For the ruling Republican party this meant that the official repudiation of slavery through the Thirteenth Amendment (passed and ratified 1865) required that African Americans be extended every opportunity to succeed. As points of reference in debates about Chinese inclusion, Burlingame on the one hand and the constitutional guarantees on the other symbolized American favor toward the Chinese and the equal rights, if not quite

³⁶ Wang, *Trial of Democracy*, 57.

equality, of African Americans. Taken together, the two seemed to clear a path for Chinese laborers.

But they did not. And the fact that they did not—things eventually went the other direction—revealed not only significant weaknesses in the debate's many arguments but also core contradictions in America's self-understanding. The debates demonstrated less that America's resolutions on matters of race were difficult to apply to the Chinese insofar as the Chinese were, unlike African Americans, aliens; on the contrary, they demonstrated how far America was from figuring out what race thinking came to if not slavery. The Chinese proved an especially piquant and proximate occasion for finding out how much postbellum America intended a fresh start on matters of race and racism.³⁷ It quickly became clear that no fresh start was to be had. Instead history would witness new iterations of tried-and-true race-ranking processes and commitments instituted at the foundations of American life. The Chinese were not an opportunity to apply freshly developed resolutions about race and racism. They occasioned a moment of reckoning that admitted that the nation was far from anything approaching resolution. The presence of the Chinese in the conversation, like the presence of Mexicans in other conversations, had the benefit of distilling issues and clarifying stakes.³⁸

These deliberations took place through public venues like the aforementioned *Los Angeles News* and the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, as well as on the congressional floor between Republicans divided among themselves on what “the party of Lincoln” meant now that abolition had achieved its objective. The legislative discussions revolved around a basic problematic: while neither Burlingame nor the amendments on their own led to Chinese inclusion, the two premises together seemed to make inclusion a foregone conclusion, and yet inclusion had not followed. For most, it was in no way evident that Burlingame and the amendments should lead to Chinese inclusion. The problematic became the sticking point for much of the congressional conversation. Reasoning against inclusion used a two-step argumentative approach: First, it disaggregated Chinese migrants into two kinds: (a) those who willingly migrated to America for gainful employment and (b) those

³⁷ See Leslie Bow, “Racial Interstitiality and the Anxieties of the ‘Partly Colored’: Representations of Asians under Jim Crow,” in *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*, ed. Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 54–76 (56).

³⁸ See Jinga Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi, “Discrepancies in Dixie: Asian Americans and the South,” in *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*, ed. Jinga Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 11–13.

trafficked in by nationalist Chinese labor companies, the so-called “coolies.” Second, it relegated almost all Chinese migrants to coolie status.³⁹ This took both premises off the table. The whole point of the Burlingame Treaty was to serve the interests of both nations by promoting fair trade, where trade entailed availing the two countries to one another and fairness entailed doing so while respecting the requirements of mutual benefit and national sovereignty.⁴⁰ Coolies now stood in for China’s attempt to manipulate Burlingame in order to advantage Chinese labor over against American homegrown labor, use foreign agents disguised as laborers to infiltrate and influence American democratic processes, and dilute American cultural, religious, moral, and racial traditions. The symbol of the coolie also left the impression that there existed somewhere out there a pure form of Chinese worker which coolie labor threatened. That impression assumed that “coolie” was a natural rather than political category, and that the distinction between (a) and (b) was made in good faith. Neither was the case. The debates around coolie labor exposed the reality of America’s internationalist ambitions. Burlingame was meant to open Chinese borders to American trade while reciprocating only enough to keep up appearances. American imperialism, epitomized so well by Burlingame, not only created “coolies” but made that creation unavoidable.⁴¹

At the same time that Burlingame was being clarified, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were also being used against Chinese inclusion in three ways. First, concerns about China’s infiltration turned the amendments’ respective citizenship and suffrage guarantees into dangerous vulnerabilities. Chinese infiltrators, many worried, could take advantage of the Fourteenth Amendment to become citizens and use the Fifteenth Amendment as a trojan horse in order to invade America from the inside, the two legitimating through naturalization and enfranchisement what many feared could be an imminent yellow invasion. Over the course of their anti-Chinese sentiments, Americans would entertain many theories about how the Chinese would invade America. Worries about Chinese naturalization and suffrage seemed to have detected an especially feasible scenario. Second, insofar as the two amendments sought to lend substance to the Thirteenth Amendment’s prohibition on slavery, endorsing trafficked-in slave labor (as would be the case

³⁹ Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 12.

⁴⁰ See Kevin Scott Wang, “East Asian Immigrants,” in *Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, ed. David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 106–118.

⁴¹ See Desai and Joshi, “Discrepancies in Dixie: Asian Americans and the South,” 1–30 (8–10).

if the nation consented to coolies) would seem to go against the entire spirit of those hard-earned Civil War gains. The notion that all Chinese labor was crooked had no basis in reality, other than the reality that poor whites had (under highly stressed working conditions, which was often the case for lower-class laborers) almost no chance of making sense of those they already viewed as competitors. The impression of corruption grew out of the fraught relationship between poor Chinese and poor whites. Impugning Chinese rivals proved one of the few ways struggling whites thought to highlight the value of their own labor.⁴² The impression also served those protectionist and imperialist schemes, utilizing along the way familiar routes for mobilizing populist sentiments against immigrants.

Third, the problematic was resolved and Chinese inclusion abated by interpreting equal rights as the sole province of African Americans. The three amendments were held up as the great achievement of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and hence were understood as having everything to do with African Americans. The amendments were not, according to many Republicans, *for* anyone else. Some tried in vain to argue that even though the amendments had specific histories and purposes, the principles behind them held broader application. Yet this notion ran into its own set of problems: what if extending the benefits had the effect of undermining the very gains the amendments granted African Americans? Inviting the Chinese to compete with African Americans over already scarce resources would undermine all that the Civil War and Reconstruction had accomplished, and at a time when so much depended on African American success. Added to this was the further sense, held by both whites and blacks, that the Chinese were just a different class of race—irredeemably uncultured or overly cultured; naturally pagan, dangerously immoral, and doggedly so; usurpers and foreigners; rapacious, not only crooked but innately crooked. It was said repeatedly that African Americans were the racial minorities after which the new amendments were modeled. They had behind them not only the sympathies of a nation but the entire momentum of its history.⁴³ The Chinese stood

⁴² As one group of white laborers in Massachusetts complained, efforts to introduce Chinese labor “cheapen, and, if possible, degrade the intelligent, educated loyal labor of Massachusetts.... American labor is to be reduced to the Chinese standard of rice and rats.” *The Boston Investigator*, July 6, 1870, in John R. Commons et al., eds., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society* (New York: Russell & Russell, 2017).

⁴³ “The enfranchisement of the colored man was thus an act of justice, which was part of the national effort at redressing the great wrong perpetrated on native-born Americans of color.” See Naja Arim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States*,

no chance. Neither, it would turn out, and for largely similar reasons, did African Americans.

America's First Model Minorities

With an eye toward the issues that began this chapter, let me turn now to how African Americans were used as wedges against Chinese inclusion. On one occasion the Chinese question took the form of a legislative act proposed by Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. During an 1870 Senate debate on a House bill that sought to strengthen enforcement of the Fourteenth Amendment, Sumner proposed adding to the bill a proviso that would rid naturalization laws of any and all racial requirements: “That all acts of Congress relating to naturalization be, and the same are hereby, amended by striking out the word ‘white’ wherever it occurs, so that in naturalization there shall be no distinction of race and color.”⁴⁴ Sumner wanted to remove “white” as a requirement for citizenship. The Fourteenth Amendment’s allowance for non-white citizenship vis-à-vis African Americans naturally led to the question of whether a broader principle carried.⁴⁵ Sumner’s proviso sought to countermand white supremacy’s gate-keeping powers, its far-reaching ability to determine who could and could not be American. Senator Matthew Carpenter supported the proviso, saying, “a man is a man, no matter where he was born, no matter what may be the color of his skin” and warned that inconsistency on questions as basic as naturalization would embolden those who resisted black citizenship in the first place (5161). Lyman Trumbull, a senator from Illinois, similarly saw consistency requiring support of Sumner’s proviso: “I never abandoned the great principle of equal rights, nor can I consent now to deny a man the rights of citizenship simply because of the color of his skin or the place of his birth” (5165).

But for many others, Sumner’s proviso proved a bridge too far. It survived aggressive filibustering and even won one Senate debate, but ultimately was stricken from the bill. For most, the sticking point came with Chinese

1848–82 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 152. See Aarim-Heriot’s discussion, which proved crucial for my own considerations, of the problematic (*ibid.*, 140–155).

⁴⁴ *Congressional Globe* (CG), 41 Cong. 2 sess., 1870, pt. 6: 5121. Further citations will be noted in the text.

⁴⁵ Wang, *Trial of Democracy*, 62–64.

naturalization and its possibility for enfranchisement, precisely those vulnerabilities that could not be tolerated. The proviso greatly alarmed those who saw the point of House Resolution 2201 as empowering African Americans at a time when resentment toward Reconstruction unleashed a growing tide of unrelenting state-sponsored terrorism.⁴⁶ Not only did Sumner's proviso threaten to overwhelm what was already at best a minimal dispensation for black empowerment, but it proposed to do so by removing a hallmark of American life. It was one thing to empower those who had languished under slavery and quite another to remove race from the grammar of American life.⁴⁷ The fact that it was Lincoln's party that defeated the proviso demonstrates just how unresolved the nation continued to be.

Those worried about the Chinese read their greatest fears into Sumner's proviso. They also realized that the Chinese question could be rhetorically used to defeat it. Debate around the proviso quickly turned into a referendum on the Chinese, in turn thrusting them and African Americans together, the yellow question now suspended to the black question. Nevada Senator William Stewart vehemently opposed the proviso, arguing that citizenship and suffrage belonged as "an act of justice" to African Americans, a rationale which could not and should not be extended to the Chinese: "The negro was among us. This was his native land. He was born here. He had a right to protection here. He had a right to the ballot here. He was an American and a Christian, as much so as any of the rest of the people of the country. He loved the American flag. Although he was ignorant, although he had been a slave, it became important that he should be enfranchised, so that he might protect himself in this great strife that we always have and always must have in a free government, where every man must take care of himself" (5152).⁴⁸ As a senator from the western states, he had witnessed first-hand the advantages of Chinese labor. A self-proclaimed "friend of the Chinaman" he acknowledged that "they have proved their usefulness. They are industrious, patient, ingenious, and possess a capacity for learning all mechanic arts unsurpassed by any other people. They are willing to perform any kind of labor at rates of wages which will insure the development of the mighty resources of the Pacific" (5150). But on the question of citizenship, the Chinese were as undeserving as African Americans were deserving. The freedman was "an

⁴⁶ Ibid., 53–54.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 74.

American and a Christian," precisely those things that the Chinaman categorically could not be: "They are pagans in religion, monarchists in theory and practice, and believe in their form of government, and no other . . . who will commit suicide for their devotion to their Government and to their religion. The edict from China or from these Chinese companies will be as perfect a control of these men as could possibly be had . . . and they will be able to sway, if the American people submit to it, the political destiny of the Pacific Coast" (5150). Like others, Stewart used incidences of anti-Chinese violence as an argument *against* the Chinese, warning that further inclusion would lead to further problems. For him, the Chinese were not worth the trouble.⁴⁹

A number of senators expressed similar concerns. They saw no problem of consistency. They did not believe that empowering African Americans committed the nation to including others "without respect to qualifications or fitness, without respect to whether they are friend or enemies of this country" (5156). Some went so far as to draw an analogy between Asians and the "feeble race" of Native Americans who already demonstrated that some races simply cannot be assimilated (5156). Sumner's fellow Massachusetts senator Henry Wilson argued that the Chinese labor scheme really only served the interests of the landed elite and threatened to widen already problematic class divisions.⁵⁰ Wilson worried that coolie contracts, controlled respectively by powerful Americans and Chinese, would again put African Americans under the thumb of the rich. His ostensibly was an argument for solidarity between poor whites and poor blacks: "the toiling millions of this country, the white men of the North and the colored men of the South, should feel apprehensive, that they should feel deeply on this subject, is only human nature" (5162).⁵¹ Anyone familiar with General Miles's appeal would know that

⁴⁹ Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 139. As Stewart puts it at one point, "if before you stop this importation of Chinese, you say you are going to extend to these coolies naturalization and subject the community there to the danger of having their votes in the market, as their labor is . . . you must rest alone upon the Army and the Navy of the United States to protect them. How many will it take to enforce the civil rights bill?" (CG 5151).

⁵⁰ As one opponent to coolie labor wrote, "We will have again a fat and pampered aristocracy, worse than it ever was, and far more haughty and overbearing. It will then be 'How many Coolies does he work?' instead of 'how many negroes does he own?' so commonly used *ante bellum*. With Coolies . . . a planter can make more than he did when owning negroes, with less risk and perhaps more satisfaction. To replenish our plantations with such labor will undoubtedly restore them to former prosperity, even if not excelling it; but it will be at the sacrifice of the poorer or middle classes, with their bone, muscle and intellect. No man with scanty means can cope with the wealth of the larger property owner." Quoted in Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 169.

⁵¹ Frederick Douglass would later credit Sumner and Wilson among those responsible for emancipation: "Without Adams, Giddings, Hale, Chase, Wade, Seward, Wilson and Sumner to plead our cause in the councils of the nation, the taskmasters would have remained the contented and undisturbed

Wilson's worries were not unfounded. Southern planters openly discussed using the Chinese to put African Americans in their place. In July 1869 the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* advocated utilizing the Chinese to break the "negro monopoly of unskilled labor," ominously forecasting, "the struggle of poor men with each other in the competition for employment."⁵²

The deployment of African Americans as model minorities that could be wedged against Chinese inclusion was prevalent in the wider society. In a broadly circulated piece from *De Bow's Review*, the South's leading commerce journal, William M. Burwell wrote, "The Chinaman and the East Indian stand next to the African in American estimation. In many respects he is far below the African. The African is at least utterly ignorant. He is docile to be taught our own impressions. He now believes in the Christian system of salvation, and copies the ideas and customs taught him. The Asiatic has a superstition which he will die rather than surrender. He believes in nihilism, or in inhabiting some animal after death. He is utterly faithless to any standard of Divine or human obligation which we can set up for him. Physically he is unequal to the African in his ability to labor, while he is equally repugnant to all of our ideas of a common race." To his Southern readers, Burwell boasted that if it were up to him neither Africans nor Asians would be in America, but since he had to choose, he chose the former and for the stated reasons.⁵³ In a tortured bit of logic, the *Daily Picayune* (June 1869) interpreted the Chinese question as the regrettable but entirely predictable result of manumission: "There is nothing in this of malice or resentment . . . but rather compassion for the condition into which they have been forced without fixed desire or intelligible purpose of their own, wherein they are yet unenlightened as to

rulers of the Union, and no condition of things would have been brought about authorizing the Federal Government to abolish slavery in the country's defense." Frederick Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Two: Autobiographical Writings, Volume I: Narrative*, ed. John W. Blassingame, Peter P. Hinks, and John R. McKivigan IV (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 625.

⁵² "The Chinaman and the Negroes," July 13, 1869, and June 6, 1869. Quoted in Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants*, 122–123. Even those who supported the proviso's attempt to repudiate racial qualifiers, like the aforementioned Illinois senator Lyman Trumbull, tended to participate in race-ranking procedures: "Why include even the peoples of Southern Africa, but not the people from the oldest nation in the world, and who are so far advanced in arts and literature? . . . the patient, the laborious, the industrious, the skillful, the intelligent Chinese. . . . Is it proposed to deny the right of naturalization to the Chinaman, who is infinitely above the African in intelligence, in manhood, in every respect? The amendment we have adopted . . . opens the whole continent of Africa, where are to be found the most degraded examples of man that exist on the earth, pagans, cannibals, men who worship beasts, who do not compare in intelligence at all with the Chinese" (CG 5175 and 5177).

⁵³ "The Cooley-ite Controversy," *De Bow's Review: Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources* 6, no. 7 (1869): 557–571 (560).

their own duties and needs.”⁵⁴ Such sentiments were expressed throughout the country, not just in the South. In March 1870, the *New York Times* spoke of “a danger that John Chinaman will be preferred to the freedman, and that he will be overreached and abused.”⁵⁵

Anti-Chinese sentiment reverberated through African American communities which similarly saw their fate threatened by the upstart Chinese. *The Elevator*, in an 1869 piece entitled “Freedman v. Chinaman,” said that “the Negro seeks to be an integral part of the nation, which their political status will soon secure—while the Chinese are making no such pretension.”⁵⁶ The 1869 “Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention” concluded, “While we extend a free and welcome hand to the free immigration of labor of all nationalities, we emphatically deem imported contract Coolie labor to be a positive injury to the working people of the United States; is but the system of slavery in a [new] form.” In 1873, *The Elevator* declared, “We honestly confess we have no sympathy with the Chinese. Their habits, customs, modes of living, manner of worship (faith or religion it cannot be called) are all at variance with our ideas even their pigeon English is an abhorrence to us. We cannot assimilate with them and wish the last one would depart from our shores, never to return. They are here, however, more are coming, daily, and they are likely ever to remain.”⁵⁷ African-American outlets came up with their own analogies, aligning themselves, as opposed to the Chinese, with white “aspirations, habits, living and employment.”⁵⁸

The black question cast in terms of the Chinese question featured African Americans as model minorities:

⁵⁴ “The Chinamen and the Negroes,” *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, July 13, 1869.

⁵⁵ “What Shall Be Done with John Chinaman?,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1870. William Stewart would make similar claims to condemn coolie contracts in the congressional debate around Sumner’s proposal: “I will not sanction any attempt, no matter how it may be glossed over, to introduce a system of slave labor in competition with free labor in this country” (CG 5151).

⁵⁶ “Freedman v. Chinaman,” *The Elevator*, November 19, 1869. In 1873 *The Elevator* used similar kinds of arguments against European immigrants, saying in relation to the Irish, the African American is “more American than the descendants of the Dutch or Irish immigrants of the last half century.”

⁵⁷ “Have Chinese Any Rights Which Americans Are Bound to Respect,” *The Elevator*, May 24, 1873. As a counterpoint, the AME-based *Christian Recorder* condemned this opinion, making the case for legal inclusion and speaking against black participation in anti-Chinese violence, largely under the view that Chinese inclusion and black empowerment, despite competing with one another, were tied to similar fates around racial equality. “California and the Chinese,” *The Christian Recorder*, June 19, 1873.

⁵⁸ “The Chinese Question,” *The Pacific Appeal*, May 31, 1873.

- A. The existence of any successful minority group proves that racism is not so bad that no minorities can succeed.
- B. African Americans are a successful minority group, proving that racism is not so bad that no minorities can succeed.
- C. African Americans serve as a model proving that minorities *can* succeed and a model for *how* minorities can succeed.

In this version of the myth, Chinese laborers occupy the “problem minority” role. African Americans, forced now to assume the role of exemplar, are used to rhetorically discipline Asian Americans, specifically with the goal of problematizing Chinese labor and blocking Chinese inclusion. The myth’s presentation of African American success was meant to ease American concerns that Chinese exclusion revealed a chronic problem with racism. Especially after slavery and the Civil War, Americans needed to think better futures were possible for racial minorities. The myth grants the possibility that the American Dream lives on in spite of American chattel slavery and Chinese exclusion, General Miles’s “true” and “industrious” house slaves precursors to Professor Petersen’s barrier-climbing Japanese Americans.⁵⁹

Remythologizing the Myth

With some familiarity of the early history of the Chinese question, let us now return to the model minority myth to see how the history clarifies the myth. Recall that the myth works like this:

- A. The existence of any successful minority group proves that racism is not so bad that no minorities can succeed.
- B. Asian Americans are a successful minority group, proving that racism is not so bad that no minorities can succeed.
- C. Asian Americans serve as a model proving that minorities *can* succeed and a model for *how* minorities can succeed.

⁵⁹ For an interesting parallel in relationship to medical care access respective to how Japanese Americans and Mexican Americans were contrastively viewed, see Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). See also Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

Its refutation then works like this:

1. The myth too narrowly defines racism and therefore too broadly defines minority success.
2. A wider definition of racism will show that Asian Americans have not succeeded.
3. If the group that was purported to achieve model minority success has in fact not succeeded, then racism is so bad that no minority can succeed.

In their book-length treatment of the myth, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*, sociologists Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin refute the myth along the lines of 1 through 3 above.⁶⁰ Their argument grants that if Asian Americans are assessed according to their educational, professional, and financial success, then indeed they serve as a model minority that casts doubt on antiracist claims. At stake for Chou and Feagin then are both perceptions of Asian Americans and the reach and reality of racism. Their refutation, they believe, serves the interests of Asian Americans specifically and antiracism generally.

Chou and Feagin's argument begins with a circumscribed notion of racism. If by racism one means something as encompassing and debilitating as the racial capitalism I have described, then one will miss how Asian Americans—with their fabulous educational, professional, and financial success—experience racism. Chou and Feagin define racism differently so as to include Asian Americans. In the picture their circumscribed definition offers, Asian Americans have succeeded educationally, professionally, and financially *in spite* of the racism they experience.⁶¹ But how can this be?

⁶⁰ Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2015). Further citations will be noted in the text. See also Nancy Chung Allred, "Asian Americans and Affirmative Action: From Yellow Peril to Model Minority and Back Again," *Asian American Law Journal* 14, no. 3 (2007): 57–84; Karen Kurotsuchi Inkela, *Racial Attitudes and Asian Pacific Americans: Demystifying the Model Minority* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Guofang Li and Lihshing Wang, eds., *Model Minority Myth Revisited: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Demystifying Asian American Educational Experiences* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2008).

⁶¹ Thence does David L. Eng and Shinhee Han's *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) distinguish between the model minority myth's economic versus political and cultural "legitimation" (46). Eng and Han do better than most in keeping the political economic questions in view, but never quite make good on their promise of "consider[ing] at once the psychic and social mechanisms of this interchange between the individual and the collective" which initially references racial capitalism and the like (7). The heavy use of literature and clinical case studies, while moving, does little to clarify

If racism economically exploits, how can Asian Americans both succeed economically and suffer racism? This is where their redefinition comes in. Instead of racial capitalism, Chou and Feagin point to all those personal injuries Asian Americans experience that negatively affect their personal identity, self-worth, social relationships, sense of belonging, and so on. They talk about how “Asian Americans, at least in part because of the constant intrusion of racial hostility and discrimination in their lives, are plagued with relatively high rates of depression and suicide, attention to which has so far been minimal among national public health policymakers” (104). They suffer the injuries, remarkably, in spite of their successes. This kind of racism can certainly hurt their prospects for educational, professional, and financial success, but more likely its effects will show up elsewhere.

Racial capitalism has always exacted profound personal damage as a consequence of burdening individuals with dominative systems of abuse. With the Delta Chinese I will present an intimate portrait of this in the next chapter. Chou and Feagin’s innovation comes in emphasizing the personal damage to the exclusion of the political economy that causes it, separating the two until the former is made to stand on its own. Sifting through qualitative research with their reworked definition, Chou and Feagin found that Asian Americans do after all face racism: “Our interviewees have regularly conformed to white framing and folkways by attempting to change personal and family characteristics in their physical and social worlds—by giving up their Asian names, changing their style of dress, and trying to enter white networks, for example—and in the psychological realm, by adopting white ways of thinking, understanding, and acting” (142). Only with this more carefully delineated picture of racism will one see that racism is so bad that no one can succeed, not even those as educationally, professionally, and financially successful as Asian Americans.⁶² The features that make Chou and Feagin’s redefinition compelling also create a number of problems to which I will return momentarily.

Chou and Feagin’s refutation of the myth interestingly resembles others that Poon et al. dismiss as insufficiently critical. Recall that Poon et al. worry

how repeated mention of “the true self” relates to other concepts (e.g., whiteness, colorblindness, etc.) floating about in their analysis (e.g., 138).

⁶² One might notice that Chou and Feagin’s redefinition of racism indirectly supports Petersen’s version of the model minority myth, which characterizes Japanese American success *in spite of* racism.

that by taking the myth at face value those refutations miss its disciplinary power. Yet, Chou and Feagin deal with the myth on its own terms and still never lose sight of its disciplinary agenda. They too recognize the model minority myth as a ploy of white supremacy. As they say, “The dominant white group and its elite stand in a position of such power that they can rate groups of color socially and assign them ‘grades’ on a type of ‘minority report card.’ Whites thus give Asian American groups a ‘model minority’ rating while other groups of color receive lower marks as ‘problem minorities.’ However, the hierarchical positions that whites are willing to give any group of color are always significantly below them on the racial ladder” (20). The harm for Asian Americans comes in all those microaggressions that highly graded minorities have to endure. Those with lower marks are labeled (as with Petersen’s version of the model minority myth) “problem minorities” and must face life thusly stigmatized. Assigned “model minority” status, Asian Americans curry the privileges of their rank (say, academic, professional, and financial success) but must still carry its social burdens (say, the expectation of academic, professional, and financial success).⁶³ “The dominant white group” conscripts minorities to these roles in order to establish and maintain dominance. Because Chou and Feagin intentionally bracket political economic questions in order to emphasize the specific racism Asian Americans face, they spend little time discussing the material consequences of this “white racial frame.” For whites and those minorities ranked closest to them, the social dominance is intrinsically good, the political economic benefits receding to the background.

Poon et al. take a different route but arrive at the same place. Recall that in critiquing what they referred to as the “counter-model minority myth project” they refused to take the myth at face value. They simply do not believe the myth has anything to do with Asian American success, Asian American failure, or, for that matter, Asian Americans. The model minority myth says more about white supremacy than about Asian Americans. To play the game of circumscribing Asian American success in order to attack the myth is to play into the hands of “a global system of racial hierarchies and White supremacy” (474). This is the problem with the counter-model minority myth project. It adopts a “deficit framing” which puts it in the awkward position of championing Asian American causes by spotlighting Asian American

⁶³ For example, Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou talk about “the double-edged sword” of expecting Asian American academic success. Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015).

failures. And not just Asian Americans. Everyone is made to get in on the act of comparing deficits. All of that, they think, is distraction, allowing white elites to dominate while everyone else fights over scraps.

It is an astute analysis. But it also puts antiracist thinking in a corner. If, as I show in the next chapter, racial capitalism dominates through processes and commitments that exploit, then the effects of what I will call its aftermarket dominance will show up particularly in those deficit situations its victims are forced to navigate. But Poon et al. rule out deficit situations altogether. So, for example, the reality that only 12.3 percent of Cambodian Americans attain college degrees puts the myth in doubt.⁶⁴ Yet this deficit situation—the reality that these record low numbers directly relate to race-based exploitation in Cambodia (where America's racial capitalist war in Vietnam created the conditions for ethnic genocide) and America (where Cambodians arrived as asylum seekers with few resources to help them)—is precisely the kind of thing Poon et al. refuse to consider.⁶⁵ That is because methodologically they decide early that questions about the validity of deficit situations are red herrings meant to distract from “the ways systemic Whiteness is preserved and advanced” (471). By precluding considerations of how deficit situations (and their systemic ties to racism) arise in the first place, Poon et al. leave us with nowhere to go other than a mythic whiteness that determines human history without answering to it. Racism, in my approach, relies on sites of domination, aftermarket installations on which racism depends, and apart from which racism loses power. To remove from consideration these investitures and their effects is to effectively make racism theoretically untouchable.⁶⁶

Chou and Feagin and Poon et al. defeat the myth by evacuating it of political economic content. Chou and Feagin do so by defining racism in terms beyond political economy, committed as they are to preserving an Asian American presence in the conversation about racism. Poon et al. do so by refusing to grant such considerations a place in the argument, convinced as they are that the myth has nothing to do with Asian Americans—deficits

⁶⁴ Rubén G. Rumbaut, “The Coming of the Second Generation: Immigration and Ethnic Mobility in Southern California,” *American Academy of Political and Social Science* 620 (2008): 196–236 (224).

⁶⁵ Eric Yo Ping Lai and Dennis Arguelles, eds., *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity, and Change in the 21st Century* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2003), 93–104.

⁶⁶ Poon et al. draw on Richard R. Valencia, “Conceptualizing the Notion of Deficit Thinking,” in *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*, ed. Richard R. Valencia (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1–12. The point of Valencia's “deficit thinking” concept is precisely to broaden one's analysis in order to avoid gaslighting victims of systemic injustice. Hence, it is odd that in their use of the concept Poon et al. do not find another way into those considerations.

or otherwise. In both cases, political economy drops out. Which is amazing considering that the model minority myth is a story, false as it may be, *about* Asian American political economic success. Chou and Feagin and Poon et al. (advancing two of the myth's sharpest refutations) deflect attention from those issues by redirecting racism to involve other things, interpersonal microaggressions on the one hand and whiteness on the other. They take a story that is, as demonstrated in the history of the Chinese question, economic through and through and replace it with one that has no economic bearing. By recasting the myth in these other terms, they make the story about racial identity without recognizing that racial identities are instruments of political economies.⁶⁷

If the case against racism rides on accusations of microaggressions and abstractions about whiteness, we will lose track of what is most important, and devastating, about it.⁶⁸ The problem with focusing on microaggressions is not that the language claims too much (i.e., making more of microaggressions than they are) but rather that doing so claims too little, like severing the material connections between personal trauma and what Cathy Park Hong calls “the trauma of a racist capitalist system that keeps individuals *in place*.⁶⁹ The antiracist refutations are correct about the model minority myth being a ploy of white supremacy. But identarians think recognizing as much, which is easy enough, excuses them from returning to the economic questions.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ For an analysis of the myth as a story rife with class and other economic questions, see Lee and Zhou, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*.

⁶⁸ For debate on microaggressions, see Derald Wing Sue et al., “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice,” *The American Psychologist* 62, no. 4 (2007): 271–286; Scott O. Lilienfeld, “Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12, no. 1 (2017): 138–169; Derald Wing Sue, “Microaggressions and ‘Evidence’: Empirical or Experiential Reality?,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12, no. 1 (2017): 170–172. For studies seeking to answer Lilienfeld’s call for further research, see Daniel Cruz and Christina Mastropolo, “Perceived Microaggressions in Health Care: A Measurement Study,” *PLoS One* 14, no. 2 (2019): e0211620; Stephanie Aubuchon, “Exploring Microaggressions among Trans Populations: Effects on Feelings of Social Exclusion,” Master’s thesis, Illinois State University, 2019; Lisa Eaton et al., “HIV Microaggressions: A Novel Measure of Stigma-Related Experiences Among People Living with HIV,” *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 43, no. 1 (2020): 34–43; Lauren Freeman and Heather Stewart, “Microaggressions in Clinical Medicine,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 28, no. 4 (2018): 411–449; Sae-Mi Lee et al., “Student-Athletes’ Experiences with Racial Microaggressions in Sport: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis,” *The Qualitative Report* 23, no. 5 (2018): 1016–1042.

⁶⁹ Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 56, emphasis in the original.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, in one of the moments when issues of class seriously come up in their interviews, Chou and Feagin downplay it. Describing an interviewee’s experience in college of being excluded, looked down upon, and mistreated by wealthier, white students, which is clearly joining race and class in her retelling of her experience, Chou and Feagin comment: “The exclusionary discrimination was frequently coded in class terms. Alice reports that she and her Asian friends were not fooled by

The myth is indeed founded on misperceptions about Asian American material success, and the deficit framings can show that to be the case. Yet by refusing the deficit framing (explicitly or implicitly) they block one of the few paths that might otherwise return them to the myth's formal conditions. The omission abstracts racism's interpersonal injuries and overarching white supremacy from the material conditions that give them power.

Now, everything stops at microaggressions and whiteness, though without enough conviction to clarify what is being discussed. This explains why accusations of microaggressions and whiteness are often met with bewilderment, which can be as much about ignorance as evasion. Cases where bewilderment is not a function of gaslighting victims (cases where bewilderment betokens genuine ignorance) result in endless cycles of suspicion and avoidance. Indeed, the lacuna opened up by insisting that the claimed injury or white supremacy stands on its own makes the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate grievance elusive and practically irrelevant. These unfortunate scenarios have grown increasingly common.⁷¹ The lacuna results in three large problems. First, antiracism's shifting definitions and asserted abstractions open the door to doubts about the reach and reality of racism. Second and more importantly, it precludes recognition that Asian Americans have indeed suffered racism defined in terms of racial capitalism—for example, the Chinese question as a deficit situation. Third and following, it removes any question whatsoever about Asian American complicity in racial capitalism and its correlative hospitality to the model minority myth (to which I return in Chapter 6 where I review “opportunity hoarding” as one of the myth's scripts for becoming Asian American). If the racism that counts for Asian Americans is of the circumscribed variety, then Asian Americans will be excused as victims and perpetrators of racial capitalism. While not intended, these deflections are the result of moving the model minority myth away from questions of political economy.

One wonders whether Asian American microaggression talk has to stop short of racial capitalism because going further would expose the advantages that come on the back side of the injuries—one might call this the

this socioeconomic coding and knew that white language and looks were often cover for racial prejudice.” Chou and Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*, 75.

⁷¹ See, for example, Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, “Why Diversity Programs Fail and What Works Better,” *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail>.

double-edged sword of refuting the model minority myth. This book's attempt to illumine how racism both advantages and disadvantages Asian Americans (and the myriad "aftermarket" examples throughout) comes under the conviction that racial capitalism endures because it works, simultaneously countenancing American life while exacting a terrible price. Asian Americans with one hand enjoy the benefits and so accept the costs, wishing for ignorance of what the other hand is doing.

Poon et al.'s and Chou and Feagin's combined way of discussing white supremacy is to isolate race language from the contexts in which invocations of race *do things*, which I have stipulated as justifying exploitation.⁷² Hence, they will have a hard time grasping what General Miles's appeal *does*. They will not readily see the appeal for the exploitative racism it is, just as they will dismiss the racial capitalism suffered by Cambodian Americans, looking only for interpersonal microaggressions and whiteness rather than the aftermarkets of a dominative political economy, having committed early to their mutual exclusion.⁷³ Even if they are able to see the problem, they will be unable to account for its significance. As I understand it, race is created and deployed to justify hierarchical systems of domination. In their combined account, race seems to exist *sui generis* as if conceptually basic. History begins for them with white supremacy. Chou and Feagin believe this state of affairs obtains irrespective of the political economic realities that come with rank-ordering the world as the model minority myth does. In this story, what antiracists like Chou and Feagin and Poon et al. aim to do is rearrange society so that equality—rather than hierarchy—issues across the races. In order to

⁷² One might relate my description to Ann Swidler's "culture in action" in "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 273–286. See also Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Richard L. Wood and Brad R. Fulton, *A Shared Future: Faith-Based Organizing for Racial Equity and Ethical Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁷³ Political philosopher Nancy Fraser draws a distinction between injustices of representation and injustices of distribution, arguing that the former has supplanted the latter. She proposes that a return to political economy will correct the imbalance. Responding to Fraser, Iris Marion Young shows how the distinction is too unruly to manage, even for analytical purposes. For Young, only by realizing that representation injustices cause distribution injustice can one rightly fend off Fraser's distinction. However, in the case of Asian Americans, that causal relationship is not always so clear. I return in Chapter 6 to Fraser's conceptualization. See Nancy Fraser, "Recognition or Redistribution? A Critical Reading of Iris Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference*," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995): 166–180; Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* 212 (1995): 68–93; Iris Marion Young, "Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser's Dual Systems Theory," *New Left Review* 222 (1997): 147–160; Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

do this, they enter their particular refutations in order to demote the presumption and priority of white supremacy. They mean to cut whites down to size and uplift those minoritized by whiteness. They race-rank in order to counteract white supremacist race-ranking. They just switch out the criteria so as to reorder the world. When Poon et al. espouse the kind of analysis their endorsed critical race theory provides, they mean something like this.

Any analysis that broadens racism to include those who have not suffered racial capitalism's exploitations will not only obscure the political economic backdrop that gives racism substance but also inadvertently diminish the damage racial capitalism doles out. By downplaying deficit situations in order to highlight white supremacy (by arguing that attention to deficits detracts from white supremacy), this analysis misses how deficits suffered by racial minorities create the conditions of white supremacy. White supremacy should not be mythologized as a metaphysical claim about the way things are, but as an aspirational description on the part of some of the way things might be. Laid on top of this description is an ontological justification ("the Chinaman in miniature") which antiracists cannot afford to overinterpret. To imagine some group of Asian Americans who have not suffered racial capitalism is to concede too much to the model minority myth. What group could such a concession have in mind? Those *New York Times* and *Look* pieces mentioned the Chinese, but surely the history of the Chinese question recounted in this chapter shows how deeply Chinese Americans figure in racial capitalism's schemes. It cannot be South Asian Americans, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, or Vietnamese Americans, each of whom came to America directly as a result of racial capitalism's imperialist reach. It is almost as if Poon et al. and Chou and Feagin have gotten themselves caught up in the idea of some mythical category of Asian Americans—like a pure form of Chinese worker somewhere out there—who now need to be included within carefully inscribed definitions. The concessions necessary for this conceptual move gain too little and blunt otherwise important insights.

Revolutions of the Myth

Recently, as debates over reparations for American chattel slavery again heated up, ADOS (American Descendants of Slavery) co-founder Antonio Moore came out against U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren's plan for the

government to expend \$640 billion to forgive college debt.⁷⁴ Moore reasoned that “class-based initiatives,” which he interpreted Warren proposing, “largely fall short because they help others at the expense of black people.” Moore argued that Warren’s plan would inadvertently serve those least in need when it should serve those most in need, by which he meant African Americans, whom the plan would discriminate against by proxy. Moore specifically targets those who, unlike African Americans, were not born in America but would nonetheless reap the benefits of initiatives of the kind Warren proposes. Moore reminds us that whereas others, including many whites, came to America much later, African Americans have been here since the beginning. Their long history in America should privilege them above others in determining access to social welfare programs like reparations and debt forgiveness. For Moore it is not enough to know that because racial capitalism has so devastated African Americans the benefits of class-based initiatives would be theirs by default.⁷⁵ What concerns him is that others would benefit too, and in ways that would further disadvantage African Americans. While some African Americans would be served by college debt forgiveness, still non-African Americans would benefit far more because they, unlike systematically oppressed African Americans, are more likely to get to college. If Warren’s plan were to come to fruition, African Americans who have historically been barred from college would find themselves at an even greater disadvantage, competing against privileged college grads now unencumbered, thanks to Warren, by debt. Debt forgiveness would ensure that the wealth gap between African Americans and everyone else would widen even further. While Moore does not mention Asian Americans (mainly because he only talks about white and black people), it is hard to imagine that forgiving the debts of first-generation Asian American college grads is not the kind of thing that worries him.

Moore has a fair point. And an important one. His specific contention that Warren’s plan, implemented without broader reparations, would most benefit those whose accrued wealth will be protected by debt forgiveness seems especially prescient and anticipates my argument about standing inequality and aftermarkets in the next chapter. His arguments are powerful.

⁷⁴ tonetalks, *How Elizabeth Warren’s College Debt Plan Leaves Us Behind*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64p2t0FXgDk>.

⁷⁵ This notion has been contested. See, for example, Ta-Nehisi Coates, “A Rising Tide Lifts All Yachts: Why Class-Based Social Policy Doesn’t Address African American Problems,” *The Atlantic*, June 14, 2003, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/a-rising-tide-lifts-all-yachts/276880/>.

And deeply so on matters of political economy. As powerful as the arguments made by those Republicans who opposed Chinese inclusion for the harms it could bring the freedmen. Moore's commitment to black welfare, like Senator William Stewart's before him, is clear. One hears in Moore's concern for black people the same concerns the "Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention" voiced 150 years ago when it said, "While we extend a free and welcome hand to the free immigration of labor of all nationalities, we emphatically deem imported contract Coolie labor to be a positive injury to the working people of the United States."

My point here is not to make a case for or against debt forgiveness that would cover Asian American immigrants. Nor is it to question the veracity of Moore's claims. I assume that servicing college graduates as a group would indeed disproportionately benefit Asian Americans who disproportionately go to college. Disaggregating Asian Americans as a category would complicate my claim about disproportionate benefits, just like disaggregating African Americans by class would complicate Moore's claims. But his broader point still stands. No more is gained by debating Moore's argument on its terms than was gained by debating Senator Charles Sumner's proviso on its terms. What we might want to do is reconsider the terms. Unless one is satisfied with what those terms get us (i.e., rejecting universal college debt forgiveness on the one hand and dubiously granting African Americans pride of place as antiracism's model minorities on the other) then our terms need rethinking. What I am arguing in this book is that thinking about race and racism within the terms of the extant antiracism will fate us to the race-ranking exhibited by Moore on questions of reparations and Republicans on the Chinese question. And not because they are racists but precisely because they are antiracist. Asian American antiracists like Chou and Feagin and Poon et al. think that they have gotten us somewhere by demythologizing the model minority myth, but they have only deepened our entrenchment within modes of thought that will repeatedly mythologize others. We will give ourselves to mythologizing ever new revolutions of the model minority myth (and its villainous white purveyors) because they grant our antiracist schemes traction. Asian Americans will be encouraged (by a twisted logic that values suffering and one's proximity to it) to circumscribe definitions of racism so that their lives count, and will do so in a way injurious to those crushed by racial capitalism, including Asian Americans. The *racist* mindset variously values and devalues black and yellow bodies. The *antiracist* mindset variously values and devalues black and yellow suffering. These are fates of racial

thinking. The valuations are not accidental to this mode of thought but intrinsic features of it.

As will be seen in the next chapter, there will be consequences for wedging African Americans against Chinese immigrants. The Delta Chinese will find themselves pressed in every direction by the model minority myth's racial logic. It will determine their relationships with "whites" and "blacks," largely to the benefit of whites and to the detriment of blacks; it will drive them into the arms of Southern Baptist religion; and it will set them on their own course to model minority status.

2

A Moving Picture of Racial Capitalism

The Civilization of the Delta is on the surface simple and almost naïve. Actually it is filled with complexities, with clashing contradictions and irreconcilable disharmonies. In its tolerance it shelters without hindrance every sect and creed within its borders. In its fanaticism it has descended to the hatreds and bigotries of the Ku Klux Klan.

—David L. Cohn, *Where I was Born and Raised*¹

The difficulty was that though one could trap them like animals, transport them in pens, work them alongside an ass or a horse and beat both with the same stick, stable them and starve them, they remained, despite their black skins and curly hair, quite invincibly human beings.

—C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*²

What follows is not just a story about how we use people as things, or how things dictate our uses of them, but a drama involving a deeper, stranger, more intricate, and more ineffable fusion between thingness and personhood.

—Anne Anlin Cheng, “Ornamentalism”³

Penney Cheung’s family operated a local grocery for fifteen years before civil rights workers burned it down. Decades later, she recalled the 1969 incident:

¹ David L. Cohn, *Where I Was Born and Raised* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1948), 16.

² C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 11–12.

³ Anne Anlin Cheng, “Ornamentalism,” *Critical Inquiry* 44 (2018): 415–446 (420).

In Clarksdale the neighborhood where my parents still had the store was still a quiet community. My parents had a good relationship with the people they serviced, but during that time they were bringing people in from outside of Mississippi to try and stir up the movement. Since we were living in the black community, or my parents had their store in the black community, they considered us as white. Civil rights workers that came down may have gotten a bit carried away, but they burned my parents' store down thinking that they needed to get us. They thought we were white, and they wanted us out of the community there.⁴

The city of Clarksdale, perhaps more than any place in the Mississippi Delta, embodies racial capitalism. People sometimes refer to its county, Coahoma, as "the Golden Buckle of the Cotton Belt." Antebellum Clarksdale, with five times as many slaves as whites, bestowed the town with more than its share of millionaires, enterprising elites whose virtuosity and force of will helped give rise to modern capitalism. Incidentally, Clarksdale also gave us the Blues, America's other great cultural contribution, the first born of white ingenuity and cruelty, the second, of black genius and suffering. A true emblem of racial capitalism, the county at one time sat among America's top ten in cotton production, and bottom ten in literacy.⁵

After the fire destroyed the Cheung's store, the local black community pleaded with them to rebuild. For most of its existence the store had doubled as the family's home, making its customers also neighbors to Penney and her family. Perhaps it was a sense of betrayal more than anything that made the thought of starting all over too much to consider. Things had been very different when the family started in San Francisco, a much bigger city where one was not so surprised by the mere sight of Asian Americans. Here in the segregated South, the color line dominated everything, giving the Asian American family literally nowhere to call home. So the Cheungs lived in their store. Financially, the arrangement suited them. Like their Delta Chinese predecessors, they came to the Mississippi Delta to make money.⁶

⁴ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Penney Gong interview, October 7, 1999. Because part of my goal in this chapter is to challenge what many consider the landmark treatment of the Delta Chinese (discussed in the next chapter), I rely here almost exclusively on oral histories rather than those secondary treatments, even as I sometimes draw oral histories from those treatments.

⁵ Françoise N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 214.

⁶ See also oral history in Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1982), 124–125.

For nearly a hundred years after Reconstruction, Delta Chinese grocery stores were the best, and often only, option for African Americans living in food deserts created by white business owners who refused to invest in the very people whose labor made them rich. To meet demand, the Cheungs kept their doors open fifteen hours a day, 365 days a year.⁷ They sold anything they could get their hands on—produce, corn meal, tobacco, canned goods, molasses, and so forth. One Chinese grocer even managed to rig together leather-strapped knee pads for laborers who spent their days harvesting cotton.⁸ In the absence of other commercial businesses, the stores became social hubs for black communities. On Saturdays the groceries stayed open late into the night as friends and family gathered around store benches.⁹ Penney described what it looked like for the store to double as a home:

My mom and dad had one bedroom, and my brother, sister, and I had the other. Our bedroom was essentially the bedroom, the dining room, and the living room. I remember lying in bed and watching Friday night wrestling, and I can remember eating on the Wonder Bread trays. That was our dining room table for I don't remember how many years, and we children would sit on either crates or boxes around our bedroom to eat. It probably wasn't very sanitary because we lived with a lot of roaches and a lot of mice, but it was an inevitable thing because we were living in a grocery store and roaches just grow naturally in a hot and damp climate. In fact, it was worse than living in San Francisco, where we at least had a nice apartment. But my parents were being frugal and trying to scrimp and save every penny to pay back the relatives and friends who had subsidized them, so we had to live meagerly the first few years.¹⁰

⁷ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Bobby Jue interview, February 4, 2000. John Quon describes starting at 5:00 am, Delta State Oral Histories Archives, John Quon interview, December 2, 1999. See also Kit Gong, Bobbie Gore, Joy Gore, Amy Gore, and Billie Gore, Delta State Oral Histories Archives, May 24, 2000.

⁸ Sam Sue, "Growing Up in Mississippi," in *Asian American Experience in the United States: Oral Histories of First to Fourth Generation Americans from China, the Philippines*, ed. Joann Faung Jean Lee (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1991), 3–9 (8).

⁹ John Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton: Lives of Mississippi Delta Chinese Grocers* (Yin & Yang Press, 2008), 83. See Annette Joe interview, Delta State Oral Histories Archives, May 1, 2000.

¹⁰ Bonnie C. Lew, "'I Always Felt Out of Place There': Growing Up Chinese in Mississippi (1982)," in *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present*, ed. Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 281–291 (283 and 286). Bobby Joe Moon recounts how even though his family owned a house three miles from their grocery, they stayed in their store except on weekends, so committed to the grocery were they. Houston Asian American Archive, June 11, 2013.

The family's already strange presence in the deep South was further complicated by an arrangement that amounted to neighbors profiting off of one another's desperation.¹¹ Figuring out how to share life in such circumstances could be quite challenging. On the one hand, the family was enmeshed in the daily routines of the community, and Penney remembers playing with the other kids around the store. On the other hand, being yellow in "the most Southern place on earth" could be rough. Penney recalls, "In the afternoon it got real bad. When [Penney's sister and she] got out at the same time, both schools. So we would be walking home. The colored kids would be walking home. Sometimes they would push you off the sidewalk. My sister got pushed off the sidewalk a lot of times, my younger sister. You had colored kids call you different kinds of names. It was stuff like that."¹²

The kids picking on Penney and her sister had their own troubles—some significantly greater than sharing a room with supplies and roaches. At least the Cheungs owned their shack. And everything in it. Compared to the poverty suffered by the Delta's African Americans (whose tenant farming kept white elites in their mansions long after Emancipation), a living room crowded with signs of a profitable business seemed like a good problem to have. Black living conditions were notably worse, if also sadly familiar. In her classic 1939 ethnography of Mississippi African American life, *After Freedom*, Hortense Powdermaker described the spaces planters "furnished" tenants with: "The house goes with the furnishings. This too harks back to the plantation of slavery days, especially since the majority of the tenants live in cabins no different from those of their slave grandfathers. By any modern standards of hygiene the living quarters on most of the plantations would be considered uninhabitable. Yet the tenants and their large families do live in them, crowding into two-room frame shacks with no sanitary conveniences of any kind."¹³ After the Civil War, African Americans were given many promises, from constitutional and legislative guarantees of equal protection under the laws to dispensations for land and resources. Very little of that panned out. Instead, Southern elites devised intricate schemes for

¹¹ See the Raymond Wong interview in *The Mississippi Delta Chinese: An Audiovisual Narrative*, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.thedeltachinese.com>; Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Bobby Jue interview, February 4, 2000; Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 93.

¹² Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Penney Gong interview, February 4, 2000. Audrey Sidney talks about being called "chink" and other forms of childhood racism; Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Audrey Sidney interview, February 2, 2000.

¹³ Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (New York: Penguin, 1939), 83.

ensuring black dependence. African Americans found themselves hemmed in on the one side by Jim Crow's dehumanizing regime and on the other by relentless voter suppression meant to lock Jim Crow in place. The combination of an opportunistic peonage sharecropping system, a political machine hell-bent on commodifying black life, an utter lack of institutional support (educational, financial, health care, etc.), and white supremacy's brazen lawlessness guaranteed that generations of African Americans would remain in squalor. Long after Reconstruction the South retained its Confederate heritage, and a nation that had grown dependent on its economy would continue with business as usual. At least during slavery, the destitution could be understood for what it was. Now "emancipated," how were people to make sense of their bondage? The South had lost the war but had somehow retained a society built entirely on predatory labor practices—once enslaved, now ostensibly waged.

The Delta Mississippi, an alluvial area which extends 180 miles along the Mississippi, is one of the most fertile places on Earth. Before the Civil War, its perfect growing conditions helped elevate King Cotton to the most valuable commodity on Earth. White elites were hardly going to let Emancipation, the Civil War, and Reconstruction take that away. Exploitable labor was the key, again, and elites figured out how to enslave freed people.¹⁴ By ensuring that land stayed in the hands of white planters, racial capitalism's property regime facilitated the transition by funneling African Americans into the only jobs and homes they could get. Historian James C. Cobb describes the basic idea behind the era's labor schemes: "From the standpoint of the planter, the optimum strategy in dealing with tenants was to keep them economically dependent enough to ensure that they would be ready to work whenever labor was needed without creating a sense of hopelessness and frustration great enough to cause them to seek employment elsewhere. Individual acts of paternalism masked fundamentally cold and impersonal calculations that lay behind the planter's every management decision."¹⁵

Planters had experimented with imported labor, looking both to Northern and European whites and then to the Chinese with labor and property schemes like those described in the previous chapter.¹⁶ The slave-like

¹⁴ For one such scheme, see Calvin Cheung-Miaw and Roland Hsu, "Before the 'Truckee Method': Race, Space, and Capital in Truckee's Chinese Community, 1870–1880," *Amerasia Journal* 45, no. 1, 2019, 68–85.

¹⁵ Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 103.

¹⁶ In particular, Italians, Syrians, and Mexicans figured prominently in these plans. See Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Edward Joe interview, May 1, 2000.

working conditions exposed planters' true intentions, and newly arrived Chinese departed the plantations soon after arriving. The *Bolivar County Times* reported on August 12, 1870, the importation of sixteen Chinese laborers from Hong Kong. Three years later, on November 20, it stated that "there are none left on the plantations at this present time." The Chinese scheme had failed. Fortunately, the Chinese had other options. African Americans did not. They could go on resisting white planters and their expropriative labor practices, but at the end of the day they needed food and homes. Unless they were willing to migrate to Northern cities, where they were likely to fare no better, they had to acquiesce to planters' demands. The few African Americans who did manage to own property had to constantly fend off whites lurking about for ways to reclaim lands they had just a century ago stolen from Choctaw and Chickasaw natives.¹⁷ African Americans lived in a world where the nation had, ostensibly at least, successfully prosecuted a war to emancipate them, and yet still could not get free of white dominance. And if doubt should arise as to whether or not white supremacy was in fact the law of the land, elites could quickly clarify things by utilizing other forms of persuasion. In most cases, the daily forms of domination were enough, but when necessary whites were more than willing to bring the point home—between 1900 and 1930, the Delta saw a lynching every five and a half months.¹⁸

The Political Economy of Racial Capitalism

The Delta Chinese and the political economy of racial capitalism mutually illuminate one another, the former offering a keyhole into the operations of racial capitalism and racial capitalism contextualizing Delta Chinese existence. Cedric J. Robinson initially used "racial capitalism" to describe a "development" and "structure of historical agency" whereby the "material force" and "social ideology" of capitalism "pursued essentially racial directions": "The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones. As the Slavs became the natural slaves, the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the early Middle Ages, as the Tartars came to occupy a similar position in the

¹⁷ "The Great Land Robbery: How the U.S. Discriminated against Black Farmers," *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/597559/land-theft/>.

¹⁸ Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 114.

Italian cities of the late Middle Ages, so at the systemic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the peoples of the Third World began to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism.”¹⁹ By the term, Robinson was not distinguishing racial capitalism (with the qualifier “racial”) from some generic non-racial variety of capitalism. He was saying, along with fellow black Marxist Eric Williams, that there has been no capitalism except racialized capitalism.²⁰ Just as capitalism has not issued without dominative exploitation, neither has it issued without racism. Racism helps set the conditions of domination necessary for capitalist exploitation, just as exploitation in turn elicits the justification that, under conditions of domination, racism provides. “Capitalism and racism were historical concomitants. As the executors of an expansionist world system, capitalists required racism in order to police and rationalize the exploitation of workers.”²¹ Capitalist exploitation does not start with ready-made abstractions that first divide the world neatly—by whatever philosophical or theological schematization—between humans and nonhumans. Rather, the process of exploitation produces those distinctions. The observation that *Europeans* were stratified into “racial ones” for the sake of exploitation of migrant labor helped Robinson get behind the curtain of racial politics, that race was before anything else a labor distinction, so much political economic theater and its real-world consequences.²²

The ideological function of racism, which Robinson’s initial observation lays bare, finds bold relief when mapped onto material histories from American chattel slavery to what I later describe as racial capitalism’s

¹⁹ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2 and 25. See also Robin D. G. Kelley’s history of racial capitalism prior to Robinson’s periodization in the third (2021) edition, xi–xxxii.

²⁰ See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1944). For more recent treatments of racial capitalism, see Nathan McClintock, “Urban Agriculture, Racial Capitalism, and Resistance in the Settler-Colonial City,” *Geography Compass* 12, no. 6 (2018); Heather Dorries, David Hugill, and Julie Tomiak, “Racial Capitalism and the Production of Settler Colonial Cities,” *Geoforum*, 2019.

²¹ Cedric J. Robinson, “Oliver Cromwell Cox and the Historiography of the West,” *Cultural Critique* 17 (1991–1990): 5–19 (12).

²² Confirming Robinson’s insight Geraldine Heng traces race concepts to their medieval European origins in property and labor relations among Jews and Christians. She writes, “Race-making thus operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment. My understanding, thus, is that race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content.” “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass* 8, no. 5 (2011): 258–274 (267–268). Also see her “England’s Dead Boys: Telling Tales of Christian–Jewish Relations before and after the First European Expulsion of the Jews,” *MLN* 127, no. 5 (2012): 54–85.

“aftermarkets.” Race ideology cycles through a moral psychology that puts in dynamic relation use, identity, and justification that enliven the interplay between domination and exploitation. One can think about racism as part of the instrumentation that made possible otherwise morally objectionable behavior, racism among those “technologies of capitalism”—using historians Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman’s terms—“indispensable to transforming human beings into commodities.”²³ Examining racism and its regimes in these terms helps capture its brutality as it shows how, in the case of slavery as a property regime, human beings were run through a political economic machine—refined over decades of trial and error—hellbent on efficiently extracting from bodies usable capital, or, according to Walter Johnson, transforming bodies into *both* labor and capital, the constitution of human *property*.²⁴ Slavery—especially as it matured into that nineteenth-century institution referred to as “second slavery”—emanated less as a normatively staged war against a purportedly immoral other and more as a coldly amoral enterprise that was monstrous for its utter lack of human regard.²⁵ These are failures of empathy, not ontology, matters of convenience not metaphysics.²⁶ Hence Beckert and Rockman’s harrowing observation that among capitalism’s many innovations, “no technology was more important than the whip.”²⁷ Technologies innovated—through language games revolving around tools like the whip—a conceptual apparatus that hardened around an army of metaphors mobile enough to be projected into ever new contexts, endlessly able to justify anything and everything.²⁸ One can almost imagine

²³ Beckert and Rockman, *Slavery’s Capitalism*, 11.

²⁴ “Rather than asking over and over what Marx said about slavery, we should follow Robinson in asking what slavery says about Marx. We should use the history of slavery as the source rather than the subject of knowledge. Let us begin with the most basic distinction in political economy: the distinction between capital and labor. Enslaved people were both. Their double economic aspect could not be separated and graphed on the axes of a Cartesian grid; their interests could not be balanced against one another or subordinated to one another in an effort to secure social order. They were both.” Walter Johnson, “Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice,” *Boston Review*, February 20, 2018, <http://bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world>.

²⁵ On “second slavery,” see Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 56–71; Dale Tomich and Michael Zeuske, “Introduction, The Second Slavery: Mass Slavery, World-Economy, and Comparative Microhistories,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 31, no. 2 (2008): 91–100; Dale Tomich and Michael Zeuske, “The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (2009): 627–650.

²⁶ “The capitalist exploiter, being opportunistic and practical, will utilize any convenience to keep his labor and other resources freely exploitable. He will devise and employ race prejudice when that becomes convenient.” Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1948), 333.

²⁷ Beckert and Rockman, *Slavery’s Capitalism*, 15.

²⁸ Owing to similar labor-based innovations devised from 1790–1860—“A system of measurement, accounting, and torture was used to coerce enslaved people to pick large amounts of cotton”—cotton

the cathartic pleasures churned out through ritualized cycles whereby the morally impossible was made possible, the human soul bent to find sadistic pleasure in coming to terms with what it is doing. The “business” of racist regimes requires for its deeply personal operations formations in human cruelty. Capitalist technologies supplied them.

For critical historians of capitalism, factory exploitation (in the case of wage labor) and plantation expropriation (in the case of slave labor) identify the central extractive mechanisms of modern political economies from Mississippi to Manhattan to Manchester, habits naturalized through categorical distinctions justified not by material realities but ideological ones.²⁹ Historian Edward E. Baptist more straightforwardly refers to these instruments as “calibrated torture” and relates them to Heidegger’s “challenging-forth of nature” which Baptist characterizes in relationship to slave economies as “putting nature (the nature of human beings and the second nature they have developed in their embodied culture) to the test and making it yield all that it can.”³⁰ Baptist details a relentless political economy that *pushed* enslaved persons, through calculated torture, toward ever-greater heights of productivity and efficiency: “The amount of cotton the South grew increased almost every single year from 1800, when enslaved African Americans made 1.4 million pounds of cotton, to 1860, when they harvested almost 2 billion pounds. . . . They got more efficient every year, which is why the real price of the most important raw material of the industrial revolution declined by 1860 to 15 percent of its 1790 cost, even as demand for it increased by 500 percent.”³¹ The rate of growth shifts chattel slavery’s terms of analysis from dehumanization to mechanization—America’s synchronicity of human and machine, the perfect “zombi” counterpart to that other technological innovation of the day, the cotton gin.³² Baptist concludes this line of thought by locating these processes at the dead center of the new

production grew 10,000 percent, according to Edward E. Baptist, cotton pickers averaging 28 pounds per day in 1801 and as much as 341 pounds per day by 1846. Edward E. Baptist, “Toward a Political Economy of Slave Labor,” in *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 40, 41, and 48.

²⁹ For the origins of this critical mode of analysis, and capitalism’s early internationalism, see the opening chapter, “The Black Worker,” from 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: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 3–17.

³⁰ Baptist, “Toward a Political Economy of Slave Labor,” 56.

³¹ Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 113.

³² Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 146.

world: “this helps incorporate the astonishing increases in productivity in both field and factory into the story of the rise of the modern world.”³³ Rather than take comfort in easy distinctions between precapitalist slave labor and capitalist wage labor, Baptist makes the case for continuity, a spectrum that locates our present world within the exploitative political economy he chronicles.³⁴ Historical sociologist John J. Clegg presses the point further. Rather than differentiating slave labor and wage labor, a shared logic draws them together: “In a capitalist order of fully specified property rights, it is wage labor rather than slave labor that is the anomaly. Far from being a precapitalist holdover, enforceable labor contracts would be the dream of many an employer. Today, indenture and debt peonage are legally restricted in most countries, not because employers found free labor to be in their enlightened self-interest but because workers refused to accept a condition approximating slavery.”³⁵

³³ Baptist, “Toward a Political Economy of Slave Labor,” 57.

³⁴ Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told* has not come without controversy, some of which challenges aspects of the histories of capitalism literature from which I draw. See John E. Murray et al., “Roundtable of Reviews for *The Half Has Never Been Told*,” *Journal of Economic History* 75, no. 3 (2015): 919–931; John J. Clegg, “Capitalism and Slavery,” *Critical History Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 281–304; Phillip W. Magness, “How the 1619 Project Rehabilitates the ‘King Cotton’ Thesis,” *National Review*, August 26, 2019; Luis Pablo de la Horra, “The Southern Slave Economy Was Anti-Capitalistic,” *Foundation for Economic Education*, July 15, 2017; Marc Parry, “Shackles and Dollars: Historians and Economists Clash over Slavery,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 8, 2016. Much, but not all, of the controversy can be attributed to disciplinary lines between economists and historians, and about what are taken to be the ideological commitments and constraints of each. Since my argument stems from the qualitative relationship between capitalist technologies and their emergence from slavery, and not certain quantitative claims about that relationship, the substance of those particular controversies has less relevance.

³⁵ John J. Clegg, “Capitalism and Slavery,” *Critical History Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 281–304 (303). As mentioned in the previous note, Clegg critiques history-of-capitalism scholars (the aforementioned Walter Johnson, Edward E. Baptist, Sven Beckert, and Seth Rockman among its progenitors) whom my own framing relies on, for failing to specify what is, or should be, within this paradigm, meant by capitalism, a specification he thinks necessary to the historians’ larger approach which Clegg also takes: “Antebellum plantations were capitalist not because slave owners had a ‘capitalist mentality’ nor because slavery was part of some ineffable ‘capitalist world system’: they were capitalist for the simple reason that land and slaves could only be acquired through markets, typically on credit. Only a profitable plantation could afford these inputs, and if a planter failed to produce cotton at a competitive cost he would be threatened with foreclosure. These constraints no doubt shaped the mentality of slave owners, but they operated independently of it, for a planter who lacked the right mentality risked losing his land and slaves to one who didn’t” (*ibid.*, 229). On the “history of capitalism,” see Seth Rockman, “Review Essay: What Makes the History of Capitalism Newsworthy,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 3 (2014): 439–466; Sven Beckert, “History of American Capitalism,” in *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirred (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); “Interchange: The History of Capitalism,” *Journal of American History* 101, no. 2 (2014): 503–536. In the last, Julia Ott gets to the heart of the methodological approach: “The ‘history of capitalism’ identifies capitalism as ‘the thing,’ whose existence needs to be explained. As historians, we embrace agency and contingency. Capitalism cannot be taken for granted as an organic expression of human nature. But we are also attuned to the significance of power relations for structuring economic life, for privileging certain forms of economic knowledge, and for shaping economic outcomes” (506).

In “Toxic Debt and the Panic of 1837” Baptist, providing another instance, describes the nineteenth century’s financial innovations that pushed enslaved humans toward the maturation of the modern political economy.³⁶ He writes, “On one level, if the abstractions and thefts of human value that allowed the financialization of human beings are not fiction, then nothing is. And yet, these things were done, and the chopping and the moving and the commodifying of people became social reality—reality with significant consequences” (91). In the hands of financialization and securitization, the enslaved human was “not a particular individual, but a tiny percentage of the income flows derived from each one of thousands of slaves. The investor, of course, escaped the risk inherent in owing an individual slave, who might die, run away, or become rebellious” (83). Baptist continues, “there is something magical, fictitious, and strange about commodifying houses, land, and, most of all, human beings. Each of those things has its own claim to being treated as something unique, with moral rights” and yet still this strange, fictitious magic transformed “people into numbers, the values of their bodies and labor into paper, chopped them, recombined them by legislative fiat, carried them in suitcases across the ocean, and sold them to people on other continents—some of whom undoubtedly believed they believed in emancipation” (90–91). The imbricated relationship between capitalism and chattel slavery comes in the reality that (as black Marxists more readily recognized than traditional Marxists) enslavement transformed people not only into labor and property but most basically capital and that political and pecuniary motivations like structured debt drove these transformations. The force of Baptist’s historical account comes in its ability to connect nineteenth-century processes and commitments to today’s financial capitalism and reveals how those interconnections continue to be missed. When one fails to make these connections, one misses how much the exploitative culture that drove chattel slavery—carried forward by a remarkably similar practical and conceptual framework—today drives “a world distantly shaped by the financial decisions of cotton entrepreneurs on both sides of the Atlantic—as well as by the forgetfulness of those who have not learned from their lessons” (75). Baptist outlines the structural parallels tying the speculation that created the 1837 economic panic, the consequences of which would lead directly to the Civil

³⁶ Edward E. Baptist, “Toxic Debt, Liar Loans, Collateralized and Securitized Human Beings, and the Panic of 1873,” in *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 69–72. Further citations will be noted in the text.

War, and the speculation that created the 2008 financial crisis, with its own broad set of consequences. “Certainly, we can’t leave the mechanics of financial crisis to the court historians of the great banking dynasties, or to economists. In fact, when we look closely at the transformations and innovations that led to the panic of 1837, we find new evidence about the role of slavery and slave labor in the creation of our modern, industrialized—and post-modernly financialized—world. Neither economists nor even historians of slavery have given this evidence its due” (72).

That evidence tells us that within the political economy within which it occurs, racism ensues as a process by which bodies are racially indexed for use. This political economy identifies a body’s meaning by the commodity that it is (recall Robinson’s observation: “The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was to differentiate”), a commodity’s value being the value ascribed to its role as property, its treatment the treatment accorded something of its determined worth.³⁷ The economy’s efforts are aimed at extracting maximum value from the asset, in accordance with the kind of thing commodification deems it to be, assigning things to operations most appropriate for efficient extraction.³⁸ Notice how indexing, by reducing bodily meaning to use, justifies use in terms of indexed meaning. Use, identification, and justification are put in dynamic relationship, mutually informing and mutually reinforcing: how I use a thing tells me what kind of thing it is and the kind of thing it is justifies my use of it. And on it goes in a continuous feedback loop (see Figure 2.1).³⁹ In commodifying processes, identity is indexically determined in this way.⁴⁰ Notice also how

³⁷ Geraldine Heng suggests we “think about the political economy of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic as a single space, its dimensions defined by flows of people, money, and goods, its nested temporalities set by interlocking (though clearly distinct) labor regimes, cyclical rhythms of cultivation and foreign exchange, and shared standards of calculability and measurement.” “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages: I. Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass* 8, no. 5 (2011): 315–331. See also Heng’s wider study, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³⁸ Consider, also, the following from Baptist’s “Toward a Political Economy of Slave Labor”: “Here’s an illuminating metaphor for the process, one offered by a man named Henry Clay. Born into slavery in the Carolinas, he was moved west as a boy, and seventy years after slavery ended he recalled that his Louisiana owner had once possessed a machine that by his account made cotton cultivation and harvesting mechanical, rapid, and efficient. This contraption was ‘a big wooden wheel with a treadle to it, and when you tramp the treadle the big wheel go round. On that wheel was four or five leather straps with holes cut in them to make blisters, and you lay the negro down on his face on a bench and tie him to it’” (57).

³⁹ See Anne Anlin Cheng, “Ornamentalism,” *Critical Inquiry* 44 (2018): 415–446; Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴⁰ For a recent example, see Khushbu Shah, “They Look White but Say They’re Black: A Tiny Town in Ohio Wrestles with Race,” *The Guardian*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jul/25/race-east-jackson-ohio-appalachia-white-black>.

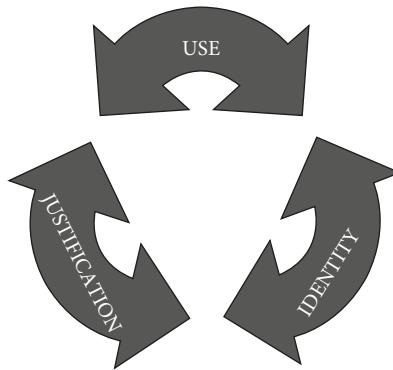


Figure 2.1 Racial capitalism's feedback loop.

bodies will need to be formed into these identities and how these identities will need to be consistently reinforced. In order to transform bodies, one will need to apply force sufficient for that transformation.⁴¹ Notice both the violence fundamental to the process and the commitment necessary for its proper application, intensifying the dynamic interplay between use, identity, and justification.⁴² No one person is capable of the commitment, just like no one person can manage and execute its processes. The commitment will be spread out and subsist at the level of culture, just like the processes will be run through a whole network of institutions. Finally, notice how these processes and commitments form a society—conforming in some cases, transforming in other cases, and deforming in yet others. Up and running, the culture can go on and on, constantly evolving processes to serve matured commitments and vice versa.⁴³ Powered by the dynamic interplay of use, identity, and justification (which runs parallel to the aforementioned dynamic of domination, exploitation, and justification), the processes and commitments show themselves to be powerfully inveterate. To claim a racial identity or to have one claimed of you is to be submitted to seasoned processes of racial commodification, indexed racially for use and used with racist justification. This process does not begin with ontological distinctions; it produces them along a path made by innumerable

⁴¹ See, for example, Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁴² For a theological description of the dynamic, see Jonathan R. Wilson, *God's Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 31–47.

⁴³ See Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 112–121.

prudential judgments as bodies are passed down the line of cultural signification.⁴⁴ More than anything race is about convenience.

Racial capitalism's processes are all those technological advances that build out and link into a global political economic complex geared toward extracting consumable and tradable value—critically, in order to serve the ends of profit—in excess to the processes themselves, from accountancy to investment banking to real estate to labor management to international trade.⁴⁵ Its commitments are those social, affective, psychological, cultural, aesthetic, moral, and religious discourses, and their attending forms of life—notions and epistemes not only circulating through the economy's body politic but largely comprising it. The commitments rationalize the processes and the processes engender the commitments.⁴⁶ As with any instance of practical reasoning, the justifications are built into the behaviors, located in the ends to which the behaviors are directed. We are talking about an ethical system through and through, one which takes as its moral duty properly relating to a thing according to the kind of thing it is, where the kind of thing it is can only be determined by how it is related to. These processes and commitments resist moral condemnation not because they reject morality *per se*, but because they have internal to them evolved judgments based on intrinsic conceptions of goodness, truth, and beauty.

What begins in Robinson as a social analysis of capital's ideological formations (brought home by the material historians just discussed) bears in my rendition on matters of moral psychology. Racial capitalism as this book puts forth involves the combination of the two, structural and systemic formations and how they operate on individuals—say, the relationship between systemic and internalized racism. The need to justify dominative exploitation with racial categorization (the reason enslavers played the race card)

⁴⁴ Historian Julia Ott describes how “planter elites thwarted class conflict by writing laws and by modeling and encouraging social practices that persuaded those with white skin to imagine that tremendous social significance—*inherent difference and inferiority*—lay underneath black skin. New laws regulated social relations—sex, marriage, sociability, trade, assembly, religion—between the ‘races’ that those very laws, in fact, helped to create.” “Slaves,” Public Seminar, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://publicseminar.org/essays/slavery-the-capital-that-made-capitalism/>. Oliver Cromwell Cox puts it this way: “The pith of this ideology is not so much that the colored people are inferior as that they must remain inferior.” *Caste, Class, and Race*, 357.

⁴⁵ See the essays in Beckert and Rockman, *Slavery's Capitalism*.

⁴⁶ Tonya Golash-Boza offers an account of race on similar grounds. She talks about race as a creation of white supremacist ideology and talks about racism as the structural investitures of that ideology; see Tonya Golash-Boza, “A Critical and Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2, no. 2 (2016): 129–141. Golash-Boza considers the connection between ideology and structural racism as sufficient for establishing a general theory about the relationship between race and racism.

arises from the manner in which humans, given to understanding things (including themselves) through language, peculiarly require their exploitations explained. Language grants self-reflexivity and reflexivity demands self-understanding. The story I have about myself, like the story a community tells about itself, makes sense of my life in the world. If that life happens to involve outrageous behavior, like exploitation, then my self-narration will reconcile, one way or other, those outrages. One can attribute this peculiarity to, variously, historical eventualities such as Enlightenment moral pretense, language's inclination toward narrative coherence, or simply the need to preserve one's way of life. In the case of American slavery, the justificatory schemes ranged from the highfalutin (including theology and junk science) to the mundane (e.g., defense of proprietarian arrangements).⁴⁷ The greater the outrage the greater the need for understanding.⁴⁸ Vigilante violence directed at Chinese migrant workers in nineteenth-century America, as another example, required justification and therefore entailed categorizations of human valuing. Purportedly defending the white working class from perceived economic threats, vigilantes took it upon themselves to "act in obedience to a higher law" and linked white exploitation and its violent affordances with "the maintenance of purity, the integrity, the welfare and the institutions of their nation and race."⁴⁹ As we saw in the last chapter, the U.S. government came to adopt the vigilantes' explanations, eventually putting in place the Chinese Exclusion Act which would not only selectively discriminate against Chinese migrants for decades to come but would set up the institutional apparatus and conceptual vocabulary necessary for future labor exploitation within, at, and beyond American borders.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ On proprietarian justifications, see Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 238–240.

⁴⁸ In terms of slavery as an Enlightenment anomaly, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); David Brion Davis, *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ Quoted in Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 2018, 135. For discussion of contemporary contexts, see Ian Haney-López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵⁰ Reviewing *The Chinese Must Go*, Robert L. Tsai makes an interesting observation: "Unlike racial violence against emancipated slaves, which led to the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments and the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, anti-Chinese violence rallied elites to the side of white supremacy, while leaving Chinese people who remained in America in a state of legal purgatory—a problem for later generations to solve. Local agitators got what they wanted: expulsion on a grander scale. As Lew-Williams argues, while the wave of anti-Chinese violence was deplored by many, it had the intended effect of pushing national officials to side with their white constituents and close the door completely to Chinese migration. The logic was devastatingly simple: It was safer for everyone involved if they just got rid of them." Robert L. Tsai, "Racial Purges," *Michigan Law Review* 118 (2019): 1–23

Framing racism in terms of political economy, then, highlights the justificatory role racism plays, implicitly supplying reasons for behavior that is sometimes, but not always, viewed as requiring explanation.⁵¹ Provoked, one will appeal to reasons that make sense of given behavior.⁵² More often reasons are built right into the behavior. With racial domination, because dominative behavior itself creates racial otherness, it already possesses all the reasons it will ever need. This helps explain white supremacy's uncanny durability. It is a fanciful picture that has, as orthodox antiracism often does, humans acting out of cognitive beliefs that precede their actions. In fact, action, judgment, and perception work together toward conceptual unity.⁵³ The explanations arrive in tandem with the actions, not separate from them.⁵⁴ For antiracists things will not be so easy as programmatically searching out and correcting bad source material. The relationship between action and judgment can best be described as pragmatic, meaning that racist attitudes often arrive as deliverances of practical reason.⁵⁵

(16). Also see Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁵¹ Philosopher Robert Brandom puts it this way: "The key is to be found in the normative requirement that a proposed repair of acknowledged incompatibilities be justified by a retrospective collective reconstruction that integrates it into a larger course of experience that is given the form of a cumulative, expressively progressive process revealing to consciousness how things have implicitly all along been, in themselves." Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 22–23. Speaking of such justifications, consider how Henry Louis Gates, Jr., relates the use of junk science to exploitation: "So this discourse was designed to show that Africans were separate from Europeans and indeed the rest of the human community. More related to the animal kingdom. And you find metaphors of animalism being used to describe people of African descent all through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But I can't stress enough that this discourse has an economic basis, that it didn't just come out of the air. It was used as a justification for the slave trade. It was used so that the people who shipped 12.5 million Africans across the Atlantic Ocean between 1514 and 1866 could sleep at night." Louis Gates, Jr., "Henry Louis Gates Jr. Points to Reconstruction as the Genesis of White Supremacy," interview by Terry Gross, April 3, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/03/709094399/henry-louis-gates-jr-points-to-reconstruction-as-the-genesis-of-white-supremacy>.

⁵² Consider, for example, Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018): "The colonial encounter produced a racial regime of ownership that persists into the present, creating a conceptual apparatus in which justifications for private property ownership remain bound to a concept of the human that is thoroughly racial in its makeup" (4).

⁵³ On the relationship between action, judgment, and perception, see Thomas Pfau, "Varieties of Nonpropositional Knowledge: Image-Attention-Action," in *Judgement and Action: Fragments toward a History*, ed. Vivasvan Soni and Thomas Pfau (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 269–302.

⁵⁴ For importantly different variations on these themes, see Alice Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Avner Baz, *When Words Are Called For: A Defense of Ordinary Language Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁵⁵ John R. Bowlin, following Thomas Aquinas, talks about "deliverances" of practical reason in John R. Bowlin, *Tolerance among the Virtues* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 60–105. It is precisely the indeterminate reality of pragmatic judgment—say, the human life in language—that

Sometimes explanations are required by the human's need to make sense of her actions, implicit explanations rearing to go should they be called upon *ex ante* or *ex post facto* to answer norms by which actions become intelligible. Other times she is asked, directly or indirectly, and then needs to give some explanation for her actions. Either way, the explanation—*qua* explanation—interprets the actions. None of this is to deny the role intelligence plays in human action. It is rather to say that human intelligence comes in these intentional settlements and in the way the explanations are required and given. Intelligence, as Anscombe thought of intentionality, sits on the surface of human action.⁵⁶ The intelligence of human action comes in its goal directedness, in its intentional self-awareness, and in the explanations humans both need and supply for those goals. Racism, as catastrophically stupid as it is, obtains as a form of intelligence.

Coupled with exploitation, racism functions as justification. Racial identity was invented for the sake of exercising the social control necessary for sustained domination and exploitation. The invention had the desired effect of justifying an otherwise unjust state of affairs, where *perpetually* a select few thrived, while others were made "a thing apart" in order to serve the select, with still others wedged in between.⁵⁷ The idea of America emerged as racial schemes concretized around local legislative and judicial action that triangulated landed elites relative to temporarily versus permanently bonded labor, landless white versus enslaved black, indigenous peoples versus settler Hispanics, emancipated African Americans versus migrant Asians, immigrant Europeans versus non-white migrants, and so on. The category of race can be counted on to justify each revolution of the arrangement: landed whites own property because they are white; non-whites are property because they are non-white; landless whites position themselves over those disqualified by race; whites rage whenever entitlements considered theirs by right come to those without standing. In this racial equation, processes that yield wealth or poverty barely register. All that matters is race and its circular claims to land, nation, and destiny.

requires, Bowlin thinks, tolerance as a natural virtue, a virtue made necessary *and* possible by the operations of practical reason.

⁵⁶ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), 86–87. For a more recent moral psychology along these lines, see Lisa Tessman, *When Doing the Right Thing Is Impossible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 43–80. Regarding Anscombe's account of practical reason, see Mark Ryan, *The Politics of Practical Reason: Why Theological Ethics Must Change Your Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 15–50.

⁵⁷ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 370.

Given market instability, stability tends to be artificial and therefore requires coordination and control, often violent in some form or other, either to stabilize or to create the sense of stability. “Race relations” largely amounts to those inscribed relationships within contexts where value regularly shifts and political orders do what needs to be done in order to maintain dominant positions. One can trace specific racist regimes, their periods of normality and their regular upheavals, to respective generations of the political economy in which they materialize. Framing matters in terms of racial capitalism would take Saidiya Hartman’s powerful image regarding the “after-life of slavery” and locate the perpetual processes and commitments which comprised American chattel slavery in ongoing *aftermarkets* devaluing non-white life and its capitalization as exploitable labor, carceral populations, housing disparities, food deserts, environmental racism, educational inequality, scapegoating, appropriated culture, sexualized bodies, employment discrimination, tokenism, exoticized beauty, and so forth.⁵⁸ American chattel slavery was an especially blatant and brutal set of processes and commitments coming within a transnational political economy that continues unabated toward the production of ever new forms of forced labor, property regimentation, commodification, and value extraction.⁵⁹ The durability of white racial identity, to be sure, has nothing to do with inherent value (imagined as it might be through junk science, heretical theology, or question-begging logic) and everything to do with its commanding role in the political economy that coincides with its arrival on the world stage. That durability requires casting other leveraged identities in relation to white identity, value consistently understood as inferior and threatening, again not because their value is inherent but because the leveraging of value involves zero-sum games and their inscribed others.

Racial capitalist aftermarkets arise as specific structures of opportunity within standing systems on inequality. These structures exploit economic opportunities historically created by *de jure* racist political arrangements like those facilitating second slavery as a political economy. Even as the political economies move on, the political arrangements leave in place inequality rife with opportunity for further exploitation. Aftermarket success works off the

⁵⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 6, 73, and 107.

⁵⁹ See Kris Manjapra, “Plantation Dispossessions: The Global Travel of Agricultural Racial Capitalism,” in *American Capitalism: New Histories*, ed. Sven Beckert and Christine Desan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 360–387.

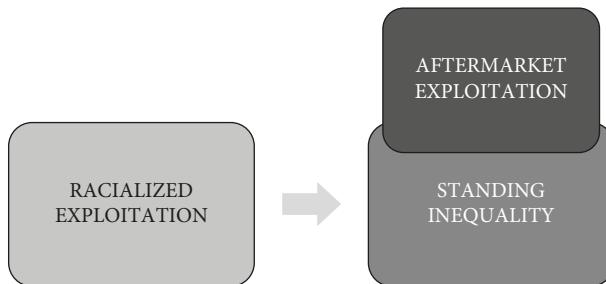


Figure 2.2 Aftermarket exploitation.

principle that exploitation begets exploitation (see Figure 2.2). Aftermarkets do not so much ignore systemic inequalities as take advantage of them. While still present, *de jure* racism—with its personal attitudes, cultural beliefs, legal sanction, and targeted discriminations—takes a backseat to the *de facto* racism that now drives the process. In fact, it is the absence of in-your-face *de jure* racism that tempts aftermarket customers to believe, given historic exclusion, that the aftermarket's mere availability signals a new racial day.⁶⁰ Yet it is precisely inclusion, along with what is included (those goods previously excluded) that springs the trap of aftermarket predation. The dynamic of use, identity, and justification again comes into play to smooth over (through implicit excuses more than explicit endorsements) an otherwise morally problematic state of affairs. Racial identification plays the role of, on the front end, signaling an opportunity and, on the back end, rationalizing its exploitation.

For examples, first consider the prevalence of payday loan businesses in economically vulnerable black communities.⁶¹ Here, companies exploit twin realities, the wealth/income inequality African Americans disproportionately suffer and their historic exclusion from broader financial markets. Availability and inclusion in such a context look on the surface like things

⁶⁰ By the distinction, I mean what James Baldwin generally meant when he said, “De facto segregation means that Negroes are segregated but nobody did it.” See Doxey A. Wilkerson, “School Integration, Compensatory Education and the Civil Rights Movement in the North,” *Journal of Negro Education* 34, no. 3 (1965): 300–309 (301).

⁶¹ On payday lending, see Michael A. Stegman, “Payday Lending,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, no. 1 (2007): 169–190; Alice Gallmeyer and Wade T. Roberts, “Payday Lenders and Economically Distressed Communities: A Spatial Analysis of Financial Predation,” *Social Science Journal (Fort Collins)* 46, no. 3 (2009): 521–538; United States Congress House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on Domestic Policy, *Foreclosure, Predatory Mortgage and Payday Lending in America’s Cities: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Domestic Policy of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives, One Hundred Tenth Congress, First Session, March 21, 2007* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).

have gotten better. This is how the payday company sells itself. But of course little advance has been made because the company's goal, its sole reason for taking up residence in the black community, is to take advantage of those twin realities, selling loans serviced by predatory interest rates. The scenario does not depend on *de jure* racism—though it certainly invites and perpetuates it—and indeed the operations of these consumer loan companies significantly resemble the regular loan industry's usury practices. The black community represents an especially quick way to make that money.⁶² Consider next the previously discussed topic of gentrification. We saw in the Introduction that the primary determinants of black displacement are the *de facto* antiblack persistence and spread of poverty and their antidemocratic antecedents and effects. For property owners to take advantage of these situations, they need not harbor explicit antiblack or white supremacist feelings or beliefs; they need only identify rental gaps where money can be made through higher rents and those who can, and cannot, pay them.⁶³ The property owners will claim no more responsibility for the fact that whites are moving in and African Americans are moving out than they will for the conditions that create rental gaps in the first place. Notice in both scenarios, first with payday companies and second with gentrification, *de jure* racism need not play a role. In fact, proprietors of aftermarkets might otherwise be antiracist, even claiming the identitarian mantle. It is the absence of explicitly racist attitudes, cultural beliefs, and targeted discriminations that makes aftermarkets simultaneously attractive and pernicious. Both are instances of what the economist Thomas Piketty describes as the past devouring the future.⁶⁴ Successful aftermarket proprietors distinguish themselves by their genius for leveraging past injustices against the future of those already disadvantaged by that past, and vice versa for those advantaged by it. If the dynamic of use, identification, and justification functions as racial capitalism's inner workings, aftermarkets serve as its storefronts—sometimes, as seen in the next section, quite literally.

⁶² For international analysis, see Gavin Brookes and Kevin Harvey, "Just Plain Wrong? A Multimodal Critical Analysis of Online Payday Loan Discourse," *Critical Discourse Studies* 14, no. 2 (2017): 167–187; Murizah Osman Salleh, Aziz Jaafar, and M. Shahid Ebrahim, "Can an Interest-Free Credit Facility Be More Efficient than a Usurious Payday Loan?," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 103 (2014): 74–92; Silvia Szilagyiova, "Exploitation of Payday Loan Users: Fact or Fiction?," *International Journal of Economic Sciences* VIII, no. 2 (2019), 127–47.

⁶³ See Neil Smith's class formulation, "Gentrification and the Rent Gap," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 3 (1987): 462–465.

⁶⁴ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 477. I return to Piketty in Chapter 5.

Aftermarkets in the Desert: The Delta Chinese Business Model

The newly displaced Chinese had to figure out a way to make it in the South.⁶⁵ Exclusion guaranteed that their numbers would remain small. Alien land laws across the country, motivated by nativist anxieties, prohibited them in most cases from purchasing land.⁶⁶ Yet, conditions at home still made America the safer bet.⁶⁷ They were here to stay. They would have to figure something out.⁶⁸ The food deserts provided an opening.⁶⁹ The racial capitalism built up around chattel slavery, the same political economy looking to exploit Chinese labor, now created aftermarket opportunities for exploiting African American need. Even though the law now required that African Americans be paid for their labor, they were not paid enough to live—certainly not enough for whites to provide services just to cover their needs. Eventually elites even lost interest in mandating plantation commissaries where predatory pricing gave them further ways to bond workers.⁷⁰ By law, whites had to pay for labor. But no law required them to provide for people they no longer enslaved. The grocery business with its social intimacies seemed especially unseemly to those with no appetite for “serving” black customers. Whites who did open businesses in black communities were shunned for relationships considered too close for comfort.⁷¹ The same people who created the need for local grocery stores ensured that none would

⁶⁵ For analysis of why the scheme failed, see Jianli Zhao, “Strangers in the City: The Atlanta Chinese, Their Community, and Stories of Their Lives” (PhD diss., Emory University, 1996), 30–31.

⁶⁶ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, John Quon interview, December 2, 1999.

⁶⁷ Charles Reagan Wilson, “Chinese in Mississippi: An Ethnic People in a Biracial Society,” *Mississippi History Now*, November 2002, <http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/86/mississippi-chinese-an-ethnic-people-in-a-biracial-society>. See also Delta State Oral Histories Archives, John Quon interview, December 2, 1999.

⁶⁸ “In fact they didn’t intend to stay in America. They were sojourners. My father made money to get back to China to build his dream house. He wanted to go back and retire there.” Houston Asian American Archive, June 11, 2013.

⁶⁹ Clearly, I use the term “food desert” anachronistically. But I do so because the term aptly describes what too many renderings of the Delta Chinese grocery store too easily describe as an economic “niche” and because the Delta Chinese took advantage of a condition that, first, still exists in America today, and second, as will be shown later in the chapter, Asian Americans continue to exploit. Everything that is today meant by “food desert” (i.e., demographic, economic, transportation, and mobility considerations) also created economic opportunities for the Delta Chinese grocers. On food deserts, see Paul Dutko, Michele Ver Ploeg, and Tracey Farrigan, “Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts,” (*USDA Economic Research Report* 140 (2012).

⁷⁰ For an account of how predatory the Delta’s commissary system was even for white sharecroppers, see Wayne Flynt’s *Poor But Proud: Alabama’s Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 79.

⁷¹ Robert W. O’Brien, “Status of Chinese in the Mississippi Delta,” *Social Forces* 19, no. 3 (1941): 386–390.

be provided. Here was an aftermarket scenario where whoever could provide those services stood, given the endlessness of the need, to make money, and could do so while remaining largely nonchalant about the historical conditions that created it. What might have begun for desperate Chinese migrants as simply a stumbled-upon business opportunity was awash in racialized realities that would make them full, if not entirely willing, participants in the racial capitalist political economy.⁷²

The Delta Chinese pooled what little resources they had to pursue an opportunity no one else took advantage of. The Chinese American laundries that had proven so successful in other parts of the country had no chance of succeeding in areas with little need for pressed business attire. In the Delta, it would be grocery stores. In the first years, when there was just the dozen or so of them, the Delta Chinese peddled their goods from the backs of horse-drawn buggies.⁷³ With regular customers came expansion. They had some lower-class white clients, but the vast majority were African American laborers from surrounding areas. As business grew, the Chinese merchants turned to permanent establishments housed in makeshift structures, often 20-foot by 20-foot shacks where they could store and sell goods, using pointer sticks to communicate with customers.⁷⁴ The structures also gave respective grocers a place to live, the shack doubling as a home and a place of business. Tax records from the 1880s credit a Wong On of Rosedale, Mississippi, as the first practitioner of a business model that would prove financially successful for nearly one hundred years.⁷⁵

This model was successful enough, in fact, to draw through the next decades Chinese from both China and other parts of America, especially where anti-Chinese persecution was on the rise.⁷⁶ Exclusion (1882–1943) granted some exceptions for Chinese merchants, which in turn fostered chain migration to the Delta. Each new migrant to the region brought whatever resources he had and borrowed the rest from savings collected from established businesses.⁷⁷ As one family described it, “They would help. They

⁷² Attempted here is something of what Christopher J. Lebron characterizes as a “measurable causality” regarding what I have called racial capitalism’s aftermarkets. See his “How Americans Make Race: Stories, Institutions and Spaces,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 14, no. 2 (2014), 201–204.

⁷³ Sieglinda Lim de Sánchez, “Crafting a Delta Chinese Community: Education and Acculturation in Twentieth-Century Southern Baptist Mission Schools,” *History of Education Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2003): 74–90 (74); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pkn_YrEbtMM.

⁷⁴ Zhao, “Strangers in the City,” 36.

⁷⁵ Wilson, “Chinese in Mississippi: An Ethnic People in a Biracial Society.”

⁷⁶ Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 24.

⁷⁷ Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 8, 61–79.

would loan them. They would actually go buy the store. They would furnish it and go in and help them till they could see that they can make it on their own. Then they would pay them back when they could. That is part of the history . . . that as a group of people they were determined to help each other.”⁷⁸

This is how the Cheungs came to find a home and a livelihood in the Delta. Penney’s dad, Tom, was born in China and her mother, Lucy, in California. They met, married, and had three children in San Francisco. When a relative described the Delta as “a land of opportunity,” Tom and Lucy moved Penney and her siblings, Bonnie and Ronald, to Mississippi to start their own store—at first unsuccessfully in Cleveland, and then successfully in Clarksdale.⁷⁹ Following Chinese tradition, relatives provided labor, with children working checkouts as soon as they could see over the counter.⁸⁰ Persistent poverty required customers to establish lines of credit with grocers who learned to devise repayment schedules that allowed customers to pay whenever planters paid them.⁸¹ The credit system had the added benefit of encouraging customers to come back even when they could not afford to. One observer described (crudely, to be sure) how central the stores became for those in the community:

It is sad to say the black population around the Chinese store uses that Chinese store just like you use the refrigerator. He gets up in the morning, and he wants breakfast. He goes across the street, and he buys R.C. Cola and a moon pie. The Chinese store has it. He gets hungry at noontime. He goes back to the Chinese store and buys some Vienna sausage and another soda and maybe some crackers. At nighttime he gets hungry again, and he goes across there and buys some neck bone and some other things that our black friends like. They cook that and eat that for supper. When he comes to the checkout counter when he pays for that item that he has bought there in front of him is all kinds of candy and cookies. They are penny, nickel, and dime. The Chinese grocerymen will give him his change, and he would look at his change and look at those items. He will pick him out some candy. The Chinese would take back some of the money you see. They are very smart

⁷⁸ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Fay and Juanita Dong interview, May 1, 2000.

⁷⁹ Penney Gong interview, Delta State Mississippi Oral History project, October 7, 1999. See also <http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/86/mississippi-chinese-an-ethnic-people-in-a-biracial-society>.

⁸⁰ Lew, “Out of Place,” 283; Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 24.

⁸¹ Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 41; Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Ted Shepherd interview, August 17, 1999.

businessmen. The black man uses the Chinese store like you use your refrigerator. The Chinese know that, and they make money out of the black neighborhood. They really do.⁸²

One Chinese family voiced a sentiment common among Delta Chinese grocers: “I think that the black community probably accepted us as merchants. They felt like we were better to them and kinder to them than a lot of people were. We treated them with more respect. I guess they saw us as something in between.”⁸³ Bobby Joe Moon, whose parents owned a grocery store in Cleveland, related what he remembered about the customers: “If you don’t treat them with respect, they’re not gonna do business with you. So, we had to learn how to treat the Black people with respect so they would come back.”⁸⁴ As African Americans continued to return, Chinese merchants did well for themselves. By 1960, Mississippi’s median Chinese income had reached \$9,739 per annum, almost three times the state median of \$2,884.⁸⁵ The Delta Chinese grocery store business model had succeeded. It worked by establishing a codependent relationship between Chinese merchants and black customers, each navigating circumstances neither could help and both had to accept. Nothing else availed itself so favorably to the Delta Chinese. And no one else was willing to serve African Americans.

Codependence came with its share of complexities. And the challenges help to illuminate racial capitalism from the inside. Here was a scenario where racial capitalism had Chinese migrants exploiting African Americans impoverished by white elites (epitomized by this book’s planters, financiers, internationalists, labor managers, politicians, and development corporations). Even though it involved three parties, it was not so much a triangulated relationship because these were not three equal partners. Rather, this was a scene where white supremacy politically determined economic conditions that non-whites had to deal with. The scenario captures how the Chinese got to the Delta, the conditions of their arrival, their transition to the grocery store business, the success of their business model, and the relationships that unfolded in the course of its regular operations. Not simply their

⁸² Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Ted Shepherd interview, August 17, 1999.

⁸³ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Fay and Jaunita Dong interview, May 1, 2000.

⁸⁴ Houston Asian American Archive, Bobby Joe Moon interview, June 11, 2013.

⁸⁵ Kit Mui Leung Chan, “Assimilation of Chinese-Americans in the Mississippi Delta” (master’s thesis, Mississippi State University, 1969), 17. According to the U.S. Census “Current Population Reports, Series P-60” the same year, 1960, nationally, white families averaged \$5,835 while black families averaged \$3,230.

business practices but the whole history of the Delta Chinese (epitomized by their business practices) can be understood as a particularly live instance of racial capitalism, the Delta Chinese market as racial capitalist aftermarket. As Sieglinde Lim de Sánchez observes,

The Chinese grocer developed much of the character that Werner Sombart attributed to the “economic stranger.” Rational calculation and a perceptive scrutiny of the socio-cultural realities of the southern racial situation provided the basis for their everyday conduct. This included paying scrupulous attention to the prevailing etiquette of race relations that supported the southern caste structure and purchasing personal security and the right to a livelihood with carefully calculated donations to all factions embroiled in racial struggles. Despite its location within the African-American community, the Chinese did not assimilate into any other ethnic group; rather, they forged a unique social identity within the Delta’s racial hierarchy.⁸⁶

Despite working and living among black people for years, the Chinese remained strangers to them, transnational others seemingly dropped out of nowhere. Relationships between economic strangers do not preclude moments of friendship and mutual affection. It only means that those moments are exceptions to a larger rule, relational transactions internal to the execution of a business plan. If ever a conflict arose between the demands of friendship and mutual affection and the business that fostered those moments, as a rule things would go one way. As one study observed, “According to traditional Delta values, retail trade itself—the buying and selling of many inexpensive items that involves a person in a larger number of small commercial transactions motivated by the desire for profit at the expense of neighbors—is a questionable activity. It contradicts important values of neighborliness, kin obligation, and white *no-obliges obliges*.”⁸⁷ Being *economic* strangers means that the economics would always win out. Indeed, the merchant would know that insofar as internal conflict did not impede his ability to run a successful business then in fact the plan was working. To resolve or, more likely, head off internal conflicts (to, as it were, not let his right

⁸⁶ De Sánchez, “Crafting a Delta Chinese Community,” 76.

⁸⁷ Mary Jo Schneider and William M. Schneider, “A Structural Analysis of the Chinese Grocery Store in the Mississippi Delta,” in *Visions and Revisions: Ethnohistoric Perspectives on Southern Cultures*, ed., George Sabo III and William M. Schneider (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 91.

hand know what his left hand was doing) he employed a bevy of explanations that justified his daily dealings.

The moral complications ran deeper still. Theological economist Mary L. Hirschfeld uses Thomas Aquinas's for Aquinas's distinction between natural desires (e.g., physical hunger) which can be satisfied and artificial desires (e.g., money) which cannot in order to describe the relationship between households and merchants. She quotes Aquinas in writing, "Whereas households enter into the market with one kind of good and exit the market with another kind of good, merchants begin with money, which they use for the purchase of goods, and end with money, which they obtain by reselling those goods. Merchants appear to be engaged in the art of moneymaking, which is 'directed to making a great deal of money and wealth as its end.' It is this evolution that leads to the confusion between money as a medium of exchange and moneymaking as an art in service of the disordered concupiscence that places riches as an end rather than as a means."⁸⁸ I said earlier that the unity of action, judgment, and perception means that explanation (internal or otherwise) subsequently *explains* behavior that is sometimes viewed as requiring justification. If and when internal conflicts arise, one will appeal to reasons that make sense of given behavior. More often, reasons are built right into the behavior. Hirschfeld's point about money and merchants gets at how money obscures justificatory processes inherent within racial capitalism, burying justification in the respectability of monetary exchange and masking an underlying "disordered concupiscence." Everything becomes about the money. Money properly changing hands indicates things must be on the up and up. As we saw earlier regarding second slavery's magical financialization, money abstracts desire away from the very material realities that would otherwise hold it to account. The process exacted a terrible toll on the attitudes harbored by Delta business model merchants, exacerbating what must have been folk prejudices around ethnic difference. Because the grocer's exploitative context (equipped as it was with a ready repertoire of racial concepts that weaponized differences) fostered racial otherness, it came prepackaged with reasons. The following remarks sadly make sense when taken in light of racial capitalism's corrupting formation:

⁸⁸ Mary L. Hirschfeld, *Aquinas and the Market: Toward a Future Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 141, quoting Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, trans. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 53. I return to Hirschfeld in Chapter 5.

- “But it was strictly business—that was all. Although I had one black friend that I used to run around with, and her name was Baby Lou. My parents didn’t mind because I would run over to Louise’s house and run back. I didn’t stay gone very long, maybe an hour or so. It was very seldom that we would play with the black kids. A lot of them were very dirty. Even as a child I knew that I didn’t want to associate with a lot of them.”⁸⁹
- “At college [our children] mix with the *Bok Guey* [whites], and they begin to think like them. There’s not too much Chinese in them, but they might tell you differently. But they’re not white, they’re not colored or black either, thank God.”⁹⁰
- “We stick together, work, and don’t bother nobody. We don’t mix with nobody, we keep our mouth shut, no talk, just work. Now we talk with other Chinese when we see them to find out what they do. But then, not many Chinese at that time. We don’t want to become *Bok Guey* [whites] and we sure don’t want to become ‘colored’ like the *Hok Guey* [blacks], no sir, those people were treated worse than dogs. We don’t want that to happen to us anyhow, anywhere, anyway. We just want to be ourselves, *Hon Yen* [Chinese].”⁹¹
- “But we still got to keep both sides happy, so I give to the *Hok Guey* [blacks] and *Bok Guey* [whites] charities and let them put posters every now and then in my store to advertise a community event. You still got to play it right, even though the Chinese are accepted in the Delta. That’s the only way you’re going to survive and make money. You could make a million dollars one day and lose it the next if you are in between like the Chinese people. It’s a sticky situation, so you got to watch both the front door and the back door and don’t offend anyone.”⁹²

One can think of the expressed attitudes as the moral cost of trading in racial capitalist money. Sam Sue, who grew up in Clarksdale in the 1960s, remembered Chinese kids getting “harassed a lot by the blacks. There was a lot of

⁸⁹ Lew, “Out of Place,” 288.

⁹⁰ Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 96. See also Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 98.

⁹¹ Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 43. For an account of such interracial life, see Wendy Marie Thompson, “Black Chinese: History, Hybridity, and Home,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, 2007, 25–31; Wendy Marie Thompson, “Beyond the Railroad People: Race and the Color of History in Chinese America” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2009). On the difference Chinese celebrations, see Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Kit Gong, Bobbie Gore, Joy Gore, Amy Gore, and Billie Gore interview, May 24, 2000.

⁹² Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 81.

resentment against the Chinese by the blacks, because some of the Chinese families would rip off blacks, because it was part of giving store credit to the black farms—they got surcharged excessively. Or they might be charged for things they didn't purchase." He later reflected, "it's sort of weird on my parent's level, because on the one hand they would make friends with a lot of the black people, then on another, they would say racist things about them."⁹³

The negative views and attitudes should be held in balance with the reality that African Americans found in Delta Chinese stores access, respect, service, and relationships largely absent in other establishments. This helps explain why African Americans tended to blame white influence for any negativity they experienced in Delta Chinese stores. In fact, the non-white immigrant experience could make the Delta Chinese quite sympathetic to the difficult lives of African Americans. Regretful of the negativity, Robert Chow said, "Chinese has their own racial fault, more so about blacks. Chinese gave respect to the whites because they held sway in public offices and judicial position and because they have wealth and power. The black was looked upon as poor, uneducated, and naive, always a servant and laborer and lazy by some Chinese. But to me, they were cordial, easy to get along [with], content, and helpful, hard worker[s]. I had studied the U.S. History, War Between the States, and Mississippi History."⁹⁴ While the Delta Chinese are morally responsible for their own attitudes and actions, and their agency certainly extended beyond what they learned from the surrounding supremacist culture, it is also the case that the Delta Chinese, like everyone in the Delta, found themselves stuck in a political economic reality set up long before they got there. The Delta represents a complex political space, a history powerfully determined by racial capitalism, which the Chinese migrants were no better positioned to oppose than native whites and African Americans. In *Bitter Fruit*, political scientist Claire Jean Kim examines conflicts between Korean American merchants and the African American communities where they operate, a topic I return to at the conclusion of this chapter. The particular context she analyzes involves Koreans rather than Chinese, New York City rather than the Delta, and the present rather than the past.⁹⁵ Still, what she describes as "racial ordering" helps us understand how racial capitalism

⁹³ Sue, "Growing Up in Mississippi," 4, 6. See also Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 88.

⁹⁴ Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 138.

⁹⁵ Another important difference between the Korean American model and that of the Delta Chinese is that Korean American merchants for the most part did not directly live in African American communities. This is largely a function of when Koreans started arriving in the United States—that is, after desegregation began to take effect.

both brought the Delta Chinese and Delta “Blacks” together and kept them apart: “It is because Blacks are relegated to the bottom of the racial order that they are less equipped to capitalize on small business opportunities, and it is because Korean immigrants are positioned somewhere above Blacks that they are more equipped to capitalize on the same. In the context of a racial order in which group fates are relative and intertwined, one group’s incapacity becomes another’s opportunity. Small business ownership thus becomes an index of group position in the racial order, and Korean-owned stores become visible symbols of racial inequalities.”⁹⁶

Remaining *Hon Yen*, Becoming Christian

No matter how much money they made, the Delta Chinese were barred from moving into the nicer white neighborhoods and sending their children to the far better resourced white schools.⁹⁷ Just a year before their store burned down, the Cheungs, as late as 1968, were only able to move into a white neighborhood after an influential white friend intervened on their behalf. Little of this mattered when the Chinese first started showing up in the late nineteenth century. At that point the Chinese Exclusion Act ensured that mostly Chinese men came to the Delta South. Some migrants kept families back in China, to whom they would send money and occasionally visit. Others found partners in African American women. At points before 1940 as much as a third of Delta Chinese men coupled with black women.⁹⁸

Questions about housing and education (topics taken up again in Part II, when we turn to Redeemer Community Church) began in earnest once Delta Chinese started having families. White elites, occupying what Delta Chinese called “the driver’s seat,” controlled both.⁹⁹ The Chinese had come to America and the South for opportunity, and the influence of Mandarin

⁹⁶ Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 15. See also Edna Bonacich, “Making It” in America: A Social Evaluation of the Ethics of Entrepreneurship,” *Sociological Perspectives* 30, no. 4 (1987): 446–466; Pyong Gap Min, *Ethnic Business Enterprise: Korean Small Business in Atlanta* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1988); Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁹⁷ Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 124–125.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 74. Interracial marriage was often as much a matter of class as race, with poor Chinese marrying poor African Americans (Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 178). See also de Sánchez, “Crafting a Delta Chinese Community,” 83.

⁹⁹ Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 51.

and Confucian culture had taught them that education created opportunity. As one older Delta Chinese person put it, reflecting a view shared by many Delta Chinese, “If you were to ask what it takes to survive and be respected in this world—I will tell you. Money and education. The Chinese started at the bottom with no money, no education. That’s why they didn’t get any respect, but we have worked hard to give these things to our children. Chinese are now prosperous and respected in Mississippi. They have money, brains, and education. They are now at the top!”¹⁰⁰ The Delta Chinese, unburdened by the generational poverty shouldered by the area’s African Americans, kept a high view of education.¹⁰¹ In a revealing quote, one Delta Chinese American recalls, “I guess you can say it was part of the culture that you would have to leave each generation to get better. That was your charge. That is what Dad used to say, ‘You owe me. You owe me to be better than I was. My grandchildren will be better than you are.’”¹⁰² Everything depended on getting their kids into the right schools. And they knew that white elites were, as always, the gatekeepers. Here, those Chinese-black couplings would turn out to hurt them as a group. The association with African Americans, not just serving them but living among and even with them, complicated their case for inclusion. Making an exception for a small number of Chinese kids was, in many cases, not a problem, and certain towns granted allowances when they could.¹⁰³ But whites worried about setting a precedent that could open the door to biracial Chinese-black children, which could eventually open the floodgates to non-Chinese African Americans. In this context, admitting Chinese looked like a slippery slope whites needed to avoid. This presented a serious problem for the Delta Chinese, for whom family was a huge reason for being in America (a leitmotif I return to in Chapters 3 and 6).

When whites told Delta grocer Gong Lum in 1924 that his daughter Martha could not attend the local white—and therefore better resourced—school, he sued, pressing his case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. As things progressed, the Lum family became less committed to challenging the injustice of race-based segregation and discrimination. Indeed, their argument increasingly assumed it, and only wanted Martha, and other Chinese, located on the right side of a ledger. Because their fight did not target segregation and discrimination, any benefits to be had were not likely to accrue

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 124–125.

¹⁰² Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Fay and Juanita Dong interview, May 1, 2000.

¹⁰³ Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 45–46.

beyond Chinese Americans. Nor were they intended to. But that presented a problem. Trying to get the Court to expand racial considerations beyond a white/black binary proved too much. In this way, as will be shown in the following chapter, the family simply failed to understand what race is. Race is not, as they apparently wanted to believe, the categorization of biological differences into natural kinds, where equity requires fair treatment along lines of diversity. Rather, race involves ideology that racially indexes bodies for exploitative use. Race is about differentiation rather than difference, stratification, not diversification. Martha Lum wanted to attend better schools in a world where there was simply no way to think about race beyond the binary (black and white coded by the courts as “colored” or not) without upsetting the entire political economic infrastructure. Indeed, when *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) finally began the process of desegregating schools, the Court’s reasoning was predicated on the binary, which it now held needed to be integrated rather than segregated. Eventually others, like the Chinese, were included under *Brown*’s umbrella, but, only as declensions of white and black racial identity. As shown in the following chapter, race thinking employs a basic binary logic—white versus black; this one, not that one. To commit to race thinking while also protesting the binary is to be caught in a bit of confusion. In *Gong Lum v. Rice* (1927), the Court confirmed as much when it unanimously decided that the same principle of racial separation applied to “the yellow races” and therefore denied the family’s petition.¹⁰⁴ In the eyes of the nation, Chinese Americans counted as African Americans. The Lums left the Delta for educational options elsewhere. The rest of the Delta Chinese would have to figure out what to do next.

As the Court sidelined the Delta Chinese, the Southern Baptist Church’s missionary mandate put them front and center. Southern Baptists would end up saving the Chinese, though not exactly as planned. They realized (using a rationale reminiscent of General Miles’s labor scheme) that they did not

¹⁰⁴ For a helpful analysis, see Edward E. White, “The Lost Episode of *Gong Lum v. Rice*,” *Green Bag Law Review* 18, no. 2 (2015): 191–205. Specifically, “the Court’s opinion in *Gong Lum* reveals how much of the impetus for its validation of *de jure* segregation in the years between *Plessy v. Ferguson* and the 1930s came from the disinclination, on the part of most white Americans in that period, to probe beneath the surface of two assumptions on which segregationist policies had been erected. One assumption was that differences in skin color were proxies for foundational, and meaningful, differences between races. The other was that rhetorical commitments by states to provide ‘equal’ facilities for members of races who were segregated from one another meant that those facilities were in fact equal” (192, emphasis in the original). Also see Martha Casas, “A Historical Analysis of the United States Supreme Court and Its Adjudication of *Gong Lum v. Rice* (1972) and *Keyes v. Denver School District No. 1* (1973),” *Journal of Thought* 41, no. 4 (2006): 83–103.

need to send missionaries all the way to China since the Chinese had brought themselves to the Delta.¹⁰⁵ Ted Shepherd, who headed up Southern Baptist missionary efforts in the Delta, relates how the mission started shortly after *Gong Lum*: “They were not accepted in ‘white areas’ and so forth. That was a problem for these [white missionaries] as they went out. They gradually broke that barrier, and they said, the [missionaries] said, ‘If you will come and worship with us we will have a service on Sunday afternoon where you can close your store for an hour or two and bring your family. We will have a worship service just for you on Sunday afternoon.’ That is the way it was started having the Chinese Mission at 2:30 on Sunday afternoon in 1934. The men got into the act, and the ladies began to recruit the men.”¹⁰⁶

Initially the Chinese showed little interest, in part because Christian missionaries had not so long ago made a mess of things back in China and in part because their native Confucianism was nothing like Southern Baptist religion. It was also the case that Christianity’s complicity with American nativism and racism made it suspect in the eyes of many Chinese.¹⁰⁷ Most significantly, however, the Chinese had no time for Christianity. Their stores opened on Sunday. Things changed when they realized that Christianity could be good for business. Showing up at church would go a long way in familiarizing them to whites, making them less strange, and lending an air of respectability to their businesses. Soon, Southern Baptist *Chinese* Christianity became another part of the successful business model: “We go to the Baptist Church because that is what most of us are. In other words if you don’t belong to a church, the *Bok Guey* [whites] don’t think you are a good citizen . . . or your family either.”¹⁰⁸

Christianity would also get them the education they coveted. While the Delta Chinese still could not attend white schools, the Southern Baptists

¹⁰⁵ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Ted Shepherd interview, August 17, 1999.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ de Sánchez, “Crafting a Delta Chinese Community,” 78. The Delta Chinese were especially skeptical about the hypocrisy of white Christian racism. See Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 132. See also John Quon’s description of the different religions available in the Delta: Delta State Oral Histories Archives, John Quon interview, December 2, 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias*, 88. Patriotic support of America’s war efforts also helped. Reflecting on Delta Chinese World War II veterans, one person said, “I think it changed the attitude of a lot of people. Of all the soldiers that were in the service. A war is bad, but after the Second World War a lot of people came back, and they accepted a lot more. They accepted a lot more of the different. They accepted Chinese a lot more.” Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Annette Joe interview, May 1, 2000. Also see “Learn the Untold History of the Chinese Community in the Mississippi Delta,” Open Culture, May 19, 2017, <https://www.openculture.com/2017/09/learn-the-untold-history-of-the-chinese-community-in-the-mississippi-delta.html>.

provided the next best thing: Chinese schools.¹⁰⁹ As part of their proselytizing efforts, Clarksdale Southern Baptists encouraged the Chinese to open their own school.¹¹⁰ Relaxed Exclusion restrictions and growing families made the schooling issue more pressing than ever.¹¹¹ The strange bedfellows combined resources to create schools that went by names like “The Oriental School” and “The Chinese Mission School.”¹¹² Chinese children came from all over the Delta to attend. In the morning, white teachers supplied the rudiments of a standard American education. In the afternoon, Chinese teachers taught them Chinese language, art, literature, and culture. After school, the children returned to work in their parents’ grocery stores, their lives now revolving around the business model’s core institutions—Chinese schools, Baptist churches, and Chinese grocery stores.¹¹³ Christianity gave many a way to hold together the various pieces of their American life: “A lot of people ask me are we bitter about the way it was back then. I know a lot of things were unfair. I am sure there are lots of stories down there that you can dig out. Through it all, it is the attitude that you have about where you are going and what you are doing and the values are there. No matter who or what, you are all right with the Lord, so you know that you are okay. You don’t have to worry about it. You don’t have to be the best. You just do the best that you can. I like that.”¹¹⁴

Some believed that American success meant they were becoming less distinctly Chinese. Older Delta Chinese worried that assimilation would swallow up their Chinese heritage. As one said, “We old people are afraid that when the children go to college to become engineers, teachers, doctors, and lawyers, they no longer hold onto the Chinese ways. And I can see why, because these children have to mix with the *Bok Guey* [whites] and do social things with them in order to get ahead. But soon they like the American way better than the Chinese way. They are no longer real *Hon*

¹⁰⁹ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Annette Joe interview, May 1, 2000.

¹¹⁰ See Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 36.

¹¹¹ See numbers in de Sánchez, “Crafting a Delta Chinese Community,” 77.

¹¹² Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 116. See also Emily Erwin Jones and Frieda Quon, “Mississippi Delta Chinese,” in *Ethnic Heritage in Mississippi: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Shauna Walton and Barbara Carpenter (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 145–172; Li Li, “From Southern Baptists to Chinese Baptist Identity, 1850–1950,” in *Baptist Identities: International Studies from the Seventeenth Century to the Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Ian M. Randall, Rolvo Pilli, and Anthony R. Cross (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 241–256 (250–256); Peter Kung, “The Story of the Asian Southern Baptists,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 18, no. 3 (1983): 49–58 (51).

¹¹³ de Sánchez, “Crafting a Delta Chinese Community,” 75, 84, and 86.

¹¹⁴ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Annette Joe interview, May 1, 2000.

Yen [Chinese] but *Bok Guey* [whites].”¹¹⁵ How, they wondered, would they inhabit a white and black world without also losing their Chinese identity, without ending up more “*Hon Yen*” than “*Bok Guey*”?¹¹⁶ Unlike Chinese Americans who lived in or near metropolitan Chinatown enclaves, the Delta Chinese were isolated, never totaling more than a tiny fraction of the Delta population:

| Year | Total Population | Black | White | Chinese ¹¹⁷ |
|------|------------------|---------|---------|------------------------|
| 1880 | 178,700 | 118,000 | 60,650 | 51 |
| 1900 | 367,400 | 301,600 | 65,600 | 183 |
| 1920 | 394,200 | 310,700 | 83,200 | 322 |
| 1940 | 479,700 | 345,500 | 113,500 | 743 |

Yet, even after decades in America, many Delta Chinese understood themselves as Chinese. That Baptist minister, Ted Shepherd, noted, “We are in about the third or fourth Chinese generation here. They still would not turn loose of their old country customs. They still have those customs, and I honor those. I went along with everything except the things that were detrimental to the Christian faith. We never compromised our Christian faith. This is what I taught them. As far as their old customs that they had with their families and everything previous to coming to this country I would never criticize them or anything. They hang on to those.”¹¹⁸ The goal for the Delta Chinese had been, even before they got to the South, that their children would find success in America, which for them included the ability to “*gong ho Hon Yen Wah*” (not become white but remain Chinese).¹¹⁹

Notably, for Reverend Shepherd nothing about the Delta Chinese business model put it at odds with Christianity. While there might be aspects

¹¹⁵ See Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 59 and 61.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 16, 19, 21, and 64; Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 179.

¹¹⁷ United States Census of Population. Reported in de Sánchez, “Crafting a Delta Chinese Community: Education and Acculturation in Twentieth-Century Southern Baptist Mission Schools,” 77; Chan, “The Chinese Americans in the Mississippi Delta,” 29–35 (32). For an account of the Chinese from a sympathetic white perspective, see Delta State Oral Histories Archives, S. E. (Juliet) Kossman interview, May 2, 2000.

¹¹⁸ “Speak Chinese well,” Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Ted Shepherd interview, August 17, 1999.

¹¹⁹ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Fay and Jaunita Dong interview, May 1, 2000. See also Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 17, 38, 63, and 180–183; Lew, “Out of Place,” 287.

of Chinese culture that proved “detrimental” to Christian faith, there was nothing problematic about their adopted capitalist culture. Not only did the Christianity and the political economy run smoothly together, but, as described, Christianity helped the Delta Chinese, like many Southerners, establish their lives in the South.¹²⁰ Participation in white Baptist churches benefited them, alleviating tensions with neighbors and accessing desired educational resources for their families. Religious faith was put in service of placating existing political economic concerns, as had long been the case with racial capitalism.

The substance of Southern Baptist religion tightened the bonds of Delta Chinese Christianity’s marriage of convenience. Oral histories consistently reference a “fire and brimstone” theology that emphasized individual salvation from hell. This came at the cost of serious attention to social, political, and economic issues which then got swept under a generalized “all-wise Providence.”¹²¹ When asked, Delta Chinese interviewees could not recall any instances when their churches discussed racism, much less racism’s justificatory role in political economic exploitation.¹²² So long as they were saved from hell and lived what were deemed to be respectable lives, little else mattered. The soul/body divide mapped comfortably onto a church/state divide early-American Baptists established long ago, in part to settle the issue of slavery and in part to stake out their own lines of authority, along the way relegating political economic notions like liberty to freedom of conscience on matters of slavery.¹²³ Situated within a climate where white supremacist attitudes had free reign and especially at a moment when (increasingly internal) questions about desegregation—often viewed as a threat to reigning political economic arrangements—loomed, the Baptist Christianity adopted by the

¹²⁰ Also see Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999), 128.

¹²¹ John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1972) , 25. Eighmy speaks of “the silence, if not the sanction, of the local churches relative to the basic attitudes of the secular world” (*ibid.*, 19).

¹²² Which is not to say that Baptists did not sometimes articulate justifications for certain political economic arrangements, as exhibited by Richard Furman’s infamous 1822 defense of chattel slavery, “Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Coloured Population of the United States.” Available at <https://glc.yale.edu/exposition-views-baptists-relative-coloured-population>. It is only to say that for many Baptists, implicit endorsement rarely required explicit defense, or as I have argued throughout, moral action, as intelligent action, bears in its own justification.

¹²³ See Randolph Scully, “‘Somewhat Liberated’: Baptist Discourses of Race and Slavery in Nat Turner’s Virginia, 1770–1840,” *Explorations of Early American Culture* 5 (2001): 328–371 (especially the illuminating discussion of the “difficult case of Brother Jonathan Langford” on pp. 357–360); Monica Najar, “‘Meddling with Emancipation’: Baptists, Authority, and the Rift over Slavery in the Upper South,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 25, no. 2 (2005): 157–186 (163 and 186).

Delta Chinese lent itself to passive endorsement, if not aggressive defense, of the racial capitalist order.¹²⁴ Cultural sociologist Orlando Patterson observes how the power of these conceptual divides came in their subtlety: “In this way fundamentalism, by reverting to Pauline dualism, provided the slave South with the perfect creed, one much more subtle in its support for the system than most of the masters thought. The crude theology of slavery that the masters tried unsuccessfully to preach in the plantation mission was really quite unnecessary.”¹²⁵ The subtlety paid off for those adopted into it. Delta Chinese seemed hard-pressed to identify correlations between Christianity, racism, and their business model. If anything, they saw positive connections, stretching white Baptist Christianity’s generalized account of providence into a unique version of the prosperity gospel (popular at the time among both white and black Christians).¹²⁶ As several Delta Chinese interviewees suggested, God’s blessing of *their* business model evidenced God’s deliverance from the crucible of Southern racism. God blessed those who lived clean, worked hard, and took care of their families. White Baptist Christianity presented itself as a road map to financial success—never mind the thorny questions about how money got made or used. Baptist religion, rife as it was with generalizations and abstractions, allowed plenty of room for such stretches of the imagination.¹²⁷ As historian Rufus B. Spain describes, “the denomination was not greatly concerned with problems of the economy. They tended to accept the economy as they found it. They offered few criticisms and still fewer suggestions for improvement. In sum, they defended American capitalism as the best of all possible orders.”¹²⁸ Even elements of white Baptist

¹²⁴ D. M. Nelson, the president of Mississippi College, the state’s premier Baptist school, characterized integration as “based upon Karl Marx’s doctrine of internationalism,” advocating “the obliteration of all national and racial distinctions and the final amalgamation of all races,” Randy J. Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi for the Mississippi Historical Society, 2001), 231.

¹²⁵ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 76.

¹²⁶ For suggestions along these lines, see Paul Harvey, *Christianity and Race in the American South: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 186–187.

¹²⁷ In the twelve interviews I conducted with Delta Chinese, who ranged in age from 62 to 83, rarely did the interviewees bring up race and racism. When asked, either with follow-up questions or follow-up interviews, they tended to diminish the role race and racism played, and almost never (an exception comes at the end of Chapter 3), even when pressed, connected racism to Christianity or their business practices. Extant oral histories reflect similar reticence. When it came up, several explicitly refuted James W. Loewen’s *Mississippi Chinese* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1988) “becoming white” thesis which I describe extensively in the next chapter, specifically under the rationale that race and racism did not play determinative roles in their experiences.

¹²⁸ Rufus B. Spain, *At Ease in Zion: A Social History of Southern Baptists, 1865–1900* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 148. This is not to say that Baptist Christians were completely unable to see the political economic import of their situations or identify certain capitalist

Christianity committed to the social gospel had little to say. The Christian Life Commission, the arm of the Southern Baptist Convention tasked with handling moral and social issues, “never seemed to question the essential soundness of the existing American system.”¹²⁹ As Baptist Christians, it simply never occurred to the Delta Chinese that Christianity did anything but sanction racial capitalism, a reality that helps explain how the Delta Chinese became simultaneously the wealthiest and most Christian (per capita) of Chinese Americans.¹³⁰

The Delta Chinese Christians present us with a scenario where an alternative political economy had availed itself, but because of how things turned out, it could do little work. The terms of their arrival in America (driven by a Reconstruction-era labor scheme that pitted Chinese migrants against African American freedmen) required that they remain wedded to racial capitalism, even when the conditions of that arrival might have given them pause. Moreover, the Delta Chinese only made room for Christianity when the financial benefits (the success of their business model and the education of their children) of doing so became apparent. Rather than resisting racial capitalism, Christianity helped them further into it. The very terms by which they received Christianity would set the terms for what it could do for them. The Baptist Christianity which situated their lives in the American South permitted them a religious piety that enabled upright business practices and honorable dealings with their black customers but disabled any ability to recognize the political economy in which those practices and dealings occurred. Because the opportunity that the Chinese migrants initially stumbled upon allowed them to accumulate wealth while ignorant of the historical conditions that created it, they would need additional resources to see the scenario for the aftermarket reality that it was. Yet because Christianity had become for them, as it had for so many, synonymous with the racial capitalism that first created the aftermarket opportunity, then rather than playing this illuminating role, the Christianity only further blinded them to what they were doing. That they could continue in this blindness no matter the direct racism

excesses (e.g., urbanization, elitism, consumerism, etc.). When it came to the Reconstruction-era political economy, white Baptists were quite aware of the challenges and opportunities facing them, and the attitudes of the farming and planter classes toward emancipated African Americans correlated closely to how they viewed their plight along these lines. Still, the abstracted spirituality made connections between religious faith and the attending political economic challenges difficult to come by.

¹²⁹ Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 188.

¹³⁰ Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 127.

they personally experienced or the systemic effects they regularly witnessed demonstrates the inveterate nature of the political economy that dominated their daily lives, as well as the anemic Christianity adorning it. All the while, right under their noses sat, just beyond reach apparently, the θεία οικονομία (divine economy). That the tragic scenario of missed opportunities resembles the pattern of so much American Christianity, where the regnant political economy determines so much about religious life, means that the Delta Chinese Christians were at least not alone in compromising Christianity. Even though Delta Chinese Christianity did little to present an alternative to racial capitalism, instead providing a moving picture of its inner workings, it went a long way in demonstrating the moral cost of failing to do so.

The Fire Ever Burning¹³¹

This book has been arguing that shifting antiracism's approach from racial identity to political economy gets us closer to liberation. The case studies (Part I's Delta Chinese and Part II's Redeemer Community Church) play two important roles in that argument. First, they offer material evidence for why that shift should be made. Second, they illuminate the implications that come with making it. With the first role, it should be clear that I intend the Delta Chinese *both* as an example of a political economy *and* as an example of the conceptual benefits of the political economic approach. Part II's portrayal of Redeemer Community Church will attempt something similar. In their second role, the case studies show that once that conceptual shift has been made, once antiracists accept that racism issues as a function of racial capitalism, those committed to overcoming racism will need to figure out how to contend with its political economy. The Delta Chinese and Redeemer Community Church contrastively offer an alternative political economy as one way of contending with racial capitalism. Which is to say that this book's way of contending with racial capitalism is to remind us that we have other options. Offering alternatives serves as an intervention on racial capitalism when so much of its dominance comes from the collective belief that we have no other options.¹³² Seeing alternatives allows us to think otherwise: one

¹³¹ The subtitle comes from Clarksdale's famous civil rights leader Aaron Henry's book of the same name: Aaron Henry, *The Fire Ever Burning* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).

¹³² The complex question of whether economical alternatives to advanced capitalism remain gets to the heart of the previously noted debate between historians and economists. The intensity of that

option before us, racial capitalism, creates and utilizes race and racism to facilitate dominative exploitation. Other options imagine things differently. Together the two case studies in this book present one such option, or at least the possibility of one.

Exclusion's repeal, Civil Rights, modernization, and desegregation combined with the success of the business model to bring an end to Delta Chinese life. Academic success meant that families sent their children off to Mississippi universities, where Delta Chinese students, still strangers to the larger population, met other Asian Americans. Leaving home for university education also made returning home, as other options presented themselves, less attractive.¹³³ Even if they wanted to return to the Delta, the grocery stores were beginning to lose ground. As supermarkets moved in, the Delta Chinese no longer claimed the monopolies they once did when it was just them servicing the food deserts.¹³⁴ Most importantly, African Americans, who made up the bulk of their customers, were leaving the Delta. The growth of mechanized farming meant that white planters no longer needed their labor. Just as white elites exploited African American laborers when they needed them, so they discarded them when they did not. The remaining black communities fell further into poverty, and drugs and crime took over already fragile communities.¹³⁵ The broader population plummeted as people migrated north and west seeking opportunities where they could find them, allowing some to move into the middle classes even as the hopes of others were dashed by an all too familiar reality. The same institutional dominance exercised by white elites held true everywhere. Migrants came to realize that racial capitalism's aftermarket installations were inescapable, from the segregated food deserts of the South to the "integrated" deserts of the North to (as we will see in Part II) areas west like the Bayview/Hunters Point section of San Francisco. The Vietnam War took its toll on the remaining Delta population as young African American men were conscripted to yet a further site of the racial capitalist imperium. Between 1950 and 1970, the population

debate suggests that at least the semblance of an alternative proves important. Part II takes up this question.

¹³³ For the challenges of those who wanted to marry whites, see Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 129–130.

¹³⁴ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Kit Gong, Bobbie Gore, Joy Gore, Amy Gore, and Billie Gore interview, May 24, 2000.

¹³⁵ Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 102–103. Ted Shepherd remembers three Chinese merchants getting killed in their stores. Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Ted Shepherd interview, August 17, 1999.

in Clarksdale's Coahoma County dropped sharply from 49,361 to 40,447.¹³⁶ The nation's response to all this was not to challenge the remarkably unjust economic system and its emerging classes of managerial elites that created these conditions. Instead, it issued food stamps. The massive dissemination of Great Society programs was the government's best response to racial capitalism's far greater expansion. Epitomized by the influx of state-sponsored food stamps which complicated the Delta Chinese microeconomy, things had run their course.¹³⁷ The number of Chinese groceries in Greenville alone declined from forty-two to ten between 1951 and 2008. From 1960 to 2008, the Chinese population in Cleveland, another Delta Chinese hub, dropped by half.¹³⁸ The end was already near by the time civil rights workers set fire to the Cheung store.

According to Penney, the African Americans who burned their store down were not locals, but likely traveling civil rights workers looking to rouse local black communities against racial capitalism. No doubt they would have seen the Cheungs' store as yet another installation. For indeed it was. One can imagine the store coming to represent all the frustrations that had piled up after two decades of political action failed to loosen racial capitalism's grip. Significant gains through the civil rights movement just a few years earlier were now met with the harsh reality of an unrelenting political economy. If anything, the benefits civil rights accrued to the black and white middle classes highlighted just how bad things were for working-class African Americans, the monumental efforts changing so little for the poorest Americans, including those in the Delta. Access to voting booths and corporate jobs meant little if one couldn't get a decent education or put food on the table.

Clarksdale itself had reached something of a crossroads, which the Cheungs could not have anticipated when they opened their store in the mid-1950s. Between then and now, the world had changed. The civil rights movement had stretched the national conscience, but it was still to be seen whether anything permanent would come of it. The South's Confederate culture had shown itself to be impressively resilient. It was also the case that the political economy that had made slavery necessary for so long was

¹³⁶ Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, 228.

¹³⁷ Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton*, 103–108. In some instances, food stamps revitalized Chinese grocery stores whose customers could not afford to patronize the stores without government assistance. Author interview with Bobby Jue, June 3, 2020.

¹³⁸ John G. Thornell, "A Culture in Decline: The Mississippi Delta Chinese," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 30 (2008): 196–202 (196).

now, in the late 1960s, awakening to aftermarket opportunities for making money off empowered, integrated, and interested African Americans. The growing commodification of Blues culture would serve as a case in point.¹³⁹ The arrival of post-civil rights government-sponsored programs benefited Clarksdale greatly, and a city that had on several occasions hosted Martin Luther King, Jr., now saw the likes of Bobby Kennedy coming through to tout the changes brought on in part by King's efforts. Still, the legacy of the civil rights movement remained fuzzy—and hotly contested. It was always the case that the movement bore significant internal divisions, and in places like Clarksdale those divisions could be felt as the NAACP and more radical groups like SNCC presented very different accounts of uplift. SNCC especially relied on imported liberal ideas, including more confrontational methods of direct action. And while the civil rights movement had improved some things, much remained the same. If elements within SNCC and the NAACP grew increasingly impatient, even incensed, they had good reason for it. The black freedom struggle had long understood racial capitalism's processes and commitments—hence, the war on poverty naturally followed the fight for civil rights. One of the most assertive measures organized by Clarksdale activists had been direct-action boycotts against downtown businesses. They understood that local businesses were conduits for Southern racism. Just five years before the Cheungs' store was burned down, an African American man was killed by police officers—on some accounts, as he begged for his life. Ernest Jell had gotten into an argument with the manager of a local establishment before the police showed up and shot him dead. The name of the establishment was, as it happens, "Fair Deal Grocery."

In her book, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, historian Françoise N. Hamlin describes Clarksdale in the heady days of the late 1960s: "Spurred on by the slow progress of the movement, the lack of jobs for African Americans, the increasing desperation, and the growing militancy among some activists, some became even more angry. In some urban areas, anger had already turned to violence. For some, the disillusionment derived from bitterness with the realization that much of the benefit from hard-won federal legislation never reached them and that they remained forgotten as mechanization continued to deplete the work supply and as harsh winters endangered

¹³⁹ For discussion along these lines, see Margaret E. Farrar et al., "Privatization, Marketization, and Neoliberalism—The Political Dynamics of Post-Katrina New Orleans: A Discussion of Cedric Johnson's 'The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans,'" *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (2012): 709–726.

many families.”¹⁴⁰ While neither Hamlin nor the extant literature mentions the burning of the Cheungs’ store, the portrait Hamlin offers helps us understand it.¹⁴¹ Penney’s sister Bonnie remembered the fire this way:

I guess the Chinese had been having problems with the blacks for a while, especially with the civil rights movement coming on and the people getting a little more militant. During the mid-sixties, there were a number of boycotts of the Chinese grocery stores because the blacks from the North said, “The whites are exploiting you and the Chinese are exploiting you. All the Chinese are is an extension of the whites. If they wanted to be like us, they would have come to our schools, they would have moved into our neighborhoods, and they would be helping us and working with us rather than being apart from us.” Then they started throwing Molotov cocktails through the windows and that kind of thing. At that time my parents didn’t live in the back of the store anymore, and that was a good thing. Someone threw a Molotov cocktail into the back storeroom and it started a fire and it burnt the store down.¹⁴²

The complexities of Delta life make it hard to know exactly what happened.¹⁴³ Was the fire the work of outside agitators who knew little about

¹⁴⁰ Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, 219. My account of Clarksdale is largely derived from Hamlin’s text, specifically 3, 124–125, 135, 212, and 228.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 3, 124–125, 135, 212, and 219.

¹⁴² Lew, “Out of Place,” 290.

¹⁴³ While I found occasional mention of the Cheung family in the *Clarksdale Press Register* between 1967 and 1972, I did not find a story on this particular episode. The *Clarksdale Press Register* did report related incidents on August 30, 1967, one of which involved a Cheung family: “Mrs. Cheung said that her husband first thought ‘some children’ playing in the area had broken his store’s front window with a rock until he noticed the shattered fire bomb on the pavement outside. When thrown, the makeshift bomb apparently glanced off a large metal roof support just inside the glass and fell back outside, Collins said. It did not catch fire.” The story’s report on the other incident stated, “A witness saw a lone Negro man pitch a Molotov cocktail through [another Delta Chinese store] window and unsuccessfully chased him, Police Chief Ben Collins said. But there were no witnesses to the incident at the grocery store. The quick action of two policemen kept [the store] from burning.” About the two incidents, “there is no conclusive evidence that the two ‘bombs’ were connected.” The story also relates, “The [store] came under recent fire in a NAACP missive that charged the business with discriminatory service. Tom’s Food Market and another store in the Negro residential area were declared ‘off limits’ for Negroes in a newsletter dated Feb 7, 1966, because ‘the owners are too good to associate with Negroes. They have changed their address to the white section of the city to prevent their children having to go with school with Negroes.’” Vincent Lee, “Bombs Hurled at Business in Clarksdale,” *Clarksdale Press Register*, August 30, 1967. In all likelihood “Tom’s Food Market” refers to Penney and Bonnie’s father Tom, but the incident reported here differs significantly from the episode Penney and Bonnie related in their respective oral histories (see Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Penney Gong interview, October 7, 1999, and Bonnie C. Lew, “I Always Felt out of Place There”). Tom’s Food Market was among the Clarksdale businesses damaged (by “rocks and bricks”) during unrest following Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. Curtis Wilkie, “Vandals Strike in Clarksdale,” *Clarksdale Press Register*, April 5, 1968. One is not sure how to think about the

the shared history of the Delta Chinese and their black neighbors? Was it the result of locals who had grown tired of “foreigners” profiting from their problems? Did those who set fire that day see the store’s owners as white, or representing whiteness, or worse, becoming white? Or perhaps whites had found a way to turn the local community against outside agitators, falsely blaming civil rights workers by torching the store knowing that the Chinese didn’t matter anyway. In each scenario, one catches flashbacks of Calle de los Negros (discussed in Chapter 1), the dispossessed caught up in ritual violence meant to mollify a frustrated body politic by cannibalizing its model minorities, Dr. Gene Tong then and the Cheung family store now. Once again race would get in the way of what could have been a new consensus, oppressed peoples refusing the divide-and-conquer terms of their oppression. Instead, race and capital became coemerging principles, stratification and its built-in antagonisms pitting racialized groups against each other in a scene eerily played out against the backdrop of civil rights.

Accordingly, let us conclude this chapter by considering an analysis that situates analogous questions against a similar background while trying to keep in focus both the political economic and identarian framing, until the latter characteristically takes over. Critical theorist Jared Sexton’s “Properties of Coalition: Blacks, Asians, and the Politics of Policing” assumes as its point of departure violent clashes between Korean American merchants and African Americans during the 1992 Los Angeles riots which resulted in dozens of deaths and hundreds of arrests and destroyed 1,600 Korean American businesses totaling \$400 million.¹⁴⁴ While the specific circumstances differ in significant ways, there is enough continuity to bring out important variations between the approach I have been developing and Sexton’s identarian

episode not coming up in the *Clarksdale Press Register*. It is certainly possible that I missed the story or that something happened with the archiving, or both. Unless one thinks that on separate occasions Bonnie and Penney grossly exaggerated and incorrectly dated the 1967 incident, there is little reason to doubt their accounts of the 1969 episode, especially given what the reported history does convey.

¹⁴⁴ Jared Sexton, “Proprieties of Coalition: Blacks, Asians, and the Politics of Policing,” *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2010): 87–108. Specific page citations are noted in the text. While Sexton, like many commentators, chose to focus on the relationship between African Americans and Korean Americans, Latinx communities also figured significantly. See Edward T. Chang and Jeanette Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City: Building Community in Los Angeles and Beyond* (New York: NYU Press, 1999); David E. Hayes-Bautista, Werner O. Schink, and Maria Hayes-Bautista, “Latinos and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots: A Behavioral Sciences Perspective,” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 15, no. 4 (1993): 427–448. Sexton and others use the description “the Los Angeles Uprising” rather than “riots” and for good reason. I use the latter only for ease of reference.

approach.¹⁴⁵ Sexton's essay challenges an Asian American theory that racial solidarity (in particular, post-riot solidarity between "Blacks" and "Asians") requires going beyond black and white which in turn requires switching "the terms of debate" from race to class (88 and 94). Examining "how the *desire* for coalition is rhetorically structured," Sexton detects something sinister motivating the bait and switch (99, emphasis in the original)—namely, the conceptual evisceration of black life. Sexton reasons that because classism is about racism and racism is about African Americans, moving classism away from racism entails moving away from the one domain of thought that would grant attention to black life and suffering.¹⁴⁶ Sexton takes specific issue with how solidarity-minded Asian Americans have explained away "essentially" exploitative practices akin to the Delta Chinese business model as I have described it (93). They have done so by claiming the victim card for themselves, blaming on the one hand American imperialism and on the other African American resentment. Claiming victimhood allows them to "bracket out" African American suffering and Asian American complicity in that suffering (98). The race-class bait and switch ends up absolving them of their racism. Sexton's passing nod to racial capitalism is meant to play up, rather than diminish, the role racism plays in a political economy that plies Asian American success against African Americans, a scenario Asian Americans seem all too happy for (99).¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ For example, like the Delta Chinese, Korean Americans report high rates of Christianity, nearly 75 percent according to the last U.S. Census. See Joseph Liu, "Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, July 19, 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/>.

¹⁴⁶ See also Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 51–55.

¹⁴⁷ Throughout the essay, Sexton knocks Asian American theorists for failing to consider such questions. Yet each of the following theorists, most of whom Sexton references, engages in quite nuanced discussions: Kim, *Bitter Fruit*; Elaine Kim, "Home Is Where the Han Is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals," in *Reading Rodney King / Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 215–235; Edna Bonacich, "Making It' in America: A Social Evaluation of the Ethics of Entrepreneurship," *Sociological Perspectives* 30, no. 4 (1987): 446–466; Edna Bonacich, "The Social Costs of Immigrant Entrepreneurship," *Amerasia Journal* 14, no. 1 (1988): 119–128; Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965–1982* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); Pyong Gap Min, *Ethnic Business Enterprise: Korean Small Business in Atlanta* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1988); Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Jeff Chang, "Race, Class, Conflict and Empowerment," in *Los Angeles—Struggles Toward Multiethnic Community: Asian American, African American, and Latino Perspectives*, ed. Edward Chang and Russell Leong (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1993), 87–107. For an extended discussion, see Calvin Cheung-Miaw, "Asian Americans and the Color-Line: A History of Asian American Studies, 1969–2000" (PhD diss., Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 2021).

Sexton's critique resembles a complaint I previously registered regarding Asian American theorists who evacuate racism of its political economic content. However, at bottom for me is the domination and exploitation that in turn requires theological explanation, which I try to provide through an account of distorted creaturely desire, a political economy parasitic on a prior Θεία οικονομία. Accordingly, racism is fundamentally about political economies and how they operate, and specifically racial capitalism as expropriative of what I call in Chapter 5 "deep economy." The theological casting makes my story a political economic story through and through, and does nothing to "absolve" racial capitalists of their racism (96). Because Sexton subsumes political economy to libidinal economy, at bottom for him is solely the racism which the exceptionalist reasoning renders *undifferentiably* anti-black (97; I return to Sexton's libidinal economy in Chapter 6). Hence, his resistance to "going beyond" black and white for fear that doing so would "de-politicize" racial capitalism (97). Or, more precisely, because antiblack racism is for him the whole story, he needs nothing else. The political economic approach conceptually gets him to the racism, which he positions as explanatorily basic. Sexton imagines a primordial (semiotic, paradigmatic, literary) antiblackness that becomes the *raison d'être* of a libidinally political economy, the latter finally an installation of what literary theorist Iyko Day characterizes as "an antiblack base that generates a global racial superstructure."¹⁴⁸ Asian Americans, then, play the victim card in order to "evade" culpability in antiblackness (94). Only by dealing in half-truths can they attain the moral purity of the ingénue who only exploits because exploited. This mythical self-presentation enables Asian American theorists to make their case not only for going beyond black and white but also for coalitional solidarity with others who have similarly suffered.¹⁴⁹

Disabusing Asian Americans of these hopes, Sexton explains that their suffering ensues as "a *relatively* privileged experience" insofar as it rides on the back of black suffering (98, emphasis in the original).¹⁵⁰ Interestingly,

¹⁴⁸ Iyko Day, "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 102–121 (108). See also Jared Sexton, "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts," *Lateral: Journal of Cultural Studies Association*, no. 1 (2012), <https://csalateral.org/issue/1/ante-anti-blackness-afterthoughts-sexton/>.

¹⁴⁹ For a parallel argument regarding indigenous decolonial and settler decolonial arguments, see Jared Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (2014): 583–597. I return to this article in Chapter 6.

¹⁵⁰ Along these lines, see Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 103, no. 28.2 (2010): 31–56. See especially Sexton's discussion of what he calls the "Oppression Olympics dogma" on 47–48. For an account of solidarity that tries to make good on

he gives no account here of what he elsewhere calls “the *longue durée* and *global scale* of anti-blackness,” which goes unnamed on the pages of the essay, seemingly self-interpreting realities like Latasha Harlin’s death at the hands of Soon Ja Du as a bulwark against the claims of Asian American suffering.¹⁵¹ It requires no introduction, leaving the impression that relative to black suffering, all other suffering is derivative, and that only antiblack racism matters.¹⁵² Along the way, Sexton helps himself to the very thing he chides Asian American theorists for. Both trade in accounts of suffering that purport to explain themselves and thereby elude historicizing analyses that would demystify claims of moral and conceptual purity. Both deny, or simply ignore, material histories that tell other stories. As such, neither takes seriously the racial capitalist origins of race and racism. The difference comes in the respective goals for which Sexton thinks the claims are made. Asian American theorists claim victimhood and moral purity in order to escape culpability and find common cause with other victims. Such gestures are not required of African Americans. As pure victims, the conceptual site from which all racism derives meaning, it is not incumbent upon them to join *others* in solidarity. Sexton’s spellbinding argument forces “nonblack nonwhite minorities” to either beg a place around blackness or become white.¹⁵³ As we will see in the next chapter, these tropic formulations have become commonplace in the reigning orthodoxy.

Sexton’s claims, see Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange, “Toward Thick Solidarity,” *Radical History Review* 2018, no. 131 (2018): 189–198.

¹⁵¹ Jared Sexton, “Affirmation in the Dark: Racial Slavery and Philosophical Pessimism,” *The Comparatist* 43, October (2019): 90–111 (102). Regarding Latasha Harlins’s death as a precursor to the riots, see Brenda E. Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁵² See, for example, Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 271n16.

¹⁵³ Jared Sexton, “Unbearable Blackness,” *Cultural Critique* 90, Spring (2015): 159–178 (168).

3

Becoming White in the White/Black Binary

It is difficult to sign race while designing racelessness.

—Toni Morrison, “Home”¹

In America, the color of my skin had stood between myself and me.

—James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*²

I think it is an overgeneralization and to some extent a misrepresentation to say that immigrant Chinese wanted to be white. I think they just wanted to be well off financially but essentially still Chinese. I saw no effort on my father’s part to become a part of the white society. They wanted their children to be Chinese.

—Sam Sue, Delta Chinese American³

The economy that enabled the Delta Chinese to prosper in what they called “the land of opportunity” would later encourage their children to leave the Delta behind as they took up residence in other parts of the political economy. They would leave for places like Houston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco where their value as Asian Americans could be better appreciated.⁴ As these subsequent generations of Delta Chinese reached model minority

¹ Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*, ed. Waheema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 8.

² James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name; More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Vintage, 1992), xi.

³ Quoted in John Jung, *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton: Lives of Mississippi Delta Chinese Grocers* (Yin & Yang Press, 2008), 183–184.

⁴ Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1982), 60, 65, 96, 117, 127, 141, and 143.

status, they came to realize that their identity as Asian Americans would not be found in places like the Delta. As one Asian American from the Delta put it,

I once thought that I knew exactly who I was, but I don't any more. I'm unsure and confused. In high school I saw myself at first as Delta Chinese, but my friends and everyone treated me as a white American. Then, when I went to college, I tried to be in with the whites, and they told me I was Chinese and sort of shunned me. I feel it, and it hurts. I guess, then, that I am both Chinese and American, but I don't feel comfortable being Chinese, and I cannot be white. It seems like I don't belong in either world. I just think of myself as a person: it's safer that way. All of us are brothers under the skin in this world. I hope I will eventually get out of this confusion. Maybe when I get my degree in pharmacy it'll be different. I'll be somebody then. But one thing is for sure, we ain't "colored" any more.⁵

If not colored and if not white, then what? In my portrayal of the Delta Chinese, I have thus far refrained from mentioning James W. Loewen's landmark *The Mississippi Chinese*, broadly considered the definitive treatment of the Delta Chinese. I have avoided *The Mississippi Chinese* even while aware that subsequent portrayals have largely taken their cues from Loewen's text. And I have done so cognizant that Loewen's book would create a trope that would initiate a novel way of thinking about American racial life. "Becoming white" would end up a staple not only in academic historical literature but also in popular discourses that sought to problematize assimilation as a ruling paradigm. These studies became foundational texts in antiracist thought, launching critical whiteness studies and its attempt to illuminate the reach and reality of racism.

Yet, Loewen's *The Mississippi Chinese* turns out to be wrong in significant ways. And the mistakes he made were carried forward by a slate of historical studies which antiracist arguments down the line came to depend on. The way I portrayed the story of the Delta Chinese in the previous chapter challenges Loewen's becoming-white tropic account. Loewen's story is one about racial identity, whereas mine is about the political economy of racial capitalism. There is an undeniable attraction to his story, owing much to how

⁵ Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 126. See also Ryan Kwan's audio history at "The Mississippi Delta Chinese: An Audiovisual Narrative," <https://www.thedeltachinese.com>

“becoming white” simplifies things—but, I think, to the detriment of getting the story right. Indeed, I see parallels in the ways Loewen, the Court in *Gong Lum v. Rice*, and whoever burned down the Cheungs’ store each failed to understand the Delta Chinese, falsely presuming that, as reported by Bonnie Cheung in the previous chapter, “All the Chinese are is an extension of the whites.”⁶

In *The Myth of the Model Minority*, which figured largely in Chapter 1, Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin argue that the racism Asian Americans face is unique. They do not suffer racial capitalism as I have described it. If anything, Asian Americans look like beneficiaries and perpetrators of racial capitalism. Instead, they have to contend with the social psychological effects of racist microaggressions. Racism may not make them poor, but it will likely make them depressed, withdrawn, disconnected, etc. Contrary to the crude suggestions of the model minority myth, they suffer racism in spite of all their successes, which demonstrates, according to Chou and Feagin, the reach and reality of racism. The cumulative effect of suffering all these injuries is that they want to be white, or at least not black. As Chou and Feagin say, “As our interviews make evident, many people distance themselves from blackness and go to great lengths to cozy up to whiteness. Their own identities often seem to be muddled in their minds as they grapple with how the white framing of Asian Americans dictates who they should, and should not, be. These respondents have learned the racial stereotypes and images of Asian Americans that are central to that dominant framing, racialized lessons they have often internalized.”⁷ Chou and Feagin, like many antiracists, view the desire to be white as one of racism’s most damaging consequences, the internalization of “the white frame.” Toni Morrison offered an especially poignant depiction of this problem in *The Bluest Eye*, with the young African American girl Pecola Breedlove internalizing an antiblackness that eventually destroys her. She desires blue eyes more than anything, believing that blue eyes will allow her to escape her dreadful circumstances: “It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.”⁸

⁶ Bonnie C. Lew, “I Always Felt out of Place There: Growing Up Chinee in Mississippi (1982),” in *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present*, ed. Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 281–291 (290).

⁷ *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2015), 183.

⁸ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 46.

Antiracists have taken Pecola's desire to be white and projected it onto entire histories. As purveyors of a discourse focused on whiteness, they project Pecola's desire far beyond Morrison's story. And, like Chou and Feagin, they believe racism's reach and reality will be most felt internally as individuals subject themselves to white supremacy's biopower, most basically at the level of desire. People want to become white and involve themselves in self-destructive pursuits that might get them there. This differs significantly from the view I have espoused in this book: racism as racial capitalism and its aftermarket installations through which individuals get indexed for exploitative use. The benefit of Chou and Feagin's account is that it does not require for its validation material evidence. For them, racism suffered immaterially is all the worse for its abstractness, for its whiteness. The limitation of this account, as I argued two chapters ago, is that the heavy emphasis on the internal injuries, and the difficulty of tracking them, crowds out consideration of their material causes and consequences.

In this chapter, I turn from the Delta Chinese to how identitarian antiracists have told their story. Whiteness discourse initially came from becoming-white histories that recounted how different Europeans became white. The idea here is that whiteness is a constructed social identity that persons achieve by satisfying certain conditions. The histories together advance what is taken to be a shocking discovery: white people are not born white, but have to become white, and often over against nonwhite people. Works like Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*, Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color*, and David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* became standard antiracist texts and gave antiracism an innovative way of talking about race and racism, namely by emphasizing racial identity as a social psychological phenomenon. I will return to these titles later and the criticisms they faced after publication. What matters now is that a version of the becoming-white trope came some decades before those titles by Ignatiev, Jacobson, and Roediger and would set their course: Loewen's *The Mississippi Chinese*. While a few subsequent portrayals resisted aspects of Loewen's treatment, by and large they accepted the idea that the Delta Chinese could and should be interpreted according to the trope. For followers of Loewen, the Delta Chinese became white which enabled and epitomized not only their success but also that of the model minority myth.

The becoming-white trope is a mistake—but an understandable one. The trope represents the kinds of mistakes one makes when attached to the

broader aesthetic of American race thinking. That aesthetic portrays life in America painted on a canvas bifurcated white and black. Often referred to as “the white/black binary,” it conscripts persons to a mode of binary thinking that reduces everything to just two options. Its becoming-white tropic form imagines persons traversing a narrative landscape stretched between two horizons. Antiracists, especially those deemed neither white nor black, have good reason for protesting the binary’s prevalence and reductive tendencies. Things get strange, however, when antiracists simultaneously protest the binary and float becoming-white tropes, strange because the trope puts the binary in narrative form. How does one account for this performative contradiction? I suggested in the Introduction that insofar as race language deals in ideology, its utterances will constantly run into contradictions. Those protesting the white/black binary while extolling its narrative form serve as an example. They may be contradicting themselves, but their mode of thought is consistent with race thinking, which is originally and inescapably beholden to a controlling aesthetic of white and black. These contradictions, while themselves paradoxical, can be resolved by drawing a line of development between binary thinking and race thinking. Rather than tropic reconstruction, I offered in the previous chapter a complex picture of the Delta Chinese, and therefore of racialized life in America. I do not think reducing matters to the white/black binary or placing everything in becoming-white narrative form tells us very much about racism. Instead, it diminishes what could otherwise be learned into soundbites of the kind, “All the Chinese are is an extension of the whites.” It does tell us something about the current status of antiracist thinking.

There is more to the Delta Mississippi, as I tried to make clear in the last chapter, than becoming white. Indeed, part of what is fascinating about their story is precisely how it confounds the settlements of racial identity, and how their successes and failures show the limitations of racial tropes like the model minority myth and its cottage industry refutations. The problem with the white/black binary is that it is blind to important aspects of Delta Chinese life. Its ideological approach will consistently take the question-begging form “influenced by whiteness, the Delta Chinese wanted to be white.” One can substitute into this formula any number of antiracist notions: “Whiteness is a racial identity; therefore, white people have a racial identity. Whiteness equals white supremacy; therefore, European immigrants become white by adopting white supremacy. Whiteness entails material benefits; therefore,

the material benefits white people receive are a reward for whiteness.”⁹⁹ When everything becomes about racial identity, the uniqueness of the Delta Chinese disappears, reduced to paler versions of prevailing racial abstractions. They no longer matter (their story, their lives, their words) because their lives do not fit orthodox paradigms.

In order to get to all of this, I start this chapter by describing what I have mentioned in passing as the invention of race. This history will help us understand why race thinking bifurcates. I will show that race thinking is binary thinking. I portray antiracist confusions about the binary as unavoidable consequences of continuing to think racially. I then review Loewen’s binary treatment of the Delta Chinese. I show how Loewen’s tropic reading serves as a precursor to later instances of the trope’s binary historiography. It will be illuminating then to visit the troubled scholarly reception those histories faced in order to illumine the larger conceptual problems plaguing Loewen’s interpretation. What all of this will show is that Loewen’s reductive account of the Delta Chinese is a species of the confusions implicit in contemporary antiracism. The reductive and dismissive tendencies of those tropes follow as a consequence of the binary thinking inhabiting antiracist thought. My argument takes a rather circuitous path in order to trace how convoluted antiracist thought has become. The intended effect of this and the previous chapters is to raise the question of how Loewen’s ur-text could have gotten the Delta Chinese so wrong and why so many antiracists have followed him into those mistakes. Once one casts Asian Americans as a racial group, they will then be read in terms of varying declensions of whiteness. As with so many of identarianism’s confusions and convolutions, this is not an accidental but necessary feature of contemporary antiracism. Concluding this chapter, I turn to one of Loewen’s primary interlocutors, the Trinidadian black Marxist Oliver Cromwell Cox, whose thought Loewen sets his thesis against. I consider Loewen wrong exactly where Cox was right, and so attempt to supplant Loewen’s becoming-white binary thinking with Cox’s more complex formulation. Throughout, I presume my portrayal of the “Delta Chinese,” as presented in the previous chapter, in order to challenge Loewen’s “Mississippi Chinese.”

⁹⁹ This is how Barbara J. Fields exemplifies antiracist thinking in “Whiteness, Racism, and Identity,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (2001): 48–56 (53). I return to this quote and other critiques of whiteness narratives later.

The Convenience of Race

Ever since Juan F. Perea's law review article "The Black/White Binary of Race" was published, antiracist theorists have been trying to figure out how to talk about race beyond the binary.¹⁰ Political scientist Claire Jean Kim talks about racial "triangulation" where Asian Americans are measured against whites and blacks relative to specific values (i.e., inferior/superior and foreigner/insider). Kim thinks that triangulation is what grants the model minority myth its disciplinary power.¹¹ Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva discusses, in his turn, an emerging "tri-racial order" where "honorary whites" like those from Latinx and Asian American communities are permitted closer proximity to white racial identity, though "their standing and status will be dependent upon Whites' wishes and practices. 'Honorary' means they will remain secondary, will still face discrimination, and will not receive equal treatment in society."¹² The binary will, importantly for philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff, blind us to the circumstances Kim and Bonilla-Silva describe. Instead, "we need an expanded analysis of racism and an attentiveness to the specifications of various forms it can take in regard to different groups, rather than continuing to accept the idea that it operates in basically one way, with one axis, that is differentially distributed among various groups."¹³ These theorizations are helpful for understanding the particular circumstances racialized groups face and how the binary limits them. Especially helpful have been those studies examining the practical consequences of the binary.¹⁴ Yet, these

¹⁰ Juan F. Perea, "The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The 'Normal Science' of American Racial Thought," *California Law Review* 85, no. 5 (1997): 1213–1258.

¹¹ Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–138.

¹² Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "From Bi-Racial to Tri-Racial: Towards a New System of Racial Stratification in the USA," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27, no. 6 (2004): 931–950 (944).

¹³ Linda Martín Alcoff, "Latino/As, Asian Americans, and the Black-White Binary," *Journal of Ethics* 7, no. 1 (2003): 5–27 (25).

¹⁴ See, for example, Clement Lai, "The Racial Triangulation of Space: The Case of Urban Renewal in San Francisco's Fillmore District," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102, no. 1 (2012): 151–170; Jun Xu and Jennifer C. Lee, "The Marginalized 'Model' Minority: An Empirical Examination of the Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Social Forces* 91, no. 4 (2013): 1363–1397; Rogelio A. Lasso, "Some Potential Casualties of Moving Beyond the Black/White Paradigm to Build Racial Coalitions (Moving Beyond the Black/White Paradigm: Coalition Building in the Twenty-First Century)," *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice* 12, no. 1 (2005): 81–92; Marta María Maldonado, "Racial Triangulation of Latino/a Workers by Agricultural Employers," *Human Organization* 65, no. 4 (2006): 353–361; Inseo Son, "Partly Colored or Almost White? Racial Intermediacy and Identificational Ambivalence of Grown Children of Korean Immigrants," *Discourse & Society* 25, no. 6 (2014): 766–782; Adrian Cruz, "On the Job: White Employers, Workers of Color, and Racial Triangulation Theory," *Sociology Compass* 10, no. 10 (2016): 918–927.

studies have not come to terms with how the binary came about in the first place, which means that they will miss how limiting it is.

Antiracists who protest the binary by trying to press beyond the white and black aesthetic are caught in a contradiction. Race is fundamentally a way of talking about relationships between those such talk deems white and black. More precisely, race became an exploitative mode of speech that rendered some white and some derivatively black. Over time, others would factor in and need to be added to the mix. But those additions, insofar as they were added to *something*, were additions to the binary's standing logic. To understand this, one has to step back and examine how and why race was invented.

Race as we know it arose from a set of circumstances that required an instrument that could ideologically justify dominative exploitation. Race became this instrument and racism its deployment, its way of talking about and seeing the world that allowed exploitative activity to come off as natural. Through Cedric J. Robinson's initial insights about racial capitalism, we have already reviewed one moment of this development. His discovery of "races" among Europeans helped him recognize race was, before anything else, a category of labor. In this chapter, we examine another moment, one where race helps to categorize a property relation. Ignorance of this momentous history leads some antiracists to take race for granted, and then protest its confinement to the binary, as if the discourse did not emerge from the priority of white racial identity. Whatever its precise point of origin, we know from its earliest American expressions that race language facilitated three central aspects of political economy: surplus value, labor alienation, and worker dissatisfaction. In the same way that the Chinese question generally and Delta Chinese immigration specifically resulted from practical matters related to labor, so race language began in earnest as the attempt to resolve certain labor problems. An early American economy set on extracting value from recently appropriated land would require cheap labor.¹⁵ In the

¹⁵ Marxist analysis would later thematize this problem-oriented approach to labor as distinctly capitalist. For Marx, the capitalist realizes that a natural labor relationship problematically leads to the "astonishing" reality that value will exactly equal its cost of production (labor and materials). Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 91. The capitalist faces the unfortunate reality that he will not profit from his ownership. He will need to figure out some way to extract value in excess of his investment. He realizes then that he does not want labor as such, but labor cheaper than the value it produces. Profit, for the capitalist, can only be had by establishing surplus value through cheap labor. He comes to this revelation by further realizing that he needs to sever the natural relationship between workers and labor and materials and land. He then creates a process of production that can extract value from workers and land and deliver profit to owners. The goal is profit extraction, and exploitation of land and labor is the means. The more successful he is at extracting value by exploiting land and workers, the more he can extract

American case, the appropriation of lands from indigenous peoples availed vast natural resources ripe for extraction. But the vastness of the lands would require an equally vast labor supply. The capitalist able to solve this problem had before him endless opportunities for profit. But to do so, he would need to deal with issues the production process itself created. The regimentation of land ownership already meant that the materials were his as the proprietor of land value. But what about workers, without whom the appropriated land would lay fallow? How could he *own* labor such as to make persons-qua-laborers property? Wage and indentured labor when cheap were profitable but not nearly as profitable as outright ownership.¹⁶ Slavery would make labor not the worker's to sell or lease as she wished, but rather the owner's, making the worker merely a steward of the owner's property. Ownership would permanently separate workers and labor. This permanence could be achieved two ways: outright permanence through chattel slavery and practical permanence through manipulating the terms of indenture.¹⁷ The two together could supply owners with a perpetual supply of cheap labor. Under this arrangement, the owner's ability to extract surplus value would be limited only by what his workers could do and the number of workers he had. He would find ways to push them to do more which in turn would allow him to procure more.

Unsurprisingly, workers grew dissatisfied with the terms of this problematic arrangement, pressing land owners to account for its imbalance. This led to an additional problem. The nature of the work meant that laborers greatly outnumbered owners, but given the terms of the property regime, owners conspicuously hauled in the lion's share of the profits.¹⁸ How would the

and exploit. Marx shows how exploitation drives industrially socialized structures, involving both adult men and women as well as children, continuing all the way through the judicial and legislative processes meant to hold the exploitation in check. By exploiting his position relative to the position of his workers, the capitalist learns to produce and extract value *in surplus* to the worker's labor, hence exploiting her by dispossessing her of her body.

¹⁶ Through her study of the British "transition" from African enslaved to Asian (Chinese and Indian) indentured labor, Lisa Lowe shows how the distinction is not so easily maintained. See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 43–72.

¹⁷ See William Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 2:26.

¹⁸ The system proved harsh for smallholding freemen, who were at one time perceived as potential threats. "According to an account in 1667, a man, on the average, could produce 1,200 pounds of tobacco each year, which after taxes left him with approximately 50 shillings. It felt so little, in fact, that the colony's secretary marveled, 'I can attribute it to nothing but the great mercy of God . . . that keeps them [the small planters] from mutiny and confusion.'" T. H. Breen, "A Changing Labor Force and Race Relations in Virginia 1660–1710," *Social History* 7, no. 1 (1973): 2–25 (6).

owners deal with dissatisfaction from all these workers? This was not a theoretical question, as harsh working conditions combined with wildly unbalanced compensation threatened murderous revolt. Unless he was willing to give up the exploitative arrangement and its profits, he would need to figure out how to deal with the problems created by the labor scheme. Race would come to solve for all this. Race justified permanent slave labor in a way that could ingeniously redirect dissatisfaction and divide laborers.¹⁹

A series of legislative acts categorically assigned persons to respective classes of temporary and permanent labor and ultimately from laborers to property. The assignments were made according to criteria retrofitted to extend and advance the labor scheme by ideologically explaining away the conspicuous arrangements. In October 1670, Act XII of the Laws of Virginia “resolved and enacted that all servants not being [C]hristians imported into this colony by shipping shalbe [sic] slaves for their lives.”²⁰ Three decades later, with the labor distinction firmly in place, the Laws in 1705 added to that designation by distinguishing whites from those classified as “negroes, Mulattos and Indians.” Along with the 1670 stipulation “imported into this colony by shipping,” the Act differentiated imported African slaves from other nonwhite options. Without saying as much, “black” had been created as a category. “Negroes” were now, as a function of their permanent slave status, distinguishable from whites and others. As James Curtis Ballagh long ago noted, “slavery rapidly assumed a solidarity in regard to the one alien race, the negro, that simplified both the domestic and the legal problems involved.”²¹ Starting with those deemed “white” (which, of course, conveniently reflected the designation of those enacting and profiting from the distinctions), the Law’s race scheme came with the following entailments and constraints, further grammatical specifications of what “white” practically indicated:

- No one can “whip a [C]hristian white servant naked” (2:448)
- No “negros, mulattos, or Indians, although Christian, or Jews, Moors, Mahometans, or other infidels, shall, at any time, purchase any [C]hristian

¹⁹ “By the middle of the seventeenth century, Negro freemen sharing and fulfilling the same ideals and aspirations that whites held were no anomaly in the Chesapeake region. An Eastern Shore tax list of 1668 counted nearly a third of black tithables free.” Ira Berlin, “Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society of British Mainland North America,” *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 1 (1980): 44–78 (69).

²⁰ Hening, *Statutes at Large*, 2:283. Further citations will be noted in the text.

²¹ James Curtis Ballagh, *A History of Slavery in Virginia* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1902), 51.

servant, nor any other, except for their own complexions, or such as are declared slaves by this act" (2:449–450)

- White persons who marry nonwhites will be sent to prison (2:453–454)
- Rewards stipulated for taking up runaway servants or slaves (2:455–456)
- If a slave resists anyone's orders, and if correcting that slave accidentally kills them, it is not a felony (2:459)

Indexing these labor distinctions according to race (black labor as permanent and all other labor as temporary) allowed the differences between the white and black races to amount to a difference in kind that could then justify why black enslavement, now a matter of labor as property, *should* be permanent.²² As a piece of ideology, the scheme's reasoning assumed circular form: "because black, slave; because slave, black." This distinction would indeed make all the difference for white laborers, and much would be made of the difference. As Theodore Allen writes in *The Invention of the White Race*,

The prospect for stability of a system of capitalist agriculture based on life-time hereditary bond-servitude depended on the ability of the ruling elite to include the non-“yeoman” European-Americans to settle for this counterfeit of social mobility. The solution was to establish a new birthright not only for Anglos but for every Euro-American, the “white” identity that “set them at a distance,” to use Sir Francis’s phrase, from the laboring-class African-Americans, and enlisted them as active, or at least passive, supporters of lifetime bondage of African-Americans.²³

Repeated use of the distinction would be enough to justify subsequent treatment of whites and their now categorically designated opposite, “blacks.”

A parallel demarcation would come later with the Reconstruction-era conception of white racial identity as a “psychological wage” paid to poor

²² “To be white gave the distinction of color even to the agricultural servants . . . to be white and also to be free, combined the distinction of color with the distinction of liberty. . . . There are numerous proofs that any suggestion as to social equality with the negro was resented even by the most indigent and illiterate section of the white population.” Philip Alexander Bruce, *Social Life of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* (Lynchburg, VA: Bell, 1927), 103.

²³ Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Volume 2. The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York: Verso, 2012), 542, 543, 561, 562, and 563. Further citations will be noted in the text.

whites in exchange for capitulating to class oppression and poverty.²⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois's conception accounted for, even after Emancipation, black suffering as continuous in some distant way with poor white suffering. Emancipation would require that the terms of labor be restated now that the previous legal designations had mostly been abrogated. Fortunately for white elites, the designations had been in place long enough to bestow on the psychological wage lasting value. Both instances were byproducts of political economic arrangements requiring disciplinary instruments that could control against class agitation and, more worrisome, uprising and revolt.

Together the laws and Reconstruction served as bookends for a two-hundred-year period that saw the piecemeal formulation of the white/black binary.²⁵ Race as a concept showed itself capable of repurposing centuries of labor problems to the benefit of class elites (epitomized by this book's planters, financiers, internationalists, labor managers, politicians, and development corporations). White laborers *could*, insofar as they were white, achieve elite status, whereas the slave's inability to escape her predicament became a function—and a fault—of an inborn blackness. The dissatisfaction (to continue to use the forensic description) was directed away from those responsible for it to those now scapegoated as the source of their own problems.²⁶ Racial domination, with its many processes and commitments, would then come to conveniently legitimate its own occurrence. It prepared the stage for deep-seated rage whenever white dominance got narrated as losing ground. Given the rhetorical role resentment plays in race mythology, such narratives don't act as add-ons to a raceless story. It is the whole thing, the American jeremiad. The current procession of American grievance, and its populist attractions to demagoguery, is less the result of a new culture war and more imbrication of the same old thing.²⁷ This is not to deny the reality of white disenfranchisement, but to clarify its sources.

As things shifted decisively to second slavery's entrenched white/black bifurcation, the categorical justifications came to stand apart from the particular material instances that gave rise to them. Any originating history of

²⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 700.

²⁵ For an account of white life under these conditions, see Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 159–174.

²⁶ “These laws increased the status of plain whites, making it easier for planters to recruit them as a population of guards against their slaves, and as armed retainers in the conquest of Indian lands.” William McKee Evans, *Open Wound: The Long View of Race in America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 42.

²⁷ On this score, see Jeffrey Bell's *Populism and Elitism: Politics in the Age of Equality* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1992).

semantic development would be forgotten. Indeed, it would need to be if the status of racial distinction was to slip the reins of its lowly practical origins and reach the heights of ideological legitimization. It would be fundamental ontology that would account for all the permutations race would assume.²⁸ The more unnatural the arrangements became, the more work the ideology would need to do. Thence the career of race language would begin with the forced separation of value and labor from land and bodies and travel through all those metaphysical distinctions that made for the contrivance of discrete categories of human kinds. Each step along the way would meet with violence proportionate to the force necessary to displace conventions from their everyday homes (e.g., the natural relationship between labor and laborer).²⁹ Because neither “black” and “slave” nor “white” and “wage” shared a basis in human biology, because nothing in nature required these associations, material culture would need to be made to testify to their identity. Slave society showed itself to be remarkably capable of furnishing the necessary formulations, marshalling everything from junk science to spectacular displays of cruelty in order to make the immoral, illogical, and destructive seem obviously moral, logical, and edifying. All of this produced and importantly disguised the intended effect, so that rather than joined in solidarity by shared oppression, poor laborers became divided by race.³⁰

The ideological nature of the distinction, that it subsisted as political speech detached from naturally occurring reality, meant that it did not answer to anything other than the grammar of its own assertion. Race meant whatever labor managers (and in the case of the white working class, those they managed) said it meant. “White” and “black” were conventions of pure politics. By indexing persons accordingly, race language provided a lasting

²⁸ See Oscar Handlin and Mary F. Handlin, “Origins of Southern Labor,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1950): 199–222.

²⁹ For a parallel account, see Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 90–92.

³⁰ “Why was social transformation given this particular form, and how was it brought about? . . . it was only because ‘race’ consciousness superseded class-consciousness that the continental plantation bourgeoisie was able to achieve and maintain the degree of social control necessary for proceeding with capital accumulation on the basis of chattel bond-labor. That the plantation bourgeoisie and those engaged in the labor supply trade favored the imposition of perpetual bondage on the plantation labor force can be seen as simply prudent business practice designed, in terms of current jargon, ‘to keep down inflationary labor cost in order to promote economic growth and to make Anglo-America competitive,’ by utilizing opportunities in Africa newly opened up by the ‘expanding global economy.’” Allen, *Invention of the White Race*, 240–241. See also Bruce: “Small landowners[,] after passing through a period of indentured service, were as inferior socially to their neighbors of the gentry as the same class in contemporary England were to the principal English landowners.” Bruce, *Social Life of Virginia*, 101.

solution to early American labor problems, specifically by assigning some to the category of permanent chattel and others to temporary indenture. The genius came in relating the two designations to one another, a divide-and-conquer maneuver that proved so successful that it endures long after the political economy's early forms gave way.³¹

Framing the Mississippi Chinese

The previous section recounted how race was invented to address specific labor problems. More specifically, the categories “white” and “black” designated labor types for the sake of dominative exploitation. Purveyors of this language did not start with a formal category called “race” and then fill it with respective content—for example, “white,” “black,” and “yellow.” Rather, “white”—like its opposite, “black”—named a differentiation that legitimated a practical arrangement. The ontological packaging came later in order to lend greater weight to the designations. We do not first have “race” and then “white” and “black”—with “yellow” and “brown” later thrown in. Rather, “race” is placed on top of a scheme that already assigns some white and some black, a categorical distinction jerry-rigged to a preexisting state of affairs. Race comes prepackaged with content that is binary in form. The binary is part of the basic grammar of race language. Evacuated of the white/black binary, “race” loses meaning.

This explains why when Americans talk about Asian Americans, they do so in binary terms. Even efforts that explicitly push against the binary, like the current book, revert again and again to its controlling formal conditions (i.e., “Asian Americans don’t fit on the *white/black* binary”). Committing to race talk entails committing to binary talk. The work of including other races requires fitting them into (or, more precisely, onto) the binary. Antiracists who protest the binary seem confused about what race names and what it means to talk racially. They can regret the invention of white and black racial identities, but they cannot coherently talk about race without acquiescing in some fashion to the binary. It might be easier here to turn the principle

³¹ Attempts to divide white and black laborers appear clearly in statutes such as those that forbade intermarriage, prohibited slaves from striking whites of any class, and transferred property from slaves to poor whites—“a highly effective device for dissociating the two.” Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 333.

around and say that the reason people talk in terms of the binary is because they talk in terms of race.

Within the confines of race thinking, the only way for recounting the stories of Asian Americans is through a binary framework traversing whiteness and blackness. As the aforementioned Kim, Bonilla-Silva, and Alcoff discovered, this reduction of Asian American life is not an accidental feature of talking racially about Asian Americans. It is what it means to talk racially about Asian Americans. While one can find variants of the trope within popular parlance and other academic fields (one thinks particularly of literary studies), its deployment is especially prominent in historical studies under the spell of racial thinking (i.e., “assimilation” and its equivalents).

Such has become the fate of the Delta Chinese. James W. Loewen surely offers the definitive edition of this story in *The Mississippi Chinese*, which comes with the telling subtitle *Between Black and White*. Loewen’s book, which was first published by Harvard University Press in 1971, set the academic mold for understanding the Delta Chinese, and would two decades later help produce a slate of becoming-white tropic histories.³² Here, I describe that mold, draw out its salient features, explicate its relationship to the binary, and then, in the following section, identify its deep influence on orthodox antiracism.

Those acquainted with becoming-white tropes will recognize the rough outline of Loewen’s narrative. Specifically, Loewen imagines the Chinese entering a world where social life unfolds in a highly structured way around stable lines of identity and identity performance, where visible threads of behavior are ruled by exacting rubrics of etiquette and powerful mores operate at the level of social psychology. For Loewen, the substance of that social life is race. This structured society and its engrained lines of racial code determined everything about the Mississippi Chinese, from their entrance into Southern culture through their brief tenure as plantation hands to their discovery of entrepreneurial niches between whites and blacks. In Loewen’s telling, the Chinese come to the South not at the behest of planters in need of labor; rather, the Chinese were imported in order to fortify an antebellum racial scheme that obtained irrespective of the political economy. For Loewen, the labor shortage is but an occasion, the symbol of a runaway racial situation that needed to be restored to prior conditions. In the

³² James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1988). Citations will be noted in the text.

alternative interpretation I offered two chapters ago, General Miles's appeal made the case for the Delta Chinese on labor needs indexed to race. Loewen quotes another appeal, found in the *Vicksburg Times*, which makes its case by inverting the relationship between race and labor: "Emancipation has spoiled the negro, and carried him away from fields of agriculture. Our prosperity depends entirely upon the recovery of lost ground, and we therefore say let the Coolies come, and we will take the chance to Christianizing them" (22).³³ The *Times* appeal resembles Miles's version at certain points, but in Loewen's story, it takes on entirely different meaning, where now the "spoiled" African American takes center stage, and the "lost ground" intones something approaching culture war. For Loewen the very presence of the Mississippi Chinese gestures to, rather than a slackening political economy, a mythic whiteness. Loewen makes it seem like the Chinese were brought in for the sole purpose of propping up white supremacy.

Imported into this world for these reasons, the Mississippi Chinese did not—could not—fit in. They would have to choose. Yet, as will be seen, the structuralist picture overdetermines Loewen's analysis, the tidy formulation that the Chinese would have to find their way into "a biracial system of etiquette [that] has no provision for a third race. Such a race tends to be assigned subordinate or near-subordinate status or gains admission, at least formally, to the dominant caste" (73). Accordingly, the Chinese made their way in through a *social* niche, finding a way between overlapping social norms, specifically at the site of those societal mores that ruled the handling of groceries (37). Hence, the Chinese stepped in, according to Loewen, precisely because they were the only ones that could, their racial ambiguity perfectly suited to a racially fraught situation.

In time, the Mississippi Chinese wanted to become white. Loewen marks the 1940s as the transition from reluctantly occupying the niche to aggressively wanting to become white. "As Chinese began to shift even slightly in their orientation, as Mississippi began to grow in their minds as a possible permanent residence, they became increasingly conscious of and bothered by their lowly place" (71). Once the Mississippi Chinese realized they would remain in America, they set themselves to improving their racial situation (56)—collectively, it seems. They would become white, which, according to Loewen, involved distancing themselves from blacks. They began ridding themselves of all signs of blackness. On this score, the grocery stores both

³³ "The Coming Laborer," *Vicksburg Times*, June 30, 1869.

helped and hurt them. On the one hand, their profitability highlighted features like ownership that looked distinctly white. On the other hand, their African American clientele tainted that ownership, making them look black. Unfortunately, the very social structure they sought to climb dictated they not give up their grocery stores in order to open businesses that would compete with whites. That would encroach on white territory. They would have to figure out a way to be white without upsetting the carefully arranged racial balance. How could they look white without being white? According to Loewen, their collective strategy came to involve three specific tactics: moving into white neighborhoods, sending their kids to white schools, and ending African American couplings. The third would have to lead out, for so long as they literally wedded themselves to black life, they would be unable to access white neighborhoods and schools. Loewen pictures the Delta Chinese aggressively committed to stopping these interracial couplings, almost as if a secret cabal unilaterally decided that the best way for them to become white was by policing the love lives of their fellow Chinese (135–138). Implying the success of such efforts, Loewen points to a steep decline in Chinese-black relationships after the 1940s.

“Newcomers cannot live for long, especially for more than a generation, among people who label them so negatively, without changing their old evaluative standards to be more like those of the new reference group. The Chinese did gradually change from sojourner to immigrant, as a consequence, and began to take seriously white Mississippi’s low placement of them. They then worked systematically to eliminate the causes of that treatment, in order to rise from Negro to white status” (72). In order for this transition to happen, the Mississippi Chinese had to satisfy the white constituency, which was the only constituency that mattered, insofar as race was the only thing that mattered. Loewen subordinates political economy to racial politics by imagining race as possessed of a freestanding structure of meaning, where the former only matters as a constituent of the latter. As he states, “I would rank economic success the most important basic cause of the upward racial mobility of the Chinese. But wealth in itself was not the means of solution. Their situation was transformed only as a result of the process of image change, parallel institutions, and behind-the-scene negotiation” (98). If they were going to realize their hopes of becoming white, the Mississippi Chinese would have to separate themselves from blacks while still making money off of them. If a conflict ever arose, making money would need to take a backseat to becoming white (see 35 and 51). Eventually the Chinese

Baptist churches became the linchpin for their success. The churches gave them their own space, one that would disassociate them from blacks without also encroaching on whites. Accordingly, “the Chinese realized that the mission offered them crucial aid in their drive toward full participation in white society, for it provided a way to show whites that Chinese were not heathen but had an acceptable and distinctly non-Negro Christian religion” (84). The same held true for those Chinese schools, which coincidentally came as a benefit of their newfound Christianity. By aggressively pursuing Chinese versions of white institutions, which simultaneously involved distancing themselves from African Americans, the Mississippi Chinese became white, or at least what Bonilla-Silva earlier called “honorary whites.”

In my analysis, religion plays not so much a different role than the one Loewen grants, but a different kind of role. In the story he tells, Christianity aids the Mississippi Chinese, granting their foreign business practices legitimacy in the eyes of white and black Christians and helping them hold together different parts of their lives (work, home, education, community, etc.). As important as these roles are, they remain contingent aspects of the story, connecting elements that could be put together differently. In one version of the story, church attendance proves the fulcrum, yet in another, geography (being physically located between white and black neighborhoods) might. Church held their lives together, but nothing about that story prevents their children’s futures from assuming that role. These are important but provisional elements of the story. For Loewen, racial identity rather than religion provides the story narrative coherence. His Mississippi Chinese want to be white, and religion (or, for that matter, geography or children) either advances or impedes progress toward that goal. So committed are they to whiteness that they are willing to break up marriages and give up Chinese culture in order to attain it, converting to Christianity and getting rich merely covers for becoming white as the ultimate prize.

My story is different. In order to get into and succeed within America, the Delta Chinese wed themselves to its regnant political economy, which involves them in all manner of processes and commitments related to children, education, neighborhoods, churches, and so forth. What makes this story religious is not just that it includes aspects of religion like church attendance. What makes the story religious is the political economy at the center of its analysis. My theological casting of political economy is what allows me to see the Delta Chinese as religiously salient. In the story I tell, racial capitalism elicits from its adherents nothing short of religious devotion,

inculcating them through dynamic rituals of use, identity, and justification, and involving them in liturgies of domination, exploitation, and justification.³⁴ Thematized in terms of desire, racial capitalism approximates religious structures of valuation. Racial identity serves this political economy by facilitating its rituals and liturgies. As such, it can hardly be the goal. From the perspective of my account, Loewen's identitarianism gets things backward, mistakenly judging that which serves the political economy (i.e., racial identity) more important than the political economy itself (i.e., that which grants racial identity meaning). An identitarian preoccupation with racial identity drives the structuralist story Loewen tells, which, as we will see, ends up riding roughshod over the material evidence, in turn further marginalizing already marginalized people.

Becoming-White Tropic Histories

In order to explain how and why Loewen ends up misconstruing the Delta Chinese, I will need to show how his mistakes are indicative of contemporary antiracism. In order to do that, I need to, first, connect Loewen's thesis to a slate of becoming-white narrative histories, second, examine the critical reception of those histories, and third, see what that reception tells us about the trope and the identitarian arguments that employ it.

Of course, the Chinese in Loewen's story did not actually become white; at best they achieved white status. But this raises a question: What does it mean, for the Chinese or anyone really, to become white? Loewen's "biracial system" both motivates the Mississippi Chinese desire for whiteness and makes realizing it impossible. This becomes apparent once the becoming-white tropes are conversely applied to European immigrants who are said to successfully become white. These immigrants become white in a way the Chinese cannot. But that fact reveals something conceptually slippery about the trope, whether applying it to the Chinese or to anyone else. Examining this slipperiness shows that the trope only makes sense within the white/black binary, which in turn only makes sense within race thinking.

Leslie Bow, whose own significant work on Asian American Southerners draws from Loewen, characterizes Loewen's influence by speaking of its

³⁴ Along these lines, see Eugene McCarraher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

“unacknowledged inauguration of Critical White Studies.”³⁵ Two decades after Loewen’s text, the trope inspired (if not directly, at least in spirit) a slate of historical studies that came on the heels of postmodern deconstructionist/historicist thought. Especially in the social sciences and the various branches of ethnic studies, postmodernism resulted in an abiding commitment to social constructivism, the idea that humans construct wide swaths of social phenomena. From this it was adduced that race is a social construction. Only some of these developments were necessary for seeing how the Mississippi Chinese did not actually become white. Social constructionism’s real advance came in realizing that whites were not originally white. The ability to take a group that is assumed to be white, such as the Irish, and show that they *became* white was social constructionism’s real payoff. Social constructionism did not grant whiteness to the Mississippi Chinese, but it did cast suspicion on all claims of whiteness. Upsetting the solidity of white racial identity became one of deconstructionism’s highwater marks. Race language came to be seen as a tropic discourse—hence *becoming* white.³⁶ However, as will be seen, in the hands of antiracist theorists like Loewen and Bow, the trope took on a life of its own, ironically returning to race language a solidity that the move to constructivism was meant to destabilize.

The trope came to life through a slate of highly influential titles. Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (1995) offers the most straightforward version of the becoming-white trope. Ignatiev writes, “While the white skin made the Irish eligible for membership in the white race, it did not guarantee their admission; they had to earn it.”³⁷ Ignatiev identifies a number of factors that placed the Irish on the outside of whiteness, and cites specifically English rule, Roman Catholic religion, perceived anatomical traits, and public perception. Upon arriving in America as poor immigrants, they

³⁵ Leslie Bow, *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 11.

³⁶ Throughout this text, I use “trope” with its usual sense, as a commonplace and even overused figure that exaggerates for some desired effect. I am, however, aware of how trope as a category can upset certain settled distinctions between exaggeration and whatever is taken to be its opposite. Hayden White talks about “the tropical element in all discourse, whether of the realistic or the more imaginative kind. This element, I believe, is inexpungable from discourse in the human sciences, however realistic they may aspire to be. Tropic is the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee. This flight, however, is futile, for tropics is the process by which all discourse *constitutes* the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively.” Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1–2, emphasis in the original.

³⁷ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 59. I return to Ignatiev in Chapter 6.

were, given both their history and their present circumstances, seen as less than white. Ignatiev reports that in “the early years Irish were frequently referred to as ‘[African Americans] turned inside out.’”³⁸ Burdened with these associations, the Irish had to work their way into white identity through the binary logic, which they did by involving themselves institutionally and politically in antiblack violence, ostensibly in order to distance themselves from African Americans. As an example, Ignatiev references Irish “Blackbirders” who kidnapped freed African Americans and transported them to Southern plantations, distancing the Irish as far as possible from blackness.³⁹ Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998) presents another version of the trope. Jacobson at one point turns to how popular mythologies emblemize Europeans becoming white. Speaking of Al Jolson’s infamous 1927 talkie, he writes, “*The Jazz Singer* encapsulates the racial transformation of the Jews in the twentieth century in all its elements. Jolson’s metamorphosis from Jakie Robinowitz to the Americanized Jack Robin is predicated upon a literal racial redefinition, which is effected in its turn by the racial masquerade of the jazz singer’s blackface routine.”⁴⁰ Again we see the formula of a marginalized European American group making its way into whiteness by enacting antiblackness, pressing toward one side of the binary by violently pushing against the other. Of course, it was David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) that took the lead in pressing the trope into antiracism’s conscience, namely by casting the trope as a unique iteration of the American Dream. Roediger writes about “the idea that the pleasures of whiteness could function as a ‘wage’ for white workers. That is, status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships, North and South. White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as ‘not slaves’ and as ‘not Blacks.’ . . . Race feeling and the benefits conferred by whiteness made white Southern workers forget their ‘practically identical interests’ with the Black poor and accept stunted lives for themselves and for those more oppressed than themselves.”⁴¹ Roediger’s depiction of whiteness as a wage (encountered already in Du Bois) grants teleological orientation

³⁸ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 41.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁰ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of Another Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 119.

⁴¹ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 13.

to the becoming-white trope.⁴² What Roediger contributes to the mix is the key component of explaining why anyone would want to be white. With both Loewen and Roediger, the idea of the Chinese or the Irish becoming white requires “white” to have enough value that achieving it makes for a good story.

Antiracists have made ample use of the trope. It matters for their arguments whether the trope does the conceptual work they suppose it does. What becoming-white histories did for antiracists is ground their arguments about racial identity in reality. Showing that people (say, the Irish or the Jews) really did become white stood to demonstrate that racial identity denoted something real, something that could be materially gained, and its attainment tracked and measured. Because antiracists took for granted the historical reliability of these narratives, they did not bother to check for themselves, an unfortunate omission given how much weight their arguments gave the narratives. As it turned out, not long after Ignatiev, Jacobson, and Roediger laid the tracks for the trope’s prominence within antiracist thought, historians began to question whether the concept was sound at all, or whether it rather obfuscated the very phenomenon it meant to elucidate. While these critiques were heard among historians, they never seemed to reach the ears of those who most needed to hear them, certainly not enough to give pause to their frequent employment of the trope. For example, in “Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness,” Susan Koshy, already in 2001, spoke of the Mississippi Chinese’s “movement toward whiteness,” writing, “The strategy of the Chinese was based on shifting the focus from their racial difference from whites to their cultural similarity to whites and their racial and cultural difference from blacks. Moreover, by mimicking white cultural patterns, they placed themselves in a tutelary relationship to whites, seeming to reaffirm through this posture

⁴² Cedric Johnson observes, “This problem derives in part from [Roediger’s] use of W. E. B. DuBois as inspiration, and in particular, DuBois at a moment in his long career that was marked by transition and a rather uneasy commitment to both bourgeois liberal politics and a nascent interest in socialism—not quite the ‘great African American thinker and militant’ Roediger praises.” Cedric Johnson, “The Wages of Roediger: Why Three Decades of Whiteness Studies Has Not Produced the Left We Need,” *Nonsite*, no. 29 (September 9, 2019). Johnson later asserts, “The interpretive problems and faulty political assumptions of whiteness studies have become entrenched through the emergence of a therapeutic industry dedicated to rehabilitating interpersonal racism and addressing white privilege through acts of contrition, and have grown more dangerous as they have been amplified and degraded via social media. There is not much evidence that the expansion of this mode of anti-racist trainings over the last few decades has produced a different politics, a willingness to take risk, to sacrifice one’s privileged position to make substantive changes in society, or even altered day-to-day behavior.”

of deference the superiority of whites and leaving intact the black-white polarity on which the society was based.”⁴³ Koshy’s ready deployment of the trope relies heavily on Loewen and comes with the requisite Roediger and Ignatiev quotes. Reviewing critiques the trope received at the hands of historians offers a window not only into the difficulties plaguing becoming-white analyses like Koshy’s, but more directly for our purposes, the mistakes of Loewen’s paradigmatic treatment of the Delta Chinese.⁴⁴

In the most comprehensive (and, incidentally, sympathetic) of the critiques, historian Peter Kolchin argues that “whiteness studies” (which he describes as focused “on the construction of whiteness—how diverse groups in the United States came to identify, and be identified by others, as white”) presents us with a mixed bag at best.⁴⁵ Kolchin begins by connecting whiteness historians with antiracism, surmising, “most of them see a close link between their scholarly efforts and the goal of creating a more humane social order. . . . Virtually all of these authors display a highly didactic tone and a tendency to blend policy proposals with historical analysis” (154 and 167). For Kolchin, the connection is not itself a problem, and he readily acknowledges the importance of what the activist thinkers are trying to do: “At their best, they have underscored the historical process of racial construction, showing how assumptions about race and races have changed over time and exploring human agency in the making of race” (170). Having indicated his support, Kolchin turns to the methodological problems, saying that the “authors in the field have sometimes claimed more for whiteness than the evidence will support or that their work is often characterized more by boldness than by finesse” (172). Speaking of the methods they employ, he observes (and one might recall here Jacobson’s reading of Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer*), “Such over-generalization is especially prevalent among historians who rely heavily on image, representation, and literary depiction,” making their analyses “more concerned with images and representations than with actual social relation. . . . They are more comfortable discussing ‘tropes’ than actual social relations, and they display notable unease about coming to grips with class,

⁴³ Susan Koshy, “Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness,” *Boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (2001): 153–194 (178).

⁴⁴ Two histories, both of which I employed in the previous chapter, can be distinguished from Loewen’s account, even if they still reference him uncritically: Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias* and Jung, *Coolies and Cane*. Jung, whose portrayal I consider the best treatment of the Delta Chinese, offers a diagram that seems to explicitly challenge Loewen’s identitarian framing, though no mention is made along those lines (Jung, 176).

⁴⁵ Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America,” *Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (2002): 154–173. Citations will be noted in the text.

interest, and power" (157, 159, and, 161). The lack of careful historical attention leads to "the elusive, undefined nature of whiteness" that ironically grants an "overreliance on whiteness in explaining the American past" (158). The methodological problems leave us with tough questions about historical accuracy: "The question is not whether white racism was pervasive in antebellum America—it was—but whether it explains as much as Roediger and others maintain. In an argument further developed by Ignatiev, Roediger asserts that 'it was by no means clear that the Irish were white.' They present little evidence, however, that most Americans viewed the Irish as nonwhite. (To establish this point one would have to analyze the 'racial' thought of Americans about the Irish, a task that neither Roediger nor Ignatiev undertakes)" (164). For Kolchin, the difficulties end up undermining the antiracist agenda: "There is a persistent dualism evident in the work of the best whiteness studies authors. At times, race—and more specifically, whiteness—is treated as an artificial construct with no real meaning aside from its particular social setting; at other times it becomes not only real, but omnipresent and unchanging, deserving attention as an independent force. Race appears as both real and unreal, transitory and permanent, ubiquitous and invisible, everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing. . . . The all-and-nothing character of race challenges all the whiteness studies authors, who must decide whether race is—and explains—everything or nothing" (160). The cumulative effect of these difficulties leads to, in Kolchin's estimation, the opposite of what the activist historians intend: "In viewing whiteness as an independent category, many whiteness studies authors come close to reifying it and thereby losing sight of its constructed nature; in assigning whiteness such all-encompassing power, they tend to ignore other forms of oppression, exploitation, and inequality; and in focusing so heavily on representations of whiteness, they too often ignore the lived experiences—as well as the perceptions—of those perceived as nonwhite or 'not quite' white" (170).

The journal *International Labor and Working-Class History* dedicated a special issue to "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," which included essays from a number of historians.⁴⁶ Barbara J. Fields discusses how the trope is entirely consistent with race language. She describes "whiteness" as a thimblerig which "performs a series of deft displacements, first substituting race for racism, then postulating identity as the social substance of race,

⁴⁶ *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (Fall 2001): 1–92. As these articles comprise the one special issue, citations noted in the text will be in reference to the issue.

and finally attributing identity to persons of European descent" (48).⁴⁷ She writes, "The concept of whiteness cannot, therefore, solve what I take to be its central problem (at least as far as labor history is concerned): the source of working-class bigotry, often murderous, against persons of African descent. Indeed, as an organizing concept, whiteness leads to no conclusions that it does not begin with as assumptions. Whiteness is a racial identity; therefore, white people have a racial identity. Whiteness equals white supremacy; therefore, European immigrants become white by adopting white supremacy. Whiteness entails material benefits; therefore, the material benefits white people receive are a reward for whiteness" (52–53). Identifying the trope's profound debts to race thinking, she notes, "Whereas exploring how European immigrants became white is all the rage, no one deems it pertinent to such exploration to ask how African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants became black. Whiteness, according to its bards, may be identity; but blackness, as their silence confirms, is identification, authoritative and external. . . . The question of Afro-immigrants' becoming black is the only context in which that of Euro-immigrants' becoming white makes any sense at all; though the real issue is not how immigrants became white or black, but how persons not born and bred to it, whatever their ancestry, became oriented in the American world of black and white" (51 and 52). In his analysis, Adolph Reed states, bearing on many of the arguments already undertaken in the present book, that "it perpetuates a tendency to formulate American racial dynamics on a psychological or other bases that are disconnected from political economy and the production of labor relations and attendant political and social structures. The attempt to explain race's role is thus disconnected from the material foundation and engine of American social hierarchy and its ideological legitimations. That leads this literature into culs-de-sac of reification and ontology" (78).⁴⁸ For Reed, the lack of attention to racial capitalism's histories of production, including discursive production, directly leads to its evident hopelessness. As he says, "The whiteness critique, despite its self-consciously political aspirations, has generated nothing more substantial or promising than moral appeals to whites to give up their commitments to, or to 'abolish,' whiteness. It is difficult to imagine how this program could be anything more than an expression of hopeless desperation or pointless

⁴⁷ Barbara J. Fields, "Whiteness, Racism, and Identity," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (2001): 48–56.

⁴⁸ Adolph Reed, "Response to Eric Arnesen," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 60 (2001): 69–80.

self-righteousness" (78). Eric Arnesen, penning the issue's leadoff essay, shows how the trope's stylistic approach mirrors its tropic agenda:

Passive voice construction allows them to evade the necessary task of identifying the active agents denying or qualifying these groups' whiteness in the 1930s and 1940s, lessening the need to square the assertions of the not-quite-whiteness with the countless examples to the contrary. Such grammatical constructions also permit them to avoid crucial questions like: If it was by no means clear that new immigrants were white, to *whom* was this not clear? . . . Only if whiteness is merely a metaphor for class and social power are these men and women not white. But if it is merely a metaphor, then its descriptive and explanatory power is weak and its repetition in so many different contexts contributes only to the confusion. Even if whiteness scholars managed to produce some convincing evidence that some Americans—manufacturers, professionals, or other elites—somehow doubted the full whiteness of new immigrant groups in the 1930s and 1940s, on what grounds do these historians single out those views, declare them hegemonic, and ignore all countervailing opinion, no matter how great? This raises the question of whose discourse counts. (19–20)⁴⁹

In order to lend credence to their antiracist claims, antiracists depend on a narrow selection of activist historians to make their historical arguments for them, while never bothering to check whether those histories are up to the task. David Brody comments, "What is suggestive in *Wages of Whiteness* becomes hard fact in the books and articles that followed, so that our immigration history seems on its way to being recast in the mold of 'becoming white'" (46).⁵⁰ Committed to the same identarian enterprise and working in the same deconstructionist milieu, the whiteness historians and the antiracists who employ them do not help each other. The historians give the antiracists false confidence, and the antiracists push their histories past the breaking point. All this I take to be telling. Dealing in question-begging arguments, purveyors of the trope think they have supported their arguments with historical evidence when in fact the only thing they have accomplished is

⁴⁹ Eric Arnesen, "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 60 (2001): 3–32.

⁵⁰ David Brody, "Charismatic History: Pros and Cons," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (2001): 43–47. Brody continues, "Roediger planted an interesting but unsustainable idea. It should have been allowed to die a natural death. Instead it became a monster" (*ibid.*).

to expose the abstractions sitting in the middle of their claims. The results are fatal. Rather than historicizing whiteness, they end up rendering it incoherent. Coupled with the rhetorical suggestion that to question charges of whiteness is to defend it, the lack of historical attention sends antiracism off the rails. Antiracists have lent whiteness greater power than it would have on its own. Confused about what deconstruction comes to, forgetting to historicize “whiteness” and its conditions of production, they end up constructing whiteness.

The Plenteous Harvest

Having reviewed the critical reception of becoming-white histories and their origins in binary race thinking, we are now in a position to return to Loewen and see how similar difficulties trouble his early version of the trope. Specifically, we will see how his conception of racism, its particular modality, abstracts from the material history of the Delta Chinese. We will find an analogy between whiteness discourse’s inattention to that materiality and Loewen’s inattention to the Delta Chinese. In order to make sense of this lacuna in Loewen’s analysis, we need to step back and consider the particular sociological approach he takes, and the way it positions itself against the black Marxist political framing and its abiding attention to racism’s material, historical, and social processes. Looking at this conceptual background will make clearer why antiracists tend to portray racism as a social psychological phenomenon separable from the material nature of political economy. This tendency finds an antecedent in Loewen, just as the whiteness historians similarly do, both of which evacuate racism of political economy. We already encountered this evacuating maneuver two chapters ago when we looked at how model minority myth refutations work, which is to say that the maneuver is characteristic of identitarian antiracism.

Much has to do with what Loewen conceives racism to be relative to the political economic framing I have so far advanced. One difference in particular is instructive. In Chapter 1 while discussing General Miles’s appeal, I purposefully invoked something of an idealized image of the white racist, whose racism burned with the violence of a Klan lynching party. I argued that focusing on that image of racism misses the larger political economic structures that give such activity meaning, even attraction. Loewen too wants to challenge a hyperbolic image of the white racist, namely the view

that racism starts with working-class whites who then infect the rest of society, including elites. Loewen believes that racism starts in a different place: “In a stratified society with a powerful elite, ideas and actions are to a great degree controlled from above, and even if specific violent incidents are not directed by the establishment, they can nevertheless be traced to evaluative principles stemming from that class and codified in the *class-caste* hierarchy” (121, emphasis added). So far so good. Loewen’s argument here looks like black Marxist claims about racism’s elite sources, and its repercussions for working-class whites. But in a telling engagement with the black Marxist Oliver Cromwell Cox, Loewen reveals an important difference. This has to do with what he considers to be racism’s modality. Loewen is right that societal racism can be traced back to society’s elite ranks. But he also thinks that the racism elites perpetuate relates to “moral standards” which they impose on lower classes. Throughout the book, Loewen returns to this idea, and speaks often of racism along the lines of “etiquette” and similar sociological notions like social expectations, roles, norms, mores, and so on. Like many sociologists of his era, Loewen couched all of this under the aegis of “caste” (as emphasized in the prior quote) as a concept nimble enough to capture racism’s origins among the *social* elite. The turn to caste is explicitly meant to play up racism’s social modality and downplay the role political economy has in determining its substance. Epitomizing this and his broader commitment to the caste framing, he directly engages Cox’s Marxism along these lines. He recognizes that Cox similarly envisions the hierachal dominance of white elites. But for Loewen the modality of that domination is at heart social (in a narrow sense). He quotes *Caste, Class, and Race* where Cox writes, “in developing a theory of race relations in the South one must look to the economic policies of the ruling class. . . . Opposition to social equality has no meaning unless we can see its function in the service of the exploitative purpose” (122). Cox’s formulation, to which I will turn in a moment, matches, one will notice, the account of racism that this book advances. And it is this account which Loewen attacks on the way to his own formulation in which exploitation takes a backseat to a foregrounded social psychological dominance. Loewen grants roles to racism’s structural and systemic forms, but in his analysis those modalities are put in service of a more basic social program which facilitates any exploitation that might incidentally come about. For instance, he tries to refute Cox’s expectation that the Delta Chinese business model would result in African American resentment (165–166). Loewen thinks that there is no evidence for the expectation. But, he thinks this only

because he misinterprets what resentment African Americans do exhibit as having less to do with political economic domination and more to do with their social aspirations toward whiteness, an interpretation which characteristically begs the question.⁵¹

Loewen mentions in passing certain ontological notions which he believes sit at the foundation of the socio-racial hierarchy, implying that Southern racism is predicated on mistaken beliefs about African Americans, views derived from slavery and carried forth after Emancipation, “the race doctrine” that serves to “justify the caste system.”⁵² This completes the structuralist picture for Loewen: the social psychological norms operationalize a caste system founded on mistaken ontological beliefs. “Caste” works because caste systems issue from foundational beliefs (caste as a feature of religious systems). The description of racist attitudes then follows, “If negroes are sub-human, not capable of full citizenship, unclean, probably sexual offenders, barbarians, then social intercourse with them is not only out of the question but is obscene, perverted, and those who engage in it must themselves be abnormal” (131). Loewen thinks that such an account not only supplements the political economic account, but ultimately supplants it: “in many ways segregation gets in the way of rational economic exploitation of the subordinate race” (*ibid.*). And again, “In Mississippi, any Negro, of whatever occupational eminence, has always been confronted by a code of etiquette classifying him with all other blacks, a code based on premises which directly deny his worth as an individual” (64). This premised worth stems from ontological identities, hence the caste framing.

⁵¹ Tellingly, Loewen misquotes Cox to make his point. He has Cox saying, “Should the Chinese make the necessary response [i.e., eliminate Chinese-Negro relationships], we should expect them to show an even greater hatred for Negroes than that of whites” (165). But Cox’s quote actually continues “. . . but the view of this racial situation would be very much distorted if one attempts to understand Chinese-Negro relationship independently of the controlling white prejudice.” (Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1948), 350n54.). Loewen ends up doing the very thing Cox contends cannot be done—that is, understand Chinese and black relationships outside the context of the political economy that pits them in competition. In this way, Cox is less interested in whether successful Chinese have animosity against African Americans and more interested in the conditions that create that animosity. Whether the Delta Chinese liked or disliked blacks is really beside the point Cox is making, which is that white powerbrokers control the conditions of the relationships. For Cox, this is not at bottom a racial contest as much as it is a political economic function, something that Loewen’s caste framework simply fails to pick up.

⁵² Loewen here quotes from Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1944), 88. Loewen describes the race doctrine accordingly, “By thus defining blacks as subhuman and therefore not subject to the ideology nor the rights of American citizenship, *any* practice, even the breeding for sale, literacy denials, and other customs of American slavery, could be countenanced” (132, emphasis in the original).

Loewen construes society as structurally and functionally stratified, “a structural system and an etiquette system” that can police “the small transgressions that occur almost daily” (125). In this world, individuals navigate well-defined, stable parameters, negotiate customs and norms, and occupy roles which tie moral agency to scripted performances of subjectivity. Loewen’s big idea is that the Mississippi Chinese come to discover in the South a racially coded social structure, a caste system, and then deliberately seek to gain status within it, which invariably means, as Chou and Feagin put it earlier in this chapter, “cozying up to whiteness.” The visibility and stability of the structure allow outsiders like the Mississippi Chinese to decipher pathways to success. In her later treatment of the Mississippi Chinese, literary scholar Leslie Bow adopts Loewen’s approach, except she highlights a particular moment within it, what she calls “eruptions of funk” that exceed the bounds of the structured society.⁵³ The picture she paints of Chinese-black excess presumes Loewen’s structuralism and the becoming-white trope.⁵⁴ Bow keeps the structuralist framing and inventively imagines life seeping out. For Bow, the point of all this is to show that even as the Mississippi Chinese become white, they do not do so without remainder, hence troubling overly neat assimilation narratives that portray Asian Americans as model minorities.⁵⁵ What the excess does not do for Bow is lead her to question whether the structuralist framework adequately explains the Mississippi Chinese. In highlighting the role of excessive funk, she introduces an important anomaly

⁵³ See the chapter “White Is and White Ain’t: Failed Approximation and Eruptions of Funk in Representations of the Chinese in the South,” in Bow, *Partly Colored*, 91–122, specifically 107.

⁵⁴ See also Leslie Bow, “Asian Americans, Racial Latency, Southern Traces,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Literature of the U.S. South*, ed. Fred Hobson and Barbara Ladd (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 493–513 (510).

⁵⁵ In her contribution to the *International Labor and Working-Class History* special issue, Victoria C. Hattam observes, “None of the whiteness literature that I have read tries to deconstruct, or even critique, the central narrative of assimilation as the dominant form of American immigrant life. In short, they have accepted the basic historical narrative laid out by earlier immigration scholars while adding to it the neglected element of racial identification.” “Whiteness: Theorizing Race, Eliding Ethnicity,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 60 (2001): 61–68 (66). Becoming-white narratives are assimilation narratives. Hattam’s concern that we engage the Delta Chinese on their own terms is another way of getting at the problems the trope creates, this time on the more familiar theme of assimilation. The force of Hattam’s observation is to say that while antiracists rightly resist assimilation as the model through which immigrant life is imagined, they capitulate to its terms by peddling becoming-white narrative. The trope does methodologically what assimilation does politically, the former narrowing the concepts available to us for understanding the Delta Chinese, the latter reducing the means by which they become American. See also Amy Brandzel and Jigna Desai, “Racism Without Recognition: Toward a Model of Asian American Racialization,” in *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*, ed. Khyati Y. Joshi and Jigna Desai (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 76–104 (83); Jennifer Ho, “Southern Eruptions in Asian American Narratives” (224) in the same volume.

into the becoming-white paradigm, but this is not enough for her, unlike the historians critical of whiteness studies, to question its validity. For her, like Loewen, the structures of race and racism, much like a caste system, stand without question.

In following Loewen down the structuralist path, Bow comes away with an interpretation that obscures racism's broader political economy. Racism depends on racial capitalism's processes and commitments, the inexhaustible materiality of which means that racism possesses little fixity or stability. Loewen brings up Cox because Cox's *Caste, Class, and Race* explicitly challenged the very paradigm that allowed Loewen, a generation later, to frame the Mississippi Chinese. Loewen's portrayal of the Mississippi Chinese is only persuasive if one has already accepted the structuralist caste framing, a view committed to the idea that race and its cognate identities bear meaning come what may. Cox took his contemporaries to task for exacerbating conditions of injustice by failing to recognize racism's impermanence. His critique was borne of the insistence that liberation lay within reach and his observation that the failure to recognize as much had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Cox was intent on proving that the political economy that grants race and racism their discursive powers does so contingently as a function of assailable structures and systems. Cox writes, "The exploitation of native peoples, imperialism, is not a sin, not essentially a problem of morals or of vice; it is a problem of production and of competition for markets. Here, then, are race relations, they are definitely not caste relations."⁵⁶ For Cox, caste and any conceptual allegiance to it came to stand in for the self-defeating idea that racism stands above history, determining its course without answering to it, racism as something totalizing and indelible. "Sometimes, probably because of its very obviousness, it is not realized that the slave trade was simply a way of recruiting labor for the purpose of exploiting the great natural resources

⁵⁶ Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race*, 336. Further citations will be noted in the text. On this quote, see also Debora A. Thomas, "Cox's America: Caste, Race, and the Problem of Culture," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 39, no. 3 (2014): 364–381 (369). Cox developed his arguments about American race relations from first-hand experience. This was not the case with his description of Indian caste systems, which suffers any number of orientalizing mischaracterizations. Alternatively, see Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). On Cox's world-systems approach, see, along with *Caste, Class, and Race*, "Race Prejudice, Class Conflict, and Nationalism," *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 4, no. 2 (2011): 169–182; along with Anton L. Allahar, "Marxist or Not? Oliver Cromwell Cox on Capitalism and Class Versus 'Race,'" *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 39, no. 3 (2014): 320–344; Adolph Reed, Jr., "Race and Class in the Work of Oliver Cromwell Cox," *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 52, no. 9 (2001): 23–32 (25).

of America. The trade did not develop because Indians and Negroes were red and black, or because their cranial capacity averaged a certain number of cubic centimeters; but simply because they were the best workers to be found for the heavy labor in the mines and plantations across the Atlantic" (332).

For Cox, only by recognizing how racism served exploitation could one recognize what racism was doing. As Cedric J. Robinson observed (in a quote partially related in the previous chapter and fully articulated here), "Capitalism and racism were historical concomitants. As the executors of an expansionist world system, capitalists required racism in order to police and rationalize the exploitation of workers. Cox insists that, by ignoring this relationship, those social scientists engaged in the study and eradication of racism could be of little value. They could never comprehend that 'the white man's ideas about his racial superiority . . . can be corrected only by changing the system itself.'"⁵⁷ Without a wide frame of reference, one will think racism arrives *sui generis* (say, magically *after* European feudalism or spontaneously *in America*) as if indicative of primordial realities—say, antiblackness as civilization's condition of possibility. Narrowed in this way, the work of antiracism involves establishing, securing, and asserting oppressed racial identities over against whiteness. Cox thought that this was a fatally limited view and would restrict liberation to forms of racial nationalism exactly because it failed to keep the global in view, which might otherwise help one see race as a smokescreen obscuring the systemic nature of oppression. American antiracism would become ideologically nationalist. In even the most heightened moments of racist brutality broader forces were at play, but it became the fate of antiracism to submerge itself, given the depths of racist horror, to the local, when what it needed was a broader canvas on which to pitch its liberative vision.

Cox's three-volume systematics on capitalism made two conceptual advances: first, Cox outlined the historical and material development of the capitalist world system, from its origins in fifteenth-century Venice to its many historical investitures (imperialism, colonization, settler colonization, slavery, racism, Jim Crow, etc.) to capital's eventual displacement of the nation-state.⁵⁸ Second, he took local instances of oppression and

⁵⁷ Cedric J. Robinson, "Oliver Cromwell Cox and the Historiography of the West," *Cultural Critique* 17 (1991–1990): 5–19 (12). Robinson references Cox's *Caste, Class, and Race*, 462. See also Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 341.

⁵⁸ Oliver Cromwell Cox, *The Foundations of Capitalism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959); Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Capitalism and American Leadership* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962); Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Capitalism as a System* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964).

pitched them in terms of a global freedom struggle. Cox, interestingly, saw the Chinese question as particularly helpful for distilling matters. He began by caricaturing anti-Chinese attitudes of the kind encountered in Chapter 1, quoting a now familiar view of the Chinese: “Our grievance is against the humble, tireless, mean-living, unalterably alien, field and factory hand, who cuts wages, works for a pittance and lives on less, dwells in tenements which would nauseate the American pig, and presents the American workman the alternative of committing suicide or coming down to John Chinaman’s standard of wages and living. Self-protection is sufficient ground on which to base exclusion.” Cox then argued, “It should be noted that this attitude is not an exploitative attitude; it is a conflict between two exploited groups generated by the desire of one group of workers to keep up the value of its labor power by maintaining its scarcity.”⁵⁹ Nativist persecution of Chinese gold miners and laborers, later joined by Southern racists, used racism to justify what were at base exploitative operations. Cox saw in these cases elites and their managerial classes pitting poor whites against Chinese migrant workers in order to keep both under profitable control.⁶⁰ He saw the divide-and-conquer maneuver (a playbook present throughout this chapter) once again in the West Indies, where black antipathy to South Asian migrant labor similarly functioned to manipulate class tensions. In neither case did the racism arise or make sense on its own.⁶¹

The liberative moment would come, Cox hoped, when West Indian black laborers and Californian white laborers recognized that they were similarly pitted against yet another exploited group, Asian laborers (South Asian and Chinese, respectively). Conversely, liberation would never get off the ground if black Caribbean laborers committed themselves to race-ranking South Asians or if white laborers race-ranked Chinese laborers.⁶² Both would use

⁵⁹ Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race*, 411–412. The section of *Caste, Class, and Race* where Cox deals with the Chinese question was recently reprinted as “Race Prejudice, Class Conflict, and Nationalism.” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 4, no. 2 (2011): 169–182.

⁶⁰ On the managerial class, see Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, “The Professional Managerial Class,” *Radical America*, March–April (1977); Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, “Death of the Middle-Class Dream,” *In These Times* 38, no. 1 (2014): 22–23. For an account of the professional managerial class ascendant since Cox’s time, especially as the outgrowth of a broader cultural vanguardism, see Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

⁶¹ See Christopher A. McAuley, *The Mind of Oliver C. Cox* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 120–121.

⁶² For an account that bears out Cox’s intuition as it relates to the Chinese Caribbean diaspora, see Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838–1918* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 50–106.

race ideology to naturalize class division, distracting from larger systems of oppression and precluding opportunities for solidarity with others (the white working class, the black working class, the immigrant Asian working class, etc.).⁶³ The Chinese question represented for Cox one of endless opportunities for recognizing race baiting, and unfortunately, yet another instance where antiracists took the bait. At every turn stood the question of whether oppressed people would submerge their causes to local forms of race nationalism or look past the bait to those systems pitting laborers against each other. Cox's hope lay in the reality that the many sites of oppression created opportunities to see through the local ideologized oppression to the broader system that made them not only possible but necessary. As Immanuel Wallerstein would later argue, no revolution could succeed without matching capital's global reach.⁶⁴ Insofar as the global system relied on these local systems of oppression and insofar as these local systems hid behind thinly veiled ideological justifications, the global system was always as vulnerable as its particular sites of ideology. It is toward this revolutionary hope that Cox began *Race, Caste, and Class* with an epigraph from the Gospel of Matthew (serving also as this book's own opening epigraph): "The Harvest is truly plenteous but the labourers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send fourth labourers into his harvest" (9:37, KJV).

Once something like Cox's world-systems approach substitutes for the becoming-white structuralist trope, there are rather obvious (using Cox's

⁶³ As Cox said in "Leadership among Negroes in the United States," "the common cause of Negroes in the United States is not fundamentally limited to Negroes. It is in fact an aspect of the wider phenomenon of political-class antagonism inseparably associated with capitalist culture. . . . In the United States racial conflict has never been between white people and black people as such; rather it has been between a particular class of white people and Negroes virtually as a whole. During slavery the core of the antagonism involved the master and the slaves. Since slavery, however, the struggle has been *centered* in the conflicting aims and interests of the antidemocratic, white capitalist class and black workers in general. Thus the Negro's cause has taken form within the social context of the larger democratic process." Cox draws out the implications in terms of "genuine" and "positive" black leadership: "It directs its strategy mainly to the larger problem of expediting the advent of democracy, and it will employ the Negro protest and discontent as an auxiliary in seeking to expedite the democratic process. In this way Negroes do not ask to be included; they are in fact merged into the new society by their very involvement in the process of social change." Oliver Cromwell Cox, "Leadership among Negroes in the United States," in *Studies in Leadership: Leadership and Democratic Action*, ed. Alvin Gouldner (New York: Harper and Bros., 1950), 228–271 (229 and 271, emphasis in the original). Quoted in McAuley, *Mind of Oliver C. Cox*, 217. McAuley goes on to raise incisive questions about whether these observations necessitated Cox's rejection of black nationalism, and advocates instead C. L. R. James's more nuanced view on this matter. See *ibid.*, 221–223.

⁶⁴ See the conclusion of Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 347–357. See also Sean P. Hier, "The Forgotten Architect: Cox, Wallerstein and World-System Theory," *Race & Class* 42, no. 3 (2001): 69–86 (75).

term) if also mundane explanations for the Delta Chinese, little of which has to do with a becoming-white conspiracy of the kind Loewen thought he uncovered. They stopped coupling with African Americans in the 1940s for the simple reason that relaxed Exclusion laws permitted more Chinese women to come to the Delta, especially after the 1943 Magnuson Act officially repealed Exclusion. They wanted their children to attend white schools because of the practical benefits of education, and they recognized the obvious fact that white schools were better resourced than the black schools to which they were assigned. The prevailing arguments against segregation at the time had little to do with African American children wanting to be white and everything to do with accessing resources which were clearly separate because unequal. The Delta Chinese went to Chinese Baptist churches because in a society where they were a tiny minority of the population, they understandably wanted to be with other Chinese Americans—and in time, other Chinese Baptists. The Delta Chinese did want to become rich (a stated reason for coming to and staying in America), and wealth and access to wealth under racial capitalism certainly favors those deemed white. But this *at best* makes becoming white (whatever that could mean) a means to a more determinate end. Mundane, simpler reasons like companionship, kids, and money (and their transnational formations) are not as theoretically sexy as what the aforementioned Koshy characterized as “the movement toward whiteness.” But for elucidating actual behavior they explain a whole lot more. The mundane reasons explain more than “becoming white” does, a mystifying notion that (as demonstrated by our review of the trope’s critical reception) barely makes sense within the limited confines of binary race thinking. Given how farfetched the trope looks in light of the straightforward explanations, how does one account for its prevalence?⁶⁵ I have tried to show how an overwrought identitarianism leads to confusions. Here is yet another example. One is tempted to say, if not checked by the lessons this book offers, that only a white person would dream up the idea that everyone wants to be white.

⁶⁵ Returning to Loewen’s image of secret Mississippi Chinese cabals policing the love lives of fellow Chinese, one is reminded of a comment by Pierre Bourdieu: “So long as one ignores the true principle of the conductorless orchestration which gives regularity, unity, and systematicity to the practices of a group or class, and this even in the absence of any spontaneous or externally imposed organization of individual projects, one is condemned to the naïve artificialism which recognizes no other principle unifying a group’s or class’s ordinary or extraordinary action than the conscious co-ordination of a conspiracy.” Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 80.

Of course, the main reason we know that the Delta Chinese were not driven to become white is that they themselves said so. Repeatedly. The Delta Chinese, as related in the previous chapter, time and time again voiced worries that succeeding in America could mean losing their Chinese identity, that their children would no longer be “real *Hon Yen* but *Bok Guey*.” It is striking that their own words counted for so little. We are reminded of the words Bonnie Cheung thought she heard as strangers burned down her family’s store: “All the Chinese are is an extension of the whites.”⁶⁶ No one believed them when they said they did not want to be white. None of this is to deny the allure of white racial identity, or that the Delta Chinese, like *The Bluest Eye*’s Pecola Breedlove, might have been dangerously drawn to it. Nor is it to downplay the antiblack racism readily present among them. In the previous chapter I tried to give a detailed account of how the exploitations of their grocery store business model, and its attending racist attitudes, typify racial capitalism. Yet, trying to capture all of this with the becoming-white trope misses much that is important about their story, substituting as it does a social psychological framework for the political economy that permits social psychology its normalizing (racializing) force. Typical of identitarian modes of analysis, “becoming white” becomes an entirely too convenient depiction for what are otherwise complex aftermarket phenomena, involving second slavery, food deserts, and other determinants described in the previous chapter. What the trope does accomplish is reprising (with each new iteration) the white/black binary, which in turn grants further traction to the very idea of race. The trope racializes.

Bobby Jue and the Complicated Legacy of the Delta Chinese

In 1948, Bobby Jue’s family started a store in Hollandale, Mississippi, about eighty miles south of the Clarksdale area discussed in the previous chapter. Bobby’s family had a long history in America, beginning when his great-grandfather first arrived to help build the transcontinental railroad, working specifically with dynamite to blast through rock, a critically important and dangerous role as the railway pushed its way east. Subsequent generations of the family migrated between China and America until Bobby’s father settled

⁶⁶ Lew, “Out of Place,” 290.

his family in the South. He became something of a consultant for the Delta Chinese business model, helping others set up stores on both the Arkansas and Mississippi sides of the Delta. After receiving a tip from a local supplier that Hollandale was ripe for its own grocery, with the prospect that the city's paucity of Chinese might permit access to its white schools, the senior Jue relocated Bobby and the rest of the family.⁶⁷

Things didn't go as planned. Jue Grocery struggled to generate much business as locals labored under economic conditions stressed to the breaking point. When Bobby's dad died unexpectedly three years in, the family found itself stuck in Hollandale and it fell upon Bobby and his siblings to help their mom, who spoke little English, run the store. These were lean years for the Jue family, at one point eleven of them crammed into the living quarters of a thousand-square-foot building. While other Delta stores generated strong revenue, Jue Grocery barely got by. The kids remember making do by stuffing cardboard in their worn-out shoes. Still, they could eat what they did not sell, putting them in a position of considerable privilege compared to their black neighbors. Later, as his brother Martin left to begin what would become a highly successful career as an electrical engineer, inventor, and business owner, it was decided that Bobby would take over the family business, which he did the day he graduated from high school. Except for the short time spent in Hong Kong finding a spouse, he would remain in Hollandale for nearly forty years.

Throughout this time, Bobby remained keenly aware of the organizing fact of his life: his livelihood came from poor African Americans. He knew this because his black customers sometimes said as much, telling him on occasion, "You're making your living off of us" or "If it wasn't for my family, you wouldn't have what you have now." When asked about whether he ever felt guilt or regret about the business arrangement, Bobby said, "I still do." The relationship between the Delta Chinese and their black customers and neighbors was not, as Loewen suggests, that the Chinese left behind their racial identity in order to become white—a "movement toward whiteness" in Koshy's words—making their way up a caste system organized around essential racial categories. The relationship between Delta Chinese and African Americans was more direct. They exploited them. And in this way, they were similar to others who exploited African Americans, even if the circumstances and conditions of that exploitation differed considerably. What the

⁶⁷ Author interviews with Bobby Jue and Martin Jue during Spring and Summer 2020.

Delta Chinese shared with whites was not “whiteness” as an aspirant racial identity. What they shared was direct participation in baseline exploitation facilitated by broader systems of justifying domination. Like whites before them, the Delta Chinese ascribed blackness to their customers and neighbors inasmuch as doing so facilitated exploitation. As in other cases, the racializing ruse was obvious and could be easily exposed for the ideology that it was. Recall, as recounted in the previous chapter, that the African Americans who reportedly burned down the Cheung family store were heard saying to each other, “The whites are exploiting you and the Chinese are exploiting you. All the Chinese are an extension of the whites. If they wanted to be like us, they would have come to our schools, they would have moved into our neighborhoods, and they would be helping us and working with us rather than being apart from us.” Indeed, the Delta Chinese did not go to black schools, instead avoiding them, and moved into their neighborhoods not because they wanted to be around African Americans but because of the financial benefits of doing so, and remained so only until other opportunities presented themselves. If they helped or worked with them (by, for example, extending lines of credit), they did so because money could be made (i.e., credit lines meant returning customers). These conditions bred the expected racist attitudes, which circulated through the business model’s operations. The Delta Chinese were extensions of whites in that they extended systems of exploitation set up by whites, systems they learned—as they had precious little choice—to survive, navigate, and profit from.

The moral legacy of the Delta Chinese is complicated. Delta African Americans and Chinese Americans found themselves in a situation where they had no choice but to depend on each other, and in morally complicated ways. No one else would provide the services African Americans desperately needed. Nowhere else in the South could the Chinese go. The scenario allowed African Americans to get the groceries they needed. And it allowed the Chinese to get the wealth they wanted. Thinking about the wealth cannot be divorced from the context in which it was generated. The pride subsequent generations of Delta Chinese (especially under the sway of identitarian celebrations of diversity) want to feel about the success their forebears achieved will need to be tempered by acknowledging the conditions of that success.⁶⁸ The judgment that critics, like those who burned down the Cheung store, want to dole out will likewise need to be tempered by the scenario’s

⁶⁸ Consider the Mississippi Delta’s popular Facebook page.

tragically limited options (i.e., What alternative did the Delta Chinese realistically have? To *not* serve them *because* they were poor and black?).

For many Delta Chinese, the pursuit of money and wealth served further ends, specifically those familial obligations that brought the Chinese to America in the first place. Recall that those initial Chinese migrant workers who showed up in the Delta had no intention of settling in America, hoping only to stay long enough to obtain the money they needed to support families back in China. If money had been available in China, they would have remained there so they could be closer to family. Even as America increasingly became home to them, their families now coming to America, they remained committed to that which set their course in the first place: their families. Recall this revealing quote from the last chapter: “I guess you can say it was part of the culture that you would have to leave each generation to get better. That was your charge. That is what Dad used to say, ‘You owe me. You owe me to be better than I was. My grandchildren will be better than you are.’”⁶⁹ However one narrates the sources of this commitment (e.g., culturally engrained neo-Confucian familial piety), it charged adjacent concerns like education with intergenerational, transnational, and religious purpose.⁷⁰ The Delta Chinese served a time-honored vocation to their families. Their ability to adapt themselves to Southern Baptist religion had everything to do with how prior formations related to family, like the day-to-day operations of the business model, comfortably mapped onto Southern Baptist Christianity. Neither their identity as Chinese nor their identity as Southern Baptist saw money as an end unto itself, seeing money instead as a means to familial piety, and there was, apparently, nothing in that brand of Christianity that could identify that orientation as problematic. Their felt need to take care of their families, a need endorsed and encouraged by white Christianity, effectively narrowed the breadth of community for which they felt responsible. Within these highly circumscribed relational confines, it simply never occurred to them that they were morally

⁶⁹ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Fay and Juanita Dong interview, May 1, 2000.

⁷⁰ See Victor Nee and Herbert Y. Wong, “Asian American Socioeconomic Achievement: The Strength of the Family Bond” in *Asian American Family Life and Community*, ed. Franklin Ng (New York: Garland, 1998), 1–26; Russell Jeung, Helen Jin Kim, and Seanan S. Fong, *Family Sacrifices: The Worldviews and Ethics of Chinese Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 27–46; Charissa S. L. Cheah, Christy Y. Y. Leung, and Nan Zhou, “Understanding ‘Tiger Parenting’ Through the Perceptions of Chinese Immigrant Mothers: Can Chinese and U.S. Parenting Coexist?,” in “Tiger Parenting, Asian-Heritage Families, and Child/Adolescent Well-Being,” ed. Linda P. Juang, Desirée Baolin Qin, and Irene J. K. Park, special issue, *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 4, no. 1 (2013): 30–40; Pew Research Center, Social and Demographic Trends, “Chapter 5: Family and Personal Values,” *The Rise of Asian Americans*, June 19, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2012/06/19/chapter-5-family-and-personal-values/>.

obligated to care, in any serious way, about their neighbors. Indeed, given those from whom they learned their Christianity, Southern Baptist whites for whom racism and Christianity went hand-in-hand, it is remarkable that they cared as much as they did. They were just unprepared for anything else. In their case, the moral tragedy comes not in the extent of their racism or greed, but rather in the limits of their concern as a consequence of prior formations. The full measure of this will not be apparent until Part II's case study shows how deep the concerns of Asian American Christianity might otherwise go. Already it is apparent with the Delta Chinese that it was not racism principally that prevented better relationships—say, relationships given more to care than to exploitation. It is rather that their familial obligations outstripped their ability to relate for others beyond exploitation. And the racism helped things along. As Christians, they failed to love their neighbors; more precisely, the Christianity they adopted prevented them from seeing their neighbors as neighbors. Idolatrous love of family (love distortedly turned inward), rather than greed for self or racism toward others, would determine the course of their legacy. The racism didn't lead; it followed. Complexifying racism by situating it within goods like family should not have the effect of diminishing its harms, unless one is given to Manichean presumptions that neatly divide good from evil. If anything, racism's ability to infect created goods like family, its ability to diminish capacities for love in otherwise loving people, puts in bold relief the harms it can inflict, the evil it does.

These are complications Bobby Jue understood well. He recognized the complexity of the situation for the simple reason that he wanted to understand, and that desire to understand meant that he could not fail to see what he saw. Long after other Chinese grocery operators moved out of their stores to buy houses in white parts of town, Bobby remained on the black "side of the tracks." Even when Jue Grocery generated enough income for him to buy a home, he was prohibited by law, custom, and prejudice from relocating. So he stayed with his neighbors. And over the years compassion opened him up to their lives, which meant a shared life at the store as friendship and comradeship facilitated life beyond exploitation, learning stories, spending time, bantering about, laughing together, and sharing worlds quite separate but unavoidably intimate, attending church services and funerals along the way.⁷¹ He learned that while he worked a taxing eighty hours a week, his

⁷¹ One of the people Bobby got to know, Eddie Spencer, later wrote about the challenges of growing up in the Delta. Eddie Charles Spencer, *Inmate 46857* (Enumclaw, WA: Pleasant Word, 2004).

customers counted hours differently, from “can to can’t.” He visited homes and came to see that the cheap wallpaper he sold his customers did not cover so much as serve as walls. Even as a kid, with his cardboard-reinforced shoes, he intuitively understood that he had in abundance what they had not at all, sneaking food to neighborhood kids until his mother told him they could not afford such gestures. As an adult, Bobby spent time picking cotton alongside some of his customers, simply to better understand their lives. He didn’t last half the day, but he caught another glimpse of the gulf that separated their lives from his, which is to say he understood more fully their lives and his.

It’s not clear why Bobby chose, when so many did not, to avail himself to the truth, why he opened his life, even in a limited way, to the realities of African American life and to the reality of his own. Perhaps it was the store’s humble beginnings; perhaps his family’s transnational history put things in a certain light; perhaps his dad’s sudden death or staying behind while others went off to college forced him to grow up early. Any and all of this might have opened his eyes to the world in which he found himself. Bobby says it has to do with the simple fact that his customers and neighbors were people and people deserve compassion. He thinks that growing up Christian helped him into this, even while recognizing that others who attended Hollandale First Baptist Church did not see what he could not fail to see. Maybe it was the constant sense that he did not belong, that he was no more at home in Southern Baptist religion than he was anywhere. Asked, he cannot recall the church once mentioning race or racism, even in the 1960s when the civil rights movement cut through Mississippi. He had been victim to plenty of racism, “getting it from both sides.” He tells the story of how, as late as 1978, an older white man, whose son just purchased a neighboring piece of property from him, refused to shake his hand. Through it all, he retained a strong sense of the humanity of those around him, and the requirements of compassion, whether black or white, regardless of how well or poorly he was treated. In reflecting on why he lived his life the way he did, he says that Jesus would do similarly, and so it never occurred to him to do otherwise.

History shows us that the Delta Chinese had, in contrast to Loewen’s thesis, no intention of becoming white. But that does not mean that their legacy does not bear other moral complications. The racial capitalist framing I have advanced frees their story from the caste sociology that Loewen imposed on it. But releasing them from the charge of, as Chou and Feagin put

it, “cozying up to whiteness” conceptually implicates them as beneficiaries of the racial capitalism that continued (through slavery and its aftermarkets) to racially identify bodies for value extraction. The fact that they profited, on the one hand, by meeting real needs (i.e., the Delta’s food deserts) and, on the other, in the only way they could (i.e., triply damned to the negative side of three choking distinctions: white versus black, citizen versus foreigner, and American versus Chinese) shows how “opportunism” and “triumph” each prove insufficient for capturing the complexity of the conditions they both inherited and exploited. Those who benefit from racial capitalism are complicit only inasmuch as they also suffer it. Bobby Jue’s life embodied this, and his story differs primarily in that he never denied it.

The racialized exploitation suffered by the Delta Chinese put them in the position of benefiting from a political economic order not of their making, and required that they suffer, as well as perpetuate, the racial antagonisms built into its ordering. They would get rich, but it would cost them, leaving them with a complicated legacy, at once courageous and cowardly, powerful and banal, exemplary yet ordinary, salutary though damaging, both inspirational and disappointing. Their lives, in other words, would come to resemble the moral character of racial capitalism, with its many triumphs and many missed opportunities. The full measure of their lives, then, will not become clear until we encounter, as we do in the next chapters, what else their lives as Asian American Christians could have become. Their migration in subsequent years away from the Delta to those Asian American enclaves like Houston, Los Angeles and, as we will see, San Francisco (each destinations of the Great Migration) attests to, I suggest, a pronounced desire for something more.⁷² What that might mean for those racialized as Asian Americans is the subject of Part II.

⁷² Marion Kwan moved to the Delta after having lived in San Francisco’s Chinatown in order to work as a church-based civil rights worker. See her compelling story in “Fighting for Civil Rights in Hattiesburg, MS in 1965,” *East Wind: Politics and Culture of Asian America*, May 6, 2020, <https://eastwindezine.com/fighting-for-civil-rights-in-hattiesburg-ms-in-1965/>. For a broader history of Asian American activism (particularly in the courts), see Stephanie Hinershitz, *A Different Shade of Justice: Asian American Civil Rights in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

PART II

REDEEMER COMMUNITY CHURCH

If not in yours,

—In whose

In whose language

—Am I

—M. NoureSe Philip, “*Mediations on the Declension of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying Cheek-bones*”¹

Initium ut esset homo creates est.

—Augustine of Hippo²

But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only “message” which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creates est*—“that beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.”

—Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*³

¹ M. NoureSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 25.

² Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 532.

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (Wilmington: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Trade & Reference Publishers, 1973), 478–479.

The ridiculous idea would never occur to lovers to take the risk, fragility or precariousness out of their love, its dependence on speech, right or wrong, that dizzying way of always skirting an abyss into which their affair, however long it may have been going on, risks toppling at any moment in a radically opposite experience of time.

—Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing*⁴

Those who don't belong to any specific place can't, in fact, return anywhere. The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world, even at my desk. In the end I realize that it wasn't a true exile: far from it. I am exiled even from the definition of exile.

—Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words*⁵

For Du Bois, the vicious legacy of white supremacy contributes to the arrested development of democracy. And since communication is the lifeblood of a democracy—the very measure of the vitality of its public life—we either come to terms with race and hang together, or ignore it and hang separately.

—Cornel West, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization”⁶

⁴ Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 53.

⁵ Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Penguin, 2016), 133.

⁶ Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 106.

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Redeemer Community Church and All that Lies Beneath

The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than complicitous silence. It follows, incidentally, that any analysis of ideologies, in the narrow sense of “legitimating discourses” which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies.

—Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*¹

There is no moral distance, which is to say no distance, between the facts of life in San Francisco and the facts of life in Birmingham.

—James Baldwin, *Take this Hammer*²

The truth is that we *are* separate, but not necessarily *separated* (by something); that we are, each of us, bodies, i.e., embodied; each is this one and not that, each here and not there, each now and not then. We are each endlessly separate, for no reason. But then we are answerable for everything that comes between us; if not for causing it then for continuing it; if not for denying it then for affirming it; if not for it then to it.

—Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*³

In Part I, I attempted to show, through the complicated story of the Delta Chinese, how racial capitalism racially justifies capitalist exploitation. I began by using the model minority myth and its refutations to set up the

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 188.

² James Baldwin, *Take This Hammer*, 1964, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hy9z_Jo8Du0.

³ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 369.

arrival of Chinese migrants into “the most Southern place on Earth.” They came as cheap labor, part of a scheme (coordinated between Reconstruction and Chinese Exclusion) to return the Plantation South to its economic glory and reroute an economy now untethered from its chattel slavery origins. The lens of the model minority myth allowed us to view their arrival in the Delta as integral to race-ranking procedures, played out on the debate floor of the U.S. Senate, coextensive with the very idea of race since its inception in America. Refusing the terms of the labor scheme, the remaining Chinese built what would become a highly effective business model that took advantage of food deserts created by the twin conditions of white dominance and black disempowerment and impoverishment. Over time, the Delta Chinese became rich, which would later allow them to leave the South and its particular racial politics behind. I argued that this political economic framing better explains contemporary racial life than those identitarian frameworks encountered in Part I (i.e., the myth’s refutation cottage industry and James Loewen’s becoming-white tropes popularized by *The Mississippi Chinese*). Instead of an approach that presumes racial kinds, whether naturally or socially constituted, I advanced an account of racial identity as facilitating dominative exploitation through justificatory schemes based on race ideology, an account that conceptually subordinates racial identity to political economy, positioning racial identity as a function of political economy.

Part I’s Delta Chinese case study was meant to bear out my claim that identitarian antiracism’s focus on racial identity to the exclusion of political economy tells us little about Asian American life specifically and race and racism generally. The validity of that claim then depends on Part I’s ability to better interpret the Delta Chinese than models focused on racial identity. My presentation of the Delta Chinese as involved in what I have called a racial capitalist aftermarket exemplifies the political economic mode of analysis I advance in this book. This alternative approach issues in a markedly different set of judgments about the Delta Chinese. The identitarian model would make of their history something about race, and out of that either a triumph of racial identity and celebration of American diversity or a subjugation of racial identity and triumph of whiteness. My story takes a different path. It conceptually subordinates race to racialization, and shows how their business model exploited conditions racialized to their advantage as it pertains to African Americans and to their disadvantage as it pertains to whites. Their ability to leverage these advantages and disadvantages largely accounts for the success of their business model. The abstract nature of the

Southern Baptist religion they practiced lent the impression that the business model had nothing to do with Christianity, that it was, so to speak, none of Christianity's business. In the absence of morally binding commitments (i.e., to their African American neighbors), other concerns (e.g., familial obligation) determined their course. Here is a picture of American racial life that is no less consequential for its absence of racist ill-will and racist attitudes. Again, my idea is that such an account better portrays the material reality of contemporary racism than those that rely on hyperbolic images focused on racial identity.

Part I concluded with an assessment of the Delta Chinese's legacy as morally complicated. Those complications come in the way the Delta Chinese survived the exploitative conditions created by their vulnerabilities (i.e., as non-white, non-native, and non-American) by exploiting other conditions based on other vulnerabilities (i.e., food deserts created by whites and suffered by African Americans). The genius of the Delta Chinese business model was its ability to shift the trajectory of their story, from survivors of racialized exploitation to model minorities fit for appropriation to the American Dream. With that shift come (at least) three complications:

1. They found the success they sought, but it came through a political economic arrangement requiring them to exploit their African American neighbors. The business model succeeded because the Delta Chinese took advantage of the conditions racial capitalism handed them. Hence, my description of the Delta Chinese business model as a "moving picture" of racial capitalism. If, however, one takes no issue with exploitative capitalism, then there will be no question about their business practices, which will strike one as not only unproblematic but indeed entrepreneurially inspiring. According to this mindset, business success just is exploitation of conditions, including racialized conditions. This mindset might even extol the Delta Chinese insofar as their exploitation came with the moral advantage of including those previously excluded from the broader economy (namely, by providing groceries in food deserts). We then have a win-win scenario. Yet, inclusion within exploitative processes and commitments only fosters further exploitation. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor recently argued in relationship to exploitative housing markets that previously excluded African Americans, "inclusion in those processes while ignoring the larger dynamics created by residential segregation laid the basis for even greater

exploitative and predatory practices—or predatory inclusion—in transactions involving the urban housing market.”⁴ Similarly, the Delta Chinese business model took advantage of structural and systemic inequalities by leveraging profitability on inequalities recognized as inequalities. Purveyors of the model as a *business* model could not fail to know they were taking advantage of their neighbors’ vulnerabilities. As to the moral status of aftermarket opportunities, little is gained by demarking precisely where blame lies, standing structures and systems of injustice or those taking advantage of them. We are better off coming to terms with how the many complications hold together.

2. The Delta Chinese were morally responsible to a community to which they felt obligated, but responsibility to that community (i.e., their families for whom and with whom they came to America) blocked their ability to imagine a wider set of obligations, preventing them not only from loving their neighbors, but more basically from having such possibilities occur to them. So much of the positive attention given to the Delta Chinese in recent years stems from not believing them responsible to, or capable of, this wider set of obligations. Accordingly, what gets celebrated is their very presence within racially bifurcated space. A thematic running throughout this book, and raised explicitly in the current chapter, is the conviction that the work of antiracism should not turn on questions of inclusion/exclusion and presence/absence alone. Rather, the question needs to be, “Exclusion from *what*, present for *what*?” Identarianism grants far too much weight to mere presence—or conversely, mere absence—and permits of antiracist politics the desideratum that one need only be authentically Asian American, whatever that is given to mean. Once programmatically committed (vis-à-vis diversity, inclusion, representation, multiculturalism, and the like) to an inclusion/exclusion or presence/absence calculus, questions regarding political economy drop out.
3. The Christianity adopted by the Delta Chinese did little to challenge complications 1 and 2 and instead reinforced each in relation to the other. One can certainly go further in describing how Christianity created the conditions under which 1 and 2 came about, by investigating the interrelation, respectively, between capitalist predation and the logic

⁴ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 310.

of race, as Willie James Jennings has done, and between Eurocentric theological anthropology and antiblack racism, as J. Kameron Carter has done.⁵ Those threads are crucial for showing how “racial identities have taken on landscape and geographic characteristics and cannot simply be overcome by thought.”⁶ But that has not been my concern here. Rather, I have sought to show how little work Christianity did to present alternatives to 1 and 2. Part of my choosing this route has to do with wanting to believe that racism is not intrinsic to Christianity, even while acknowledging that racism has been continuously coincident with Christianity. Rather than show just how racist Christianity can be, I am interested in showing how Christianity offers a way out of racism by stepping into “a revolution, the overturning that is the turning the world right side up by God” and how it failed to do so in the case of the Delta Chinese and what implications follow that failure.⁷

Reading complications 1 through 3 together lays out the stakes of my analysis: without their exploitative business model, the Delta Chinese would have not survived the most Southern place on Earth; fraught conditions limited their sense of moral responsibility to their families; and Christianity helped them into—or at least did not help them out of—both. This delineation raises, then, the question of what else Asian American Christianity might come to. If, as 1 and 2 denote, Christianity failed to help the Delta Chinese do better, and if, as 3 denotes, that failure is not intrinsic to Christianity, then what would it look like for Christians racialized as Asian Americans to do better? With my case study of Redeemer Community Church here in Part II, I try to answer this question. Here is a scenario where Asian American Christians similarly face racial capitalist conditions, and yet offer something radically different. Through their integration of community and place amid racial capitalism’s displacing powers, their realization of a deep economy organically scaled to San Francisco, and their attempt to resource black children amid persistent antiblackness, I show what Asian American Christianity can

⁵ See J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a historical perspective focused on Northern and Southern collusion along these lines, see Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

⁶ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 63.

⁷ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 124.

accomplish, even as that accomplishment comes with its own complications. What I hope becomes apparent is that for Christians an analysis of racial capitalism raises questions about the promise and demands of Christian discipleship, which in turn press questions about the truthfulness of the Christian gospel. Accordingly, a theological consideration of racial capitalism amounts to a question about whether the θεία οἰκονομία Christians profess as bearing good news indeed does.

Redeemer Community Church

On a typically cool summer evening in San Francisco, Chris and his spouse met on a Zoom chat with three other couples. Even though they lived within blocks of one another in the stylish Potrero Hill area of the city, COVID-19 kept them physically distanced as the pandemic rumbled into its fifth month. Anyhow, as tech natives of the gig-economy, they were well at home on video conference calls and quickly got down to business. They were here to talk about the future. Again.

Over the last two years, each couple had decided to leave Reality SF, one of San Francisco's larger churches, a place where well-educated, wealthy, progressive Christians can feel at home in well-educated, wealthy, progressive, and decidedly non-Christian San Francisco. While Reality SF was fine—even great—for what it was, each couple felt a tug for something more. One by one, the couples began to drift toward Redeemer Community Church, a small religious community well known for its outsized impact on the city—“the best kept secret in all of San Francisco” they had come to believe.⁸ Here was something intriguing—a Protestant church started by Asian American Stanford and University of California, Berkeley (Cal) grads who took their techy brains and teacher passions and started a software company and neighborhood school in Bayview/Hunters Point (BVHP), the city's most marginalized area.⁹ What in the world did these textbook model minorities think they were doing in the last vestige of “Black San Francisco”? Some in Chris's friend group had grown up in the Bay Area while others had relocated there

⁸ Author interview, June 5, 2020.

⁹ The “Stanford and Cal” characterization used throughout speaks to a certain impression of the church, which my rendition (by focusing on certain Redeemer members to the exclusion of others) pushes in order to tell a certain story. Of the thirty-three adults who started Redeemer, ten were Stanford and Cal alum.

for school or work. Either way, they knew to stay out of BVHP, widely considered, under the standard racist tropes, the city's poorest, roughest, and most neglected district.¹⁰ But it wasn't so much Redeemer's locale that puzzled them, but instead a picture of Christian faith that apparently possessed it to make its home in the unlikeliest of places. Adding to the strangeness of it all, Redeemer folks didn't talk about their BVHP presence in terms of altruism, typical of San Francisco's do-gooder culture, but of joy. Strange. The word "commune" came to mind. Well-educated, wealthy, progressive Christians needed to mix in respectable crowds. Communes were not respectable, especially not according to San Francisco's standards, which tolerated religion only inasmuch as it adorned, rather than tarnished, the city's free-spirit reputation. "Free spirit" and "commune" usually didn't go together.

For these four couples, the combination proved intriguing. Each sensed that while the Christianity on offer at Reality SF comfortably fit the city's culture, the result over time would be, for them and their children, absorbing, by osmosis more than anything, the city's values of careerism, materialism, individualism, and the like. They had impressive resumes, having been educated at Harvard, Yale, MIT, Columbia, Stanford, and so on. Each looked the part of the model minority. They were each on their way to wherever their credentialing would take them. The Christianity seemed to make little difference. It was doing little work. They noticed that, in San Francisco, meeting people always began with the same question: "What do you do?" Would having impressive answers to that question be the sum total of their lives? San Franciscans aspired to impressive answers, answers made all the more impressive when tied to altruistic ends. Here people earnestly sought what Slavoj Žižek sardonically calls "cultural capitalism," socially conscious consumption.¹¹ Would following Jesus amount to no more than this? If their lives looked like everyone else's, what was the point of the Christianity? In the midst of such questions, "commune" started to sound less menacing, or at least no more menacing than idle Christianity. Thus had they each, and somewhat together, moved to Redeemer. But now that they were there, other decisions loomed. Redeemer offered the kind of radical Christianity

¹⁰ As San Francisco Department of Public Health's report "San Francisco Healthy Homes Project: Community Health Status Assessment" shows, BVHP does have higher crime rates than the rest of the city. But as Karen F. Parker's "The African-American Entrepreneur-Crime Drop Relationship: Growing African-American Business Ownership and Declining Youth Violence" shows, these are political economic, not racial, realities. Find Parker's essay in *Urban Affairs Review* 51, no. 6 (March 10, 2015): 751–780.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009).

they always wanted but feared, models of faithfulness they had thus far only admired from a distance. Now they were in it. Redeemer wasn't going to let them rest on their laurels. That's why they were here.

Redeemer has a narrow-is-the-road-that-leads-to-life feel to it. Not exactly a recipe for church growth. Not that the church is going out of its way to make people uncomfortable (just as well one finds there levity, laughter, and life) but neither is it going to make things easy. When inviting friends, younger members feel compelled to offer three caveats. First, the worship music feels dated, as if stuck in the 1990s. They also warn that the preaching won't inspire in the usual ways. The sermons require a lot of thought and don't come with easy take-aways. Lastly, there is the hugging. Redeemer people are huggers, the passing of the peace often comes with a deep embrace, which is a lot to ask of a generational culture that prizes anonymity and personal space. But for members, it's in part the oddness that makes Redeemer feel authentically Christian. The lack of polish (the datedness, headiness, and hugginess) is its own charm and represents the kind of thing Chris and his friends were looking for. At Redeemer, they weren't asking, "What do you do?" At least, not in the usual ways.

Redeemer Community Church started in the early 2000s as a church plant of a church plant. At the turn of the twentieth century, Cumberland Presbyterians sent missionaries to San Francisco's Chinatown, far afield from their Midwest stronghold. The denomination's enterprising spirit distinguished it from other Presbyterians, adopting a name (referring to Tennessee's Cumberland Gap) that highlighted its frontier ambitions. In the 1890s, long before others thought to do so, Cumberland Presbyterians started ordaining women. At about the same time the denomination sent Naomi Sutton to Chinatown to start a mission that would become San Francisco's Cumberland Presbyterian Chinese Church, catering to the city's large enclave of Chinese Americans. Beginning with its first Chinese American pastor in 1904 and helping inaugurate a model of church ministry focused on immigrant Chinese families, Cumberland Presbyterian would go on to serve generations of Chinese American congregants as it, like much Chinese American Protestantism, developed a unique form of evangelicalism.¹² In the 1980s, Cumberland Presbyterian sent a contingent

¹² See Timothy Tseng, "Protestantism in Twentieth-Century Chinese America: The Impact of Transnationalism on the Chinese Diaspora," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 13 (2004): 121–148. More broadly, see also Tseng's "Asian American Religions," in *The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History*, ed. Paul Harvey and Edward J. Blum (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 253–264.

of young members under the direction of Pastor Bob Appleby to launch a new church, Grace Fellowship Community Church. They eventually landed in the Mission district, which before becoming one of the city's most fashionable areas was among its most impoverished. Serving poor immigrant communities became one of Grace Fellowship's hallmarks, part of what distinguished it from its mother church, which like many churches of its kind catered primarily to other Chinese. They had their origins in Chinatown, and had a base culture that drew other Asian Americans, but they would not be Grace Fellowship *Chinese* Church or even Grace Fellowship *Asian American* Church, but rather a church for and of the community, open to whomever came through the door. Given their religious, educated, and often privileged backgrounds, Grace Fellowship members shared little in common with those they served other than immigrant backgrounds, but that was often enough to find common ground amid the alienations of American life.

Grace Fellowship became known for its innovative ministry, radical thinking, and intense community life, hosting urban ministry programs during the day and fellowship meetings late into the night. Partnered with African American preachers close with Pastor Appleby, who had grown up the rare white person in mostly black East Palo Alto, the church committed itself to serving the city. Grace Fellowship saw loving neighbors, preaching the gospel, and cultivating community as God's good news for the world. Pastor Appleby held to the idea "that a congregation shaped by anything less than the gospel can never offer more, and usually offers less, than what the world is capable of producing on its own."¹³ Recalled by one member, "Bob [Appleby] was consistently preaching about the dangers of what is accepted as kind of normal in America, you know, so individualism, consumerism, nationalism. So I think Bob was consistently preaching, if you want to use the language of the powers, that the powers don't deserve our allegiance. We can't yield our allegiance to the market, the economy."¹⁴ As word spread about their radical brand of Christianity, those looking for something different journeyed to San Francisco to join in, including a number from nearby Stanford University. One of the Asian Americans who caught wind remembers, "I had to see it before I could believe it or I could enter into it. And so when I saw what they were doing in terms of getting to know their Latino neighbors and living in community and sharing their resources and being immersed in the urban

¹³ Craig Wong, *Prism* 33, 2006.

¹⁴ Author interview, May 22, 2020.

environments, I was like, ‘Oh, now I get it.’” The next year, 1988, he left graduate school behind and moved with two others into the city. “My cohort and I began to think about poverty and race. It was really our graduate school. We were no longer living in sheltered Stanford’s ivory tower environment. We had to change our social location in order to learn these things you can’t read about it.”¹⁵

Barry Wong, who’d spent his youth in Maryland after immigrating from Vietnam at age nine, remembers his first encounter with Grace Fellowship. “My initial impression was, ‘I’ve never seen something like this before.’” Describing its uniqueness, Barry recalls “the intentionality of sharing possessions, sharing time, trying to live closer together, or even living together. It was the corporate and community nature of what they were trying to do that was compelling.”¹⁶ Growing up as an immigrant in Maryland had not been easy for Barry. He and his brother had been separated from their family while emigrating from Southeast Asia. Barry attended a Chinese American church in high school. The church played the important role of, like San Francisco’s Cumberland Presbyterian, fostering community for immigrant Chinese families trying to establish homes in America. For those like Barry who grew up in America, church would need to play a different role, not so much helping them settle in, as was the case for their immigrant parents, but rather unsettling the American values that now begged their allegiance. The northeast Mennonite school he attended offered some of that, but he wouldn’t see it fully articulated until he got to Grace Fellowship. He married long-time San Franciscan Gaylene (who similarly had left an immigrant Chinese church to join Grace Fellowship), moved to San Francisco, and joined the church. Barry found something there he thought Christianity promised, even required, but rarely provided—community.

It’s really hard to sustain the same fervency and zealousness if you’re just out there doing it by yourself, right? But when you’re doing it with a group of people who have the same mindset, then you can actually support one another in a way where God has revealed God’s glory, revealed in our midst, so that those who, on the outside, look at the community can actually see a picture of how God has intended community to be.

¹⁵ Author interview, May 29, 2020.

¹⁶ Author interview, May 14, 2020.

Barry described Grace Fellowship as “a demonstration plot,” invoking Clarence Jordan’s Koinonia Farm conception of church as revelatory of God’s hopes for the world.¹⁷ Asked if he found any of it strange or weird, Barry says, “Strange, yes, weird, a little bit, but not in a repulsive kind of way, but in a compelling kind of way. I tried to explain to some of my friends back in Maryland, and they responded, ‘If we didn’t know you, we would think that you’re getting yourself into a cult.’” He was hooked. With Gaylene, Barry settled into a rhythm of life common at Grace Fellowship, a day job (in his case, as a physical therapist) that allowed ample time serving the city and doing life with others seeking to be “intentional” about where they lived, how they spent their money and time, and who they hung out with. On Saturdays, the church gathered to celebrate weddings and help folks move, symbols that spoke, like church sacraments, to the character of its communal life and presence in the city and to the church’s sense that the Spirit was moving.

Grace Fellowship saw itself as part of a global mission, serving the needs of the Mission district’s migrant communities and setting out on regular missions to Central and South America. At one point, the church thought it might be called to Colombia, which at the time figured significantly on the national consciousness. When that fell through the church had to figure out what to do with its overabundance of resources. With so many people joining its ranks, Grace Fellowship had the enviable problem of having more resources (personnel, skills, time, ideas, money, etc.) than it knew what to do with. If not South America, then what? It was at that point that Danny and Cindi Fong, a young couple on the church’s staff, presented an idea. What about starting a church in another part of the city? They had the sense that they should head south. After that, things got fuzzy. They believed that Grace Fellowship “had been blessed to be a blessing” and should like the Old Testament’s Abraham and Sarah strike out even if they didn’t know where they would end up. In line with Grace Fellowship’s brand of radical faith, the lack of clarity was somewhat the point. The idea stuck and after some preparation, Grace Fellowship sent out a contingent of families to start a new church, Redeemer Community Church.

Heady days lay ahead for those who left to start Redeemer. The group had committed to one another and to an idea but had little sense what they were

¹⁷ “Demonstration plot” has come up consistently in Redeemer’s history. On the concept, see Andrew S. Chancey, “A Demonstration Plot for the Kingdom of God: The Establishment and Early Years of Koinonia Farm,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 321–353.

doing and where any of it would go—literally. In the beginning, they did not know where the church would meet from year to year, where members would live, and what part of the city they would give themselves to. They did have a network of African American churches they knew through Pastor Appleby. Connections to black churches in the city's south would prove to be one of their most important resources. The connections gave them places to meet and relationships to build on, especially as they moved southeast toward what is known as Black San Francisco.

Asked years later as young adults, the first generation of Redeemer children remember spending lots of time together. They recall moving around and meeting in different churches, but mostly they remember the friendships. It was not only Sundays, midweek Bible studies, and fellowship meetings, but several of the families decided to educate their children together, sharing parenting duties so some would be freed up for church ministry. Soon it made sense for families to live near one another, with some families even sharing homes. Church members became aunties and uncles and babysitters, teachers, and mentors. When they reached elementary school age, the kids attended local public schools together. If they stood out because they were Asian Americans in largely black and brown parts of the city, at least they had one another. The kids turned out no less adventurous than their parents, building bridges into local neighborhood communities in ways their parents could not. They didn't know anything else, so they made do. For a number of the parents, it was not always so easy. Before Grace Fellowship and Redeemer changed their perspectives about education, they had expected their kids to have the kinds of preparation that would, as it had for many of them, pave their way to Stanford and Cal. Yet, learning about systemic injustice, experiencing its effects on neighbors, and seeing it firsthand in the schools, made them wary of how opportunity structures advantaged their children relative to neighborhood black and brown kids. As well, more and more Asian migrant families were moving into the neighborhood, with their own brand of poverty and disadvantage. The Redeemer parents wanted desperately for their children to be committed to issues of justice, to live just lives. That would need to begin at home. They didn't want their children thinking that the upshot of the Christian life was impressive answers to the question, "What do you do?" They wanted their children to love Jesus more than anything, and believed that such love could not be learned without sacrifice, including sacrifices the children could not choose for themselves. Years later, the kids as young adults look back on their upbringing as rather

normal, the only thing they've ever known, the basis of their most cherished friendships, and hope the same for their own children. More than anything the church did, the children remember what they were for one another, their community life as the lifeblood of their presence in BVHP.

Redeemer very much carries the imprint of Grace Fellowship. But with important differences. Younger, with few people over sixty. More intimate (remaining under one hundred regular attendees, unlike Grace Fellowship which had several hundred in its heyday) and therefore more intense. A shared DNA but something of its own making. Less culturally Chinese (more reflective of BVHP than Chinatown) but still distinctly, if also not explicitly or exclusively, Asian American. A similar ethos but now nearly two decades later built into its own story and matched to a unique set of circumstances and convictions. Approaching the milestone of its twentieth anniversary, some cannot believe Redeemer has made it this far, wondering how much longer things will go, while others cannot imagine life without it. In the beginning it was just them, a small group of friends and families, and the close quarters contributed to a feeling where everything and nothing was at stake—everything because they had given themselves entirely to the vision, and nothing because Redeemer was so small (growing nominally those first years) that it could drop off the face of the Earth and none would be the wiser. Because it was just them, they had no one else to depend on. They would have to rely on one another to figure things out. And if they made mistakes—and they made plenty in those early years—only they would know.

Steadily, the church moved closer to BVHP, which was as surprising to Redeemer as to anyone. For some the move came with no small amount of anxiety. They had heard plenty of negative things about that part of the city, which San Francisco's tourist industry has been known to literally leave off the map. But they knew better than to believe the racist tropes. They were most worried about the racism *they* would experience. Like other Asians moving into BVHP, they were not white, and would that be understood? Would they be *seen* as Asian Americans? As described already in this book, Asian Americans do not fit within America's racial politics, and are constantly marginalized by it. How would those racialized by whites as black see those racialized as neither black nor white? Some worried that the church would be viewed not as neighbors but as part of a long line of white opportunists looking to exploit BVHP for its ready resources, cheap labor, and increasingly valuable land. But if not white exploiters, then what? Maybe they would not be seen at all. Perhaps America's binary conversation about race,

especially as it played out in BVHP, would render them not only silent but “having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute.”¹⁸ I will return to this later when I recount BVHP’s history and examine Redeemer’s particular articulation of the gospel in relationship to the area’s history of marginalization.

Redeemer began with Danny Fong as lead pastor with Cindi and others taking on various ministry roles. Danny remembers growing into his role largely by trial and error. Thinking back, he is grateful that the church remained patient as his preaching and leadership caught up to his role as senior pastor.¹⁹ It would be Danny’s voice that led the way into BVHP. One member recalls the pivotal moment when Danny said to the congregation, “‘The church as a whole is called to the Bayview. We haven’t just come here by accident or without meaning. The doors have opened and God has led us here.’ And once he said that, it started a series of things. It started our church thinking what does it look like to be part of the Bayview. And a number of families started to think about moving to the Bayview.”²⁰ The years ahead would be consequential, full of triumphs and setbacks. Some of the initial team left after deciding that what they got was not what they signed up for. Most stayed. There were tensions and challenges as the church figured out who and what it was. And there were the losses and disappointments that come with life shared with others, deaths in the community, including those of children, losses and disappointments that tested and ultimately bonded the community. The church learned to suffer its triumphs and griefs together, publicly and privately.

A Place of Shared Time

Ann Kim’s family immigrated to America from South Korea in 1973, the same year she was born. The family’s difficult early years were spent in hardscrabble Springfield, Oregon, where her parents, with their limited English, managed a low-income apartment complex. She remembers as a young child watching her mother clean vacated apartments. Even as her family found financial success—“the American Dream worked out for my parents”—she never shook the sense of being an outsider.²¹ Growing up

¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 26.

¹⁹ Author interview, June 5, 2020.

²⁰ Author interview, May 4, 2020.

²¹ Author interview, May 29, 2020.

at a time when racism was accepted and expected, the family experienced the harassment and bullying that comes with being Asian immigrants in a white working-class community that saw outsiders as threats to their livelihood. The small immigrant church they attended allowed her family to be with other Koreans. Though she found it supportive and encouraging, Ann felt no more at home in the Korean church than she did in her non-Korean, white world.²² As with many Asian immigrant families, education was stressed and she and her sister Susan did well. Susan went to Occidental College and Ann went to Oberlin College to study cello at one of the nation's top conservatories. At Oberlin, Ann soon learned two things. First, she was not as gifted as some of the school's other performance artists. Second, she felt God calling her to serve the poor. Both suggested a new direction. She had gotten a sense of the many opportunities available at Stanford, and so transferred with hopes that medicine might open doors to her newfound calling. At Stanford, she joined InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF), a national evangelical college ministry, and later, with a small group of IVCF students, attended the Oakland Urban Project (OUP). The summer immersion program where she worked with HIV/AIDS patients, along with her studies in Human Biology, specified her medical calling to the urban poor. That summer proved fortuitous in other ways—she started dating her future spouse, Daniel.

After Stanford, Ann moved to San Francisco and attended Grace Fellowship. She applied widely to medical schools but prayed that she might stay close enough to continue with the church. Fortunately, she got into nearby UCSF, which as one of the nation's top medical schools would open plenty of doors. Medical school was demanding, taking much of her time and energy. While others at the church spent their time together, Ann hit the books. It was Grace Fellowship's ability to flex and extend itself to Ann despite her busy schedule that demonstrated the character of its community life. Over the course of the "blurry" years of medical school and residency (years spent "gone or very tired"), community accommodated itself to Ann. Grace Fellowship and later Redeemer saw themselves as part of Ann's call to the poor, imagining their respective vocations continuous with Ann's. It wasn't a calling shared by many of UCSF's elite medical students and residents, so

²² For my treatment of Asian American immigrant churches, see Jonathan Tran, "Living Out the Gospel: Asian American Perspectives and Contributions," *Annual of the Society of Asian North American Christian Studies* 2 (2010): 13–56, 69–73.

it would require others to resource her unique vocation. Knowing her residency would take her away from Daniel for long stretches, they lived with other Redeemer members. Her vocation was encouraged and enabled by both UCSF and the church: “We were joined, I think, as joined as a resident could be by a church.” When Ann finished her training in internal medicine, on the night that she completed her last rotation, a long call night in the ICU, the church turned up at the hospital to celebrate. Typically, the rotation went overtime so church members waited hours with balloons, flowers, and cake in hand, hilariously dressed up for the occasion. Throughout her career, where she turned down administrative opportunities in order to remain with primary care patients, it has been the church that has helped her into her calling as a public health doctor.

Ann established herself as a highly regarded staff physician at San Francisco General Hospital, which acts as a safety net for the city’s most economically stressed residents. Having settled into their calling to the city—Daniel taught in one of its public high schools (discussed at length in Chapter 6)—the Kims were ready to have children. But, things did not go as planned. Infertility is hard enough, yet a social setting that shares so much publicly presents additional challenges. Being around a church where many not only had children but raised them together magnified the pain of their childlessness. “It was really hard for me because you don’t want to rain on someone’s picnic. You want to be joyful with people who are having babies. I don’t think I ever didn’t attend a baby shower or something like that. I have known people who, you know, that’s just too painful to do. I don’t think I was in that place.” It would be Redeemer’s ability to cultivate a certain privacy—one amid the publicness, and necessary because of it—that again revealed the character of its communal life. The Kims found room to quietly grieve with another couple struggling to have children. They shared together what they felt unable to share with others, becoming for one another a community within the larger community, community at the limits of community. “We could talk about it with them. We definitely had fellow travelers on the road. And it looks different for everyone, but being able to walk through it with them was really significant, even if it meant we weren’t talking about it all the time.” When she thinks back on telling so few people, Ann says, “To me, it’s too bad because I think they would have been helpful and kind and understanding. . . . But I also had the sense that people knew and I didn’t have to.” Writer Wendell Berry talks about “an economy of community” that “exists for the protection

of gifts.”²³ According to Berry, one of the gifts genuine community bestows on its members—a gift community alone can bestow—is privacy. Not everything can be shared. And some things can only be shared. Not everything should be made known publicly; and some things can only be known in private. At the most intense reaches of community, the economy of the sharable and unsharable and the public and the private makes itself known. It would be an economy that Ann and Daniel came to know well, in everything that was spoken and in everything that was left unspoken, in the quietness of their shared and unshared sufferings, as the public and the private condescend to one another, communing with Redeemer in the gift of the known but unsaid.

Later, Ann and Daniel adopted two children from Korea. Each time the babies arrived at San Francisco International Airport, the church showed up, banners and cake again in hand to celebrate. Parenting has come with its own challenges, with one of their children experiencing a genetic disorder and the other weathering its stresses. As before, others would come alongside to help. The church did so without being asked, without fanfare, without so much as recognizing what it was doing. It was simply who they were. Ann says, “The church to Ella and DJ is their family. The church is their family. It is where they have felt safe and known in ways that school has not been easy for my kids. It’s where they’re experiencing God through people.”

During my time at the church, our midweek group (which affectionately referred to itself as “Bubbles, Board Games and Borscht 2.0”) read *A Place in Time*, Wendell Berry’s collection of short stories about the fictitious community Port William: “Small as it was, the town seemed to them to be inundated with self-knowledge. This knowledge moved over it in an unresting current, some of it in stories told openly that eddied with variations from teller to teller and place to place, some of it more darkly and quietly in the undertow of caution, sometimes fraught with the unacknowledged pleasure of malice, sometimes bearing a burden merely of anxiety or concern.”²⁴ The group noticed how in Berry’s stories one experiences not only a different place than San Francisco but a different time that made each of them feel as if, in Berry’s words, “they had the good fortune to land right in the midst, in the very embrace, of one that might as well have been expecting them.”²⁵

²³ Wendell Berry, “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community,” in *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 138.

²⁴ Wendell Berry, *A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port William Membership* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2012), 50.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

The short stories relate interconnected lives that unfold across the place that is Port William, its spacetime of relationships woven together over land, seasons, and generations. In Berry's depiction, space and time are not only connected but open to one another, "sometimes it seemed that a current of love traveled among them and joined them to one another, to those who were absent, to the old times, to the land and its creatures."²⁶ Generations exist in particular spaces, and the meaning of a space takes generations to unfold. What occurs in space (e.g., a birth, a death, touching the soil, telling a joke) triggers the past, recalling seasons of relationships unfolding through unknown futures. Berry construes this layering and interweaving, what is opened and what is closed, as the spacetime of community, as if to say that it is relationships (with humans and with all that is not human) that most powerfully disclose—and in a real sense hold together—spacetime, which does not yield to naked perception, but to habituated modes of saying and seeing. Members of our midweek meetings imagined their time together as a kind of place, the spacetime of belonging together in the midst of San Francisco's hustle-and-bustle culture, a shared place amid the disparate timescapes of career, school, children, neighbors, politics, money, and so forth. Each week members settled into a gathering that began with a common meal, and then group study followed by sharing and prayer, and then hanging out. The meetings would go, for the fifteen or so of us, three hours in an evening in the middle of the week. No one seemed to notice the time. Perhaps that was the point, to occupy space in a way that worked against the press of schedules, or to reconfigure time as a place for community.²⁷ Their little slice of San Francisco became Port William, "What do you do?" became "How are you doing?" and a deep economy transformed the finitude of spacetime, making for both publicness and privacy.

To be identified with a job—"What do you do?"—is to have one's time spoken for, to be rushed and relegated, forced into marked identities and productive spaces, to imagine oneself along a timeline that prioritizes career to community, committing to the former and wishing for the latter. Career in San Francisco's heavily capitalized timescape—where time is money—takes up all of one's time. Meeting midweek in the midst of that in order to share food, scripture, prayer, and one another says, "*This* is where I belong, in this

²⁶ Ibid., 231.

²⁷ This seemed a far cry from the attitudes of many Christians in the city, whose attempt to balance the demands of career often led them to think, "I enjoy the fact that I have small group for 90 minutes and then I have 90 minutes on Sunday." Author interview, June 5, 2020.

place, with these people, in these relationships, here and now and into the future, and through a shared past.” It does so by having others say, “This is where *you* belong, in this place, with us, in these relationships, here and now and into the future, and through our shared past.” The way members of the group related to one another seemed to imagine relationships along mutually cohering spatial and temporal registers, the spacetime of place relationally ordered to the consummation of creaturely longing. Our conversations went deep and covered difficult territory—discussions about race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on that risked personal exposure and offense and elicited profound empathy and care. Given a view into this, and its occurrence on a weekly basis, I realized that the breadth of Redeemer’s remarkable life in BVHP begins with the depth of its presence of place with one another.

When Redeemer members talk about their church, rarely do they begin by talking about what the church does for others. Rather, they talk about their friendships with one another and God. Their work in the community starts with their work as a church. As one member put it, ministry to the community is “as much a kind of time for members of the church to serve together and enjoy working with one another as it is a way to serve the community; it is a way of practicing embodied mutuality.”²⁸ Their service to the wider BVHP community comes as an extension of that ecology of relationships. At the church’s eighteenth-anniversary celebration, one of Redeemer’s members, after reflecting on “growing old” together, summarized this ecology by speaking of their shared future not in terms of “accomplishment or impact or change-making, but that we would be led day-by-day by the wise counsel of the Holy Spirit, that each day we would see Jesus with us in the world and know that he sees us also, in that we would receive the great love of the Father and also his delight and joy in us, as we continue this journey with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”²⁹

The ecology of relationships has been crucial for any success Redeemer has had in BVHP. It was through the gift of place that BVHP blessed Redeemer (a gift through which, as Chapter 6 shows, its members found new scripts for being Asian American), an inheritance bestowed through relationships with black churches and held as an obligation to be paid forward. It was in the careful protection of gifts that Redeemer most fully became a community. We can trace the source of these currents to the Cumberlands sending Naomi

²⁸ Author interview, May 22, 2020.

²⁹ Sunday service, May 17, 2020.

Sutton west. They continued when Cumberland Presbyterian welcomed generations of immigrants (just as that small Korean church welcomed Ann and her family) and when Cumberland Presbyterian begot Grace Fellowship and Grace Fellowship begot Redeemer. It would be a gift stumbled upon by an immigrant who journeyed from Vietnam to Maryland to San Francisco to find it, who upon getting there, said, “I’ve never seen something like this before.” In the far reaches of its currents Redeemer similarly made space for Ann and Daniel, cultivating the privacy needed to bear childlessness separately, just as they would cultivate a place for their children publicly. These would be the currents the church extended as it shared other gifts with BVHP. We can trace the foundations of this gift structure to a deep ecology, the history of the church and the Spirit’s ways of wording the world, the beginning of its politics and a new political economy, the one given child Christ and the inexhaustible gift of his life, the bestowing of creaturely existence from and within the capaciousness of the trinitarian life which condescends to make room for all things in the deep economy of God.³⁰

The First and Last Black People in San Francisco

San Francisco’s original architects, having settled on an area long occupied by Muwekma Ohlone natives, imagined a New Rome, a west coast imperial city powered by the expansive resources of its surrounding *contado* (hinterlands).³¹ Early on, the Bayview/Hunters Point area was cast as an industrial base capable of supplying the materials necessary to realize the city’s potential. It was during these early years that the rallying cry “The Chinese Must Go!” was coined in the city, setting a theme of non-white displacement that would reverberate through San Francisco’s storied history.³² Throughout, BVHP remained a working-class sector powering the city center to the north. Even if the city’s heavy industries didn’t begin there, owing to how the land was imagined, they eventually got there. While its racial and ethnic

³⁰ As theologian Robert Jenson writes, “God can, if he chooses, accommodate other persons in his life without distorting that life. God, to state it as boldly as possible, is roomy. . . . God makes narrative room in his triune life for others than himself; this act is the act of creation, and this accommodation is created time.” Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 236.

³¹ Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), xxi.

³² Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 42.

demographics have changed considerably over the last century and a half, what has not changed is BVHP's place at the city's margins.

In 1940, the majority of what now comprises BVHP was white and working-class. Of its 14,011 people, less than two percent were non-white, a number which included a total of seven African Americans and 136 people of "other races," likely Chinese shrimpers.³³ The white demographic included people from Italy (the largest European contingent), as well as Malta, France, Germany, Spain, and Portugal. This BVHP is recalled, perhaps with a bit of nostalgia, as a close-knit, cooperative working-class community. Taking advantage of the area's expansive bay access, the largest in the area, the Hunters Point dry docks were built in the late 1860s. The docks would play a central role, practically and symbolically, in BVHP's history. Their arrival greatly expanded BVHP's industrial capacity and commenced its place as a center for shipbuilding on the west coast. After Pearl Harbor, the Navy took possession of the docks in order to manufacture ships for World War II. Using emergency war powers, the government displaced surrounding properties, absorbing 537 acres west of the peninsula in order to make space for accelerated wartime production. A nation at war needed workers, lots of them. In 1943 alone, the U.S. Warpower Commission wartime efforts aimed to recruit no less than 100,000 workers. It specifically targeted African Americans, aggressively portraying San Francisco as a key destination for, as described in Chapter 2, the Great Migration out of the South. Just as the country previously needed African Americans in the Delta, now it needed them in San Francisco.

Those efforts resulted in "a demographic watershed in the history of Black San Francisco," likened in local lore to "a second gold rush."³⁴ The black population of San Francisco grew by more than 600 percent between 1940 and 1945. By 1945, San Francisco's total population increased to 827,400—a 30 percent increase in five years. The white population grew at a rate of 28.1 percent, while, over the same period, the black population increased an astounding 665.8 percent. Approximately 32,000 African Americans lived in San Francisco by 1945.³⁵ Black migrants came, often in family units, from the South and the Midwest. They were young, hopeful, and ambitious. Most of

³³ Kelley & VerPlanck, "Bayview-Hunters Point Area B Survey: Historic Context Survey" (San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, February 11, 2010), 92.

³⁴ Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 133; "Bayview Hunters Point Community Revitalization Concept Plan" (Bayview Hunters Point Project Area Committee, 2002), 23.

³⁵ Broussard, *Black San Francisco*, 135.

the workers at the shipyards moved into dormitory-like “war workers dwellings,” which would (in what proved to be a fateful turn of events) be taken over by the San Francisco Housing Authority after the war.³⁶

When the war ended, economic opportunities quickly dried up for the city’s African Americans. The changes at the shipyard reflected the U.S. defense industry’s shifting priorities from World War II to the Cold War.³⁷ Jobs at the naval yards dropped precipitously from peak war numbers of 18,000 to 5,500 in 1949.³⁸ The decline in jobs at the Naval Shipyard had a huge impact on postwar BVHP. Problems stemming from unemployment and dilapidated dwellings constructed during the war (those “war workers dwellings”) were compounded by veterans returning home to a vastly different BVHP—a place now much more racially diverse and densely populated. The Navy repurposed the docks for nuclear testing, beginning what urban geographer Rachel Brahinsky calls BVHP’s “toxic legacy.”³⁹ From 1946 to 1969, it was the job of the Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory (NRDL) to, according to investigative journalist Lisa Davis, “handle and experiment with ships that were contaminated in the world’s fourth atomic bomb explosion, which was part of the Operation Crossroads nuclear tests conducted at Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific.”⁴⁰ NRDL became the military’s leading lab for applied nuclear research. The public, including those who lived in direct proximity to the docks, was kept in the dark. According to Davis, “the Navy kept its very existence a secret until about 1950. At the peak of operations, the lab employed some 600 people—mostly military and civilian scientists—who researched the effects of nuclear weapons and how to mitigate those effects. The laboratory worked on projects for the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project and took part in almost every nuclear weapons test the military performed. Along the way, scientists exposed thousands of mice, dogs, and larger animals to long-lived radiation, often in nuclear tests in the Pacific and Nevada.”⁴¹ Davis’s crack reporting uncovered many of the undisclosed toxic materials the NRDL used and subsequently dumped in San Francisco Bay. The extent and level of toxicity of the disposed materials (including an entire

³⁶ Kelley & VerPlanck, “Bayview-Hunters Point Area B Survey,” 98.

³⁷ “Bayview Hunters Point Community Revitalization Concept Plan 2002” (Bayview Hunters Point Project Area Committee, 2002).

³⁸ Kelley & VerPlanck, “Bayview-Hunters Point Area B Survey,” 98.

³⁹ Rachel Brahinsky, “Race and the Making of Southeast San Francisco: Towards a Theory of Race-Class,” *Antipode* 46, no. 5 (2014): 1258–1276 (1263).

⁴⁰ Lisa Davis, “Fallout: How Nuclear Research Handled—and Grossly Mishandled—the Cold War’s Most Dangerous Radioactive Substances,” *San Francisco Weekly*, May 2, 2001.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

aircraft carrier, the highly radioactive USS Independence) went undisclosed until Davis's story. The Navy exposed the entire Bay area to radioactive contaminants, but BVHP and its already displaced African American population was, as usual, disproportionately affected. In this way, the Navy, acting on behalf of the nation's interests, continued a pattern of imagining BVHP and its people through a trusted calculus of use, identification, and justification. Like before, the effects borne by the land and its people would go on and on.

Inequality intensified in the ensuing decades, especially for those African American residents who lived on BVHP's east side. White flight continued and industry moved on, blue-collar work declined, and discriminatory housing, business, and education policies kept pace. Stressed housing conditions, a legacy of that fateful makeshift "war workers dwellings" infrastructure, were exacerbated when displaced black refugees from nearby Fillmore turned up in BVHP after redevelopment projects expelled them from their homes in the legendary black cultural hub (which I return to in the next section) and its emerging middle class. By the mid-1960s, the black population comprised 90 percent of the district.⁴² Throughout, the fate of local residents remained tied in some form or fashion to the shipyard, which would be shuttered within a decade. Things predictably came to a head. The killing of Matthew "Peanut" Johnson, Jr., a seventeen-year-old African American teenager by a white police officer on September 27 ignited the Hunters Point Uprising of 1966. Local police, joined by highway patrol and eventually the National Guard, used overwhelming force to suppress the uprising which officials worried could turn into another Watts Rebellion from the year before. Events culminated on the day after Johnson's killing, with police indiscriminately shooting into a community center full of children. The uprising went unreported in most national media, though the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's newspaper *The Movement*, which happened to be published in San Francisco, reported events closely on the ground. *The Movement* concludes its report with a photo of a protester's slogan, surely a sign of the times: "Now Matthew Johnson won't have to fight in Vietnam."⁴³ As a recent retrospective reports, "In the end, 457 people were arrested—only 129 of whom were white—and approximately \$135,000 in property was

⁴² Kelley & VerPlanck, "Bayview-Hunters Point Area B Survey," 115.

⁴³ "Hunters Point—Cops Shot into Community Center Sheltering 200 Children," *The Movement* 2, no. 9 (October 1966): 1.

damaged. Despite the community's calls for justice, the officer who killed Peanut Johnson was eventually cleared of wrongdoing when the coroner found that the death was an 'accident and misfortune' and therefore an 'excusable homicide.' After a short term suspension the officer was reinstated and given back pay. While Johnson's death was a catalyst for the Hunters Point uprising, many attributed the community's response to underlying grievances, including joblessness, overcriminalization, inadequate access to education, and uninhabitable living conditions."⁴⁴

The Naval Shipyard closed for good in 1974, ending bay-centered industry that defined BVHP for a century. At its peak in 1945 it had employed 18,235 workers; at the end there were fewer than 7,500 jobs.⁴⁵ The closure was devastating for the thousands who lost their livelihoods. Long vulnerable to capital flight and dependent on a heavy industry that had greatly diminished in value, the closing of the shipyard marked the end of the defense industry's long-held economic monopoly and affected many of the working-class residents of BVHP. Black residents were disproportionately affected as a result of already limited mobility within racially segregated San Francisco and its surrounding suburbs. Such changes have often been cast in terms of "deindustrialization." But things would not be that simple. On the one hand, industry had moved on in ways that stripped many BVHP residents of livelihoods. On the other hand, the effects of industrialization lived on. Urban ecologist Lindsey Dillon observes that "industrialization remains, as, for example, the abandoned underground fuel tanks leaking plumes of synthetic chemicals. . . . Particularly for Bayview-Hunters Point residents suffering from today's cancers, the term 'post-industrial' and 'clean-up' are misnomers that obscure the multiple ways industrialization remains a persistent feature of daily life."⁴⁶

In 2004, the Bayview Hunters Point Mothers Environmental Health & Justice Committee in collaboration with the Huntersview Tenants Association and Greenaction for Health & Environmental Justice published a "toxic inventory" concerning environmental racism and other health

⁴⁴ Nirali Beri, "Blog: The 1966 Hunger's Point Uprising in 'the San Francisco America pretends does not exist,'" Othering & Belonging Institute, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/blog-1966-hunters-point-uprising--san-francisco-america-pretends-does-not-exist>.

⁴⁵ Marcia Rosen and Wendy Sullivan, "From Urban Renewal and Displacement to Economic Inclusion: San Francisco Affordable Housing Policy 1978–2012" (Poverty & Race Research Action Council, November 2012), 124–125.

⁴⁶ Lindsey Dillon, "Race, Waste, and Space: Brownfield Redevelopment and Environmental Justice at the Hunters Point Shipyard," *Antipode* 46, no. 5 (2014): 1205–1221 (1210).

issues plaguing the district, in a stated effort to “to mobilize, train, and empower community mothers in the fight for environmental health and justice in Bayview Hunters Point, San Francisco.”⁴⁷ The Mothers report recounted how BVHP is home to one federal Superfund site, Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, as well as the PG&E Hunters Point Power Plant (finally demolished in 2009), a sewage treatment plant handling 80 percent of San Francisco’s solid waste, 100 Brownfield sites, 187 leaking underground fuel tanks, and 124 hazardous waste handlers regulated by USEPA.⁴⁸ The report describes air and water pollution, hazardous and toxic waste, leaking fuel tanks, and waste facilities in the district. The report also recognizes that residents living east of BVHP’s Third Street are unevenly exposed to adverse environmental hazards. This is the poorer part of the district where at least 40 percent of residents live at subsistence income levels, where approximately 12,000 residents (4,400 households) reside in close proximity to heavy industry, power plants, and truck traffic; of these, 70 percent are African American, the remaining 30 percent comprised of Asian Americans (15 percent) and Latinx and whites.⁴⁹ Mothers portrayed something of an aftermarket industrialism (using Dixon’s point about industrialization), the literal residue of a racially targeted political economy: “Over the years, the health of local residents has been heavily and disproportionately impacted by the cumulative impact of pollution from PG&E’s Hunters Point Power Plant, San Francisco Southeast Water Treatment Facility, the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, and hundreds of industrial companies. This small community has suffered from more than fifty years of apathy, neglect, and environmental racism. Government agencies consistently allowed dirty and polluting industrial activities to take place without proper permitting, adequate environmental reviews, or analysis of the cumulative negative impacts from the many pollution sources on the

⁴⁷ “Pollution, Health & Environmental Racism and Injustice: A Toxic Inventory of Bayview Hunters Point, San Francisco” (Bayview Hunters Point Mothers Environmental Health & Justice Committee, Huntersview Tenants Association & Greenaction for Health & Environmental Justice., 2004), 2. The demographic snapshot of BVHP in 2000, according to the report, runs as follows: 48 percent African American, 1.3 percent American Indian, 23 percent Asian and Pacific Islanders, 17 percent Hispanic, and 10 percent white. The income levels are lower and unemployment rates higher than rest of San Francisco. Forty percent of BVHP residents have incomes below \$15,000, in comparison to the rest of San Francisco where only 20 percent have incomes that low; unemployment is 13 percent, more than twice as high as the City of San Francisco as a whole (*ibid.*, 5). It should not be lost on us that the Mothers report was directed by, and highlighted, African American women, a reality common in environmental movements according to Dorceta E. Taylor’s “American Environmentalism: The Role of Race, Class and Gender in Shaping Activism 1820–1995,” *Race, Gender and Class* 5, no. 1 (1997): 16–62 (52–54).

⁴⁸ “Pollution, Health & Environmental Racism and Injustice,” 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

health of the community.”⁵⁰ The toll of pollution has led community activists in BVHP to resist, with mixed results, further redevelopment projects. They often based their appeals on the barest of things, such as residents’ need to breathe, eerily presaging the last words of Eric Garner and George Floyd, who like Peanut Johnson died at the hands of police—“I can’t breathe.”⁵¹

The BVHP of the future will likely look very different. Indeed, it already does. San Francisco’s economy needs real estate, not the industry-based resources BVHP used to provide. Increasingly, BVHP’s greatest asset will be its land. More precisely, its land as real estate, and therefore cleared of those who currently comprise the last vestige of Black San Francisco. While the 2008 Great Recession hit BVHP harder than any other part of the city (unsurprising considering that it was the city’s lowest median real estate market to begin with), its 18.3 percent annual compound interest rate since then is the city’s strongest. In the seven years leading up to 2018, Bayview homes appreciated on average 170 percent and BVHP home listings averaged \$890,000 (far below San Francisco’s average sale price of \$1.62 million, but still significant, in part because Bayview boasts significantly higher home ownerships rates, 57.2 percent to 36.8 percent).⁵² BVHP homeowners looking to cash out will have options, but remaining in BVHP will be difficult for those already locked out of the very tech economy now dangling big money. In other words, veterans of BVHP, especially its African Americans, are being enticed out. This is what *de facto* antiblackness looks like.⁵³

Not surprisingly, remediation of BVHP’s toxic legacy, or at least some measure of it, has finally come in the form of opportunistic redevelopment corporations. The rights to lead the redevelopment were granted to the savvy Lennar Corporation which positioned itself as “a community savior,” part

⁵⁰ Ibid., 28. Anticipating a framework advanced in this book (connecting ecological relations with political relations in the same way that I have tried to connect racial relations with political economic relations), ecotheologian Willis Jenkins writes that “the idea of environmental racism can sometimes actually obscure the way white power flows through ecological relations. The idea of environmental racism should challenge received notions of what racism is and how it functions. The American imagination of racism often focuses on direct violence or discrimination between persons, but the racist landscape of toxic waste is the outcome of environmental management policies that explicitly aim to protect all citizens from toxic harm.” *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 201.

⁵¹ See Robin Pearce, “The Sick Side of Town: How Place Shapes Disparities in Health” (HAAS Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley, 2018).

⁵² Katie Canales, “San Francisco’s Housing Crisis Is So Out of Control That One of the City’s Last Districts Seized by Big Tech Boasts ‘Cheap’ Homes Priced at \$800,000—Here’s What the Neighborhood Is Like,” *Business Insider*, September 20, 2018.

⁵³ See Erin McElroy and Andrew Szeto, “The Racial Contours of YIMBY/NIMBY Bay Area Gentrification,” *Berkeley Planning Journal* 29, no. 1 (2017).

of BVHP's most recent "New Redevelopment Era."⁵⁴ Urban geographer Brahinsky describes how Lennar stepped in at just the right moment, and presented itself as doing so: "The Southeast is a geographically isolated slice of San Francisco with the highest unemployment and worst cases of environmental illness. It has been rediscovered recently by capitalists, seeking new venues for accumulation in one of the tightest real estate markets in the country. Lennar's rhetoric draws on this very real history, echoing the claims of politicians who insist that development of the area will re-integrate the community with the rest of the city, bringing geographic and cultural cohesion to a long-forgotten place and its people."⁵⁵

Even as BVHP is brought in from the city's margins, what won't be integrated (note Brahinsky's ironic use of the word "re-integrate") is the city's historic African American community, which has been steadily declining for decades. A recent count shows that in the last decades San Francisco's black population has been cut in half, from around 85,000 in 1980 to 43,448 in 2015.⁵⁶ Of the city's total population, 13.4 percent were African American in 1970, compared to 6 percent in 2016.⁵⁷ Looking at the numbers, it is hard not to notice that BVHP's integration has come at the same time as its declining black population, as if one comes at the cost of the other, as if one requires the other.⁵⁸ The city's total population has not radically changed. But its constitution has. During the first half of the 2010s, in- and out-migration had annual averages of approximately 60,000 people. However, *who* is moving in and out is telling: incoming migrants are predominantly white or Asian American, highly educated, young, male, and white collar, characteristics consistent with the city's tech industry. Out-going migrants tend to be black and Latinx, working class, older, and less educated. Combined with an extremely competitive housing market that has become, even by San Francisco's already prohibitive standards, absurdly expensive, the result will increasingly be an uber-rich San Francisco with very few black people, and many Asian Americans and whites.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Brahinsky, "Race and the Making of Southeast San Francisco," 1263.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Walter Thompson, "How Urban Renewal Destroyed The Fillmore in Order to Save It," *Hoodline*, January 3, 2016, <https://hoodline.com/2016/01/how-urban-renewal-destroyed-the-fillmore-in-order-to-save-it/>.

⁵⁷ Dan Kopf, "Quantifying the Changing Face of San Francisco," *Priceonomics*, 2016, <https://priceonomics.com/quantifying-the-changing-face-of-san-francisco/>.

⁵⁸ Lance Freeman, *A Haven and a Hell: The Ghetto in Black America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 253. See also Richard Walker and Alex Schafran, "The Strange Case of the Bay Area," *Environment and Planning A* 47, no. 1 (2015): 10–29 (23–25).

⁵⁹ Kopf, "Quantifying the Changing Face of San Francisco."

In BVHP, the changes have certainly been felt. Dee Hillman, who has been part of the BVHP community for years, in reflecting on recent violence directed against BVHP's growing Chinese American population, said to me in an interview, "I don't think a lot of African Americans truly have accepted that they are not the majority anymore in Bayview. And that is so hard for them to come to grips with. I see it in community meetings. They feel threatened, they feel like their places, their cultural iconic places, where they once had their food, their jazz clubs and different businesses and so on, are being taken from them and others are coming in. So I think they have a hard time coming to grips with the fact that others are coming into the community and how to make that more of a melting pot of shared space instead of it's just mine and ours only."⁶⁰ How then are we to think about a predominantly Asian American church moving into the neighborhood?

“Okay, We Don’t Know about Each Other”

To get at this question I turn for a moment to film and theater in order to see how questions about racial identity and belonging have played out in the broader culture. As we will see, similar themes and problems get rehearsed, and in ways that can aid our analysis of Redeemer's place of shared time in BVHP.

The 2019 film *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* revolves around protagonist Jimmie Fails and a Victorian home in the city's Fillmore district, already encountered in this chapter as one of the communities black San Franciscans were displaced from before settling in BVHP.⁶¹ Initially the film begins as a comment on gentrification with rising San Francisco real estate costs pricing black locals out of homes and communities. However, the film pushes the issue of gentrification to say more than the initial point about race and real estate. The film's point is not simply that gentrification will make Jimmie Fails "the last black man in San Francisco." The film offers a subtler point that sits in the background of its title. Initially, the drama turns on whether Jimmie will be able to reclaim a house that is his by birthright. Or so he believes. Jimmie thinks that his grandfather built the house, a notion

⁶⁰ Author interview, May 19, 2020.

⁶¹ Joe Talbot, dir., *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* (New York: A24, 2019).

the film's various antagonists find hard to believe given the racism built into the city's history. "My grandfather built this. He came here World War II, he bought this lot and he built this house . . . the stairs, these windows, the columns, the archways, the witch hat, the balustrades, the fish scales, this balcony, that wall to keep y'all the fuck out. All of it. By Jimmie Fails the first, with his own two hands, 1946." The story Jimmie tells conveys a double injustice the film means to highlight—black people are robbed of the house's legacy just as Jimmie is robbed of the house itself. Racism makes this legacy no more believable than its black ownership. This follows a common pattern in American life, the fact that African Americans helped build a country that refuses to recognize them. Toward this larger point, the house stands in for America, Jimmie Fails I represents the generations of African Americans who built it, and Jimmie Fails III represents subsequent generations of African Americans now pushed out of it. Recounting the multiple layers of injustice reiterates yet again what the current book has been arguing about racial capitalism's processes and commitments, the determinants that lead to black displacement as yet another aftermarket reality.

Except, as we learn later in the film, the story Jimmie Fails tells about the house and his grandfather is not true. Or, not entirely true. His grandfather, we are later told, did not build the house, though his family once lived in it before losing it, likely because of the displacing forces I described in the previous section. One is left wondering why Jimmie came to believe the not-entirely-true story. It could be to make the larger point, which seems undoubtedly the case, that African Americans built a country they are consistently pushed out of. The point of the untrue story would then be to show how including African Americans greatly complicates America's legacy. But the film offers another reason for why Jimmie wanted to believe the story, and it has less to do with African American victimization, or at least complicates that story. At one point in the film, Jimmie says, in describing his grandfather's situation in the Fillmore, "He came over here from New Orleans. It was hella Japanese people, bruh, and then they got thrown into little war camps, and he wasn't trying to move into nobody's shit, so he built this bruh." *The Last Man in San Francisco* picks up the story of black disenfranchisement at the point when African Americans are being forced out of San Francisco's landscape and history. It laments the loss of "the Harlem of the West" and its testament to black dignity and resilience as embodied by the tradition of jazz music (a constant in *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*). The main thrust of the film points to the double-injustice of black displacement. But the film

is not content to rest there. It opens itself up to another story, one that complicates its own.

African Americans moved into the Fillmore after the residents that had been living there were interned during World War II. The Japanese American internment and its aftermarket effects is the central focus of the play *After the War Blues* by playwright Philip Kan Gotanda.⁶² Like *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*, *After the War Blues* focuses on displacement and appropriation. The setting is a Japanese American-owned boarding house that African Americans took over during internment. As described in the previous section, “a second gold rush” between 1940 and 1945 increased San Francisco’s black population by over 600 percent. Following a familiar playbook, the country needed black labor and did not want to pay for it (wages without housing amounted to very little) and used race to rationalize the arrangement. San Francisco both aggressively imported black labor and tightly controlled where black laborers could live. African Americans had no choice but to live where they could, which meant, if they wanted to avoid BVHP’s dormitory-like war dwellings, the Fillmore. Race likewise justified internment, which conveniently made it the case that those who imported black laborers would not need to do anything to house them—just stick them where the Japanese used to live. Japanese Americans, who could be found in San Francisco as far back as the 1860s, began relocating to the Fillmore after the 1906 earthquake destroyed their Chinatown residences. Because it was less desirable for whites, the area around Fillmore Street was one of the few places where non-whites could own property. By the second World War, the Japanese American presence in the Fillmore had grown to five thousand people and two hundred businesses. They called the area Nihonmachi, or Japantown. Their internment under Executive Order 9066 allowed African Americans to occupy conveniently vacant residences and commercial spaces. While forced overcrowding made their stay far from ideal, the city’s newest residents were still able to transform Japantown into a mecca of black culture—“the Harlem of the West”—attracting greats like Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Lionel Hampton, Charles Mingus, and John Coltrane.⁶³

Gotanda’s *After the War Blues*, which takes place around the same time Jimmie Fails believes his grandfather built the Victorian, portrays

⁶² Previously *After the War*, the play was retitled *After the War Blues* in 2014. Philip Kan Gotanda, *After the War Blues* (Berkeley, CA, 2014). <http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1389977/24924468/1400802678483/ATWB-RevScript01262014.pdf?token=SgFICjqFGFUlpvz1mBkTMZpi0os%3D>

⁶³ See Elizabeth Pepin, *Harlem of the West: The San Francisco Fillmore Jazz Era* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006).

second-generation Japanese American (or Nisei) Chet Monkawa's return to the Fillmore after being released from an internment camp. Chet is glad for the Harlem of the West. Before the internment he was an aspiring jazz musician. Yet this is a very different context, now rife with tensions as Japanese Americans and African Americans fight over contested space. In this context, questions loom over whether Chet's music embodies or appropriates the black experience jazz as a musical form represents. Jazz did not originate with Japanese Americans, but in the camps it served for many as an important source of consolation, testifying to their dignity and resilience, not unlike what the Victorian house does for Jimmie. We are left unsure what to think about Chet's music just as we are left unsure what to think about Jimmie's house. Rather than getting stuck on questions of identity (e.g., what counts as embodiment versus appropriation) these tensions, for Gotanda, open up to the mutuality of Japanese American suffering and African American suffering. In the context of mutuality, identity becomes less about essential qualities differentiating who belongs where (e.g., white people belong in Victorians and therefore African Americans do not; jazz belongs in the Harlem of the West and therefore Japanese Americans do not; non-whites belong in the Fillmore and therefore whites do not) and more about discovering how they, despite their many differences, belong to one another.

For the characters of *After the War Blues*, getting to mutuality is not easy. It begins, as it does for an African American family (Earl and Earl's skeptical older sister Leona Hitchings) that befriends Chet, by acknowledging the differences that they think separate them.

EARL: They was here before us, Leona. All over here. Up and down Webster, and Fillmore too, even over South park. Before the war they owned the whole kit and caboodle.

LEONA: And then they come back. And then after they lose the war, and what happens? Colored folks get thrown out, Japs get to move in. That's just like it's always been, but it doesn't mean it's right.

EARL: The Man locked them up.

LEONA: It doesn't matter, these things. Everybody got some pain they have to live with. And Lord knows, no one's got more pain than colored folk. . . . So they been locked up three or four years, so what? That ain't pain. I got a lifetime of pain. Three or four years, that's a walk in the park compared to our pain. Japs don't know nothing about pain.

They get closer to mutuality when circumstances, specifically relationships, force them to rethink their differences, rethink what claiming them does, or fails to do, indeed misses. It is such a relationship (with Lillian) that forces into the open presumptions Leona holds about her Japanese American neighbors, including those tasked with managing the boarding house.

LILLIAN: You think we're doing this because you're not Japanese. So it happens you're not; it's got nothing to do with us needing the rent.

LEONA: You don't know what I'm thinking. Believe me, you have no clue.

LILLIAN: Then tell me. Tell me, Miss Hitchings.

LEONA: You think it just happens to be that way. For Coloreds, it can't be that way because when bad stuff, you don't just see what's happening to you right then, you see back to your mother, grandmother, great grandmother. You got a memory of things doesn't even belong to you but connected to you. And you know it doesn't just happen. What happened before and now is all connected.

LILLIAN: I think I do understand, Miss Hitchings, bad things have happened to us too.

LEONA: No, no—I been through that with Earl, he got no sense of what it means to be Colored, and neither do you.

LILLIAN: And you have no sense of what it means to be Japanese here in this country. You don't know about me.

LEONA: I do know about you—

LILLIAN: You don't know about me. I listened to you. I gave you that courtesy. Okay, we don't know about each other.

At tension here is whether those racialized as Japanese American and those racialized as African American will be able to see the racialization for what it is. More precisely, it comes to whether they will be able to get past how racialization pits them against each other under mutual but different forms of oppression, sequestering them both to a single piece of unwanted land. They share this fate even though importantly different histories got them there. One way to understand the predicament is to see it as a result of essential differences and what those differences bring to their shared fates. Another way is to understand those differences as a function of respective aftermarket processes and commitments, and each the result of an expansive political economy that seeks to divide and conquer as a tactic of domination. Reading their predicament as a function of essential difference, they are

pitted against one another. Read in light of racialization, something entirely different comes into view, a shared fate with possible shared futures.

All that Lies Beneath

So then, how is one to think about Redeemer's presence in BVHP? Are they a religious version of Lennar Corp., an entity presenting itself as savior? Are they all that different from the capitalists in Brahinsky's story, "seeking new venues for accumulation" in contested cultural space, their rhetoric like Lennar's drawing "on this very real history, echoing the claims of politicians who insist that development of the area will re-integrate the community with the rest of the city, bringing geographic and cultural cohesion to a long-forgotten place and its people?"⁶⁴ Things can certainly appear that way. Taken within BVHP's larger history of marginalization and the presently unfolding processes and commitments of appropriation (recall Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's "predatory inclusion"), the timing looks suspicious, Christian mission once again wedded to imperialist expansion. First Spanish and Mexican Christians appropriated Muwekma Ohlone land, now Asian American Christians moving in on Black San Francisco. Read through an identarian presence/absence and inclusion/exclusion calculus (yellow and white people displacing black and brown communities), the optics are not good.

But what if the story is more complicated? What if we follow the promptings of *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* and *After the War Blues* and open ourselves to other possibilities, refusing to rest content with easy identarian answers? Recall that in the Introduction to this book, I characterized Derek Hyra's *Race, Class, and Politics in Cappuccino City* as illustrative of an identarian mode of analysis.⁶⁵ In his study of gentrification, Hyra focuses on white appropriation of black culture (a problematic not dissimilar to Chet's apparent appropriation of jazz) with the suggestion that black displacement can be explained in terms of whiteness and antiblackness. I argued that Hyra's focus on racial identity as explanatorily significant obscures, in typical identarian fashion, the actual determinates of black displacement which I described in terms of poverty and its antidemocratic antecedents and

⁶⁴ Brahinsky, "Race and the Making of Southeast San Francisco," 1263.

⁶⁵ Derek S. Hyra, *Race, Class, and Politics in Cappuccino City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

effects. I argued that the problem isn't that in focusing on white gentrifiers Hyra "plays the race card" but rather that he plays it too narrowly and thereby distracts from the fact that the whole deck of racial capitalism is stacked against anyone a race-based political economy relegates to the bottom. I said that Hyra turns what needs to be a broadly racial capitalist story into one narrowly confined to racial identity. Viewing displacement in San Francisco through the lens of racial identity (say, Japanese American versus African American displacement), as the identitarian mode of thought is wont to do, misses the schematized role racial identity plays within the political economy of racial capitalism. It is, as Rebecca Solnit puts it, to focus on "the fin above the water" to the exclusion of all that lies beneath:

San Francisco has been for most of its 150-year existence both a refuge and an anomaly. Soon it will be neither. Gentrification is transforming the city by driving out the poor and working class, including those who have chosen to give their lives over to un lucrative pursuits such as art, activism, social experimentation, social service. But gentrification is just the fin above water. Below is the rest of the shark: a new American economy in which most of us will be poorer, a few will be far richer, and everything will be moving faster, more homogenous and more controlled or controllable. The technology boom and the accompanying housing crisis have fast-forwarded San Francisco into the newest version of the American future, a version that also is being realized in Boston, Seattle, and other cities from New York and Atlanta to Denver and Portland.⁶⁶

In light of racial capitalism's dynamics of use, identification, and justification and all those aftermarket installations dotting the neo-liberal landscape, one wonders if "the new American economy" Solnit portrays is new as much as renewed, the latest version of a political economy that matures by reinvention. Taken in this light, we might ask whether Redeemer and its BVHP neighbors, both now fated to the same toxic legacy, will be able to see past the identitarian framing to the roots of their respective problems. If they can get past the racialization meant to keep them apart, then the problematic will transition from how their essential differences cancel one another to the respective gifts each brings. This would be to imagine BVHP as community

⁶⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism* (New York: Verso, 2002), 13–14.

capacious enough to accommodate within its life treasures old and new—a tall order given a social imaginary narrated through property values.⁶⁷ As was the case with framing the Delta Chinese, once the plotline reduces to racial identity, little attention is given to the character of that presence. Everything becomes about racial identity. But if BVHP and Redeemer can resist the idea that race tells them what they need to know about each other (realizing after looking below the surface, “Okay, we don’t know about each other”), then possibilities for mutuality open up. The question here about moral presence mirrors the earlier one about predatory inclusion. The first asks about the problems that come with inclusion while the second asks about the benefits that come with presence. Both arrive on the far side of recognizing that inclusion/exclusion or presence/absence gives us very little.

Once there, more can be seen. Dee Hillman, who earlier talked about fellow African Americans having a hard time with outsiders moving into Black San Francisco, described Redeemer as “the hands and feet of Jesus” in BVHP: “If you want to see a congregation act like Christ, I mean, ‘I’m going to feed you,’ ‘I’m going to tutor your kid,’ ‘I’m going to give you a business loan,’ like ‘What do you need?’ Redeemer has said that they are here to serve.” Her spouse, Tyrone Hillman, Jr., pastors BVHP’s Shekinah Christian Fellowship, a black church that befriended Redeemer after it moved into the community. When talking about the displacement his church has witnessed firsthand, he says, “I think one of the things that God has a history of doing is connecting people and place together. Whereas when we look at capitalism and many of the other, the moving on up, and the, you know, the looking for the next best thing, there’s always this constant displacement and this searching for something better than what you may presently be at or presently have. And so when you talk about gentrification, and the idea of displacement, there’s always this notion of trying to disconnect people from place.” Dee Hillman adds, “God has given Redeemer a grace to have key partnerships. I think they’re really friendships, rather, with people all over Bayview so what they do is never seen as invasive. It’s always seen as ‘How can we partner?’ or ‘How can we help?’ This is what we’re doing and we’d love to get your feedback, we’re not trying to overstep.” The Hillmans speak of Redeemer and BVHP as an occasion of, as Reverend Hillman observes, God connecting people and place together:

⁶⁷ Rachel Brahinsky, “The Story of Property: Meditations on Gentrification, Renaming, and Possibility,” *Environment and Planning*, no. 5 (2020): 837–855.

By my understanding and what I've seen from Redeemer is that they've internalized this notion of how we are to be Christ's representatives in this area that we believe that we've been called to. To the extent that they have changed their own zip codes, their own area codes, and moved into this neighborhood. I think there is something to be said that when you live in the city or in the area or in the neighborhood that you are serving, ministering and preaching you find yourself experiencing a lot of the same challenges that the people in that same community are experiencing. Now, it's not to say that is exactly identical, but it's to recognize, "Wow, this is how it would be for a middle class person who's unable to find financial support, who wouldn't be able to send their children to any of the afterschool programs because they don't qualify for it." And you're like, "Wow, you're making \$1,800 a month and rent's this amount, and so without Section 8 support, it's going to be extremely difficult for you to be able to stay in this place which then contributes to the displacement," so on and so forth. So when you see those things as a ministry and you're truly missional, like the Redeemer family is, they're able to see.⁶⁸

Rather than Redeemer's presence posing a problem, Reverend Hillman sees it as crucial inasmuch as that presence puts itself in service of BVHP, noting: "I don't think they'd be able to recognize the opportunities and challenges if they lived in other parts of the city." Asked if suspicions have been raised about Redeemer's intentions in BVHP, he answers, "Absolutely. I think that's a legitimate question. And I think that will be one of the ongoing challenges that they will have to prayerfully and discerningly address and deal with. But I think one of the things that they have, one of their secret sauces, is the relationships they have built in this community."⁶⁹

Redeemer's senior pastor, Cindi Fong, is an excellent preacher and possesses a uniquely profound pastoral presence. And she is white. When the church affirmed her calling to lead Redeemer after Danny assumed another position in the church, being white took on greater resonance—at least in her mind. Her whiteness grew in proportion to her visibility, as it always had. Her race was a problem even before she and Danny officially started dating back

⁶⁸ Author interview, May 19, 2020.

⁶⁹ Dee Hillman observes that in BVHP Redeemer's religious identity is seen as an asset—"not just a nonprofit coming in from off the street"—whereas in the rest of secular San Francisco, that identity would be held with suspicion, speaking to another BVHP distinctive owing to its historic African American presence.

at Stanford. At the time, Danny thought he might be called to serve a Chinese American church and worried that Cindi's race might pose a problem. When as a married couple they left Grace Fellowship and started Redeemer, she could have (considering that Cumberland Presbyterians had been ordaining women for a hundred years) just as well as Danny assumed the lead pastor role. But some took issue with her white identity—including Pastor Appleby, who was likely projecting concerns he as a white pastor of non-white congregants knew all too well. Yet, even before she met Danny and before they dreamed up Redeemer, she had learned, if only implicitly, to see herself as a problem. Her maternal great-grandparents served as missionaries to Native Americans with whom her family lived on a reservation for three generations, starting what is now the oldest continuously operating Native American Protestant church in the country—First Crow Indian Baptist Church of Lodge Grass of Montana.⁷⁰ In her time on the reservation, she could not escape the toxic legacy of white Christian missionaries, something the kids at her reservation school made sure she didn't forget. Cindi knows, partly because she had always known, what it means to be a problem.⁷¹

Now lead pastor, nearly two decades removed from those initial misgivings, Cindi wears the double consciousness—privileged and problematic—like a blanched scarlet letter inscribed on her mind. Neither has she found reprieve at home. Just the opposite. With Danny working through his own history as an Asian American and their biracial children utilizing critical race theory to figure out their identities, Cindi can be made to play the role of proxy to all things white.⁷² The self-abnegations native to evangelical pietism combined with the self-condemnations of “white fragility”—in an ironic case of gaslighting—don’t leave much room for acknowledging the obvious

⁷⁰ Lawrence S. Small, *Religion in Montana: Pathways to the Present* (New York: Skyhouse Publishing, 1995), 221. Prominent members of the Crow Nation have been members of First Crow Indian Baptist Church, including Robert Yellowtail and Joe Medicine Crow, who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Honor in 2009.

⁷¹ Author interview, May 6, 2020. While taking classes as Fuller Theological Seminary, Cindi examined her family's history. Her paper “The Gift of Being a Guest: Possibilities for the Gospel in Native American Missions: A Study of the Life of William A. Petzoldt, Missionary to the Crow Indians 1903–1960” recounts her family's history on the reservation. She concludes about her great-grandfather, “Petzoldt was subject to both the brutal power of colonialism as well as the transforming power of the Gospel as he accepted an invitation by the Crows to start a day school on their reservation in 1903. Beginning his work as a guest of the Crows allowed Petzoldt to be in an interdependent relationship. This interdependent relationship between Petzoldt and the Crow people made room for both parties to experience a Gospel not entirely compromised by the agenda of assimilation that governed missionaries' relationships with Native Americans in the early 1900s.”

⁷² On biracial existence, see Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

fatigue.⁷³ If the goal of whiteness discourse is guilt and exhaustion, then it has been accomplished with Pastor Cindi Fong—so much so that the achievement of her pastorate, in a congregation not that far removed from the patriarchy of immigrant Chinese Christianity, can feel lost on her.⁷⁴ Once Cindi's racial identity sets the terms of her visibility (notably in how she sees herself), the identitarian plotlines take over, sidelining questions about the character of her pastoral presence, which everyone I interviewed only admired. As far as I could tell, no one at Redeemer thought about Cindi's whiteness as much as Cindi did. And this was not for lack of awareness on matters of race and racism. The time I spent with Redeemer (a year in which COVID-19 resulted in thousands of reports of anti-Asian American racism and the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Brionna Taylor, and George Floyd provoked a massive public response), the church talked about racism a great deal, the topic coming up repeatedly on Sundays, in midweek meetings, focus groups, day-to-day life, and so on. Yet no one saw Pastor Cindi as part of the problem. It was not that they were color-blind; they saw that their pastor was white and the significance of her being so in their context. But she was not reduced to her whiteness, even if she had the tendency of reducing herself to it. She sometimes spoke of laying down her white privilege, but that sentiment seemed strangely disconnected from the church's day-to-day work (discussed in detail in the next two chapters) aimed at dismantling the structures and systems that grant that privilege. It was not clear what work talking about whiteness was doing for Cindi and the congregation, especially when her life with Redeemer conveyed so much more. What was clear was that the church admired and adored their senior pastor, and benefited greatly from her preaching and presence. It had opened up a space in its life, gifting her with the spacetime necessary for her to work her way out of whiteness, whatever that might come to mean.⁷⁵

Something similar could be said about Redeemer and BVHP. The cultural moment dictates canceling everything that offends our progressive sensibilities. Especially things like white religion. We are quick to call out anything

⁷³ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018). DiAngelo's argument aspires to a political economic analysis, but the identitarian framing, typical of the whiteness discourse discussed in Chapter 3, takes over.

⁷⁴ One interviewee talked about the important dynamic Cindi brings “as a mom and a female.” Author interview, June 5, 2020.

⁷⁵ Mary McClintock Fulkerson's *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) makes the converse argument, that without working identitarian concepts, a church congregation, even one as well-intended as Redeemer, falls into racism.

that smacks of complicity. Given the extent of the damage and its structured and systematic entanglements across spacetime, little will remain untouched. And little should. This will likely go on and on. But in the process of deconstructing everything, will we have the wherewithal to distinguish friend from foe, those things we need from those we don't, those that heal from those that harm? Our Manichean mood tempts us to base our judgments on essential qualities of persons, flattening them to properties visible to the naked eye, there on the surface of one's body and guaranteed in the history of one's race. These of course are not new temptations, and neither are the reverisons to moral purity (victimization and exceptionalism are not unrelated) even if there is more reason than ever to claim it. What does seem new is the issue of whether we have run out of resources to hold open the question of one's witness, the inventory of one's presence, of what it does to a place, say, the ability to breathe.

5

Deep Economy

Dayspring's Doxology

In our community, we're a part of this earth that is alive. That is not only spinning, but orbiting around the sun, that's alive as well. It's almost like there's something keeping us from making that realization, because when we are in tune with that, we understand that the matrix of modern society is not a reality. It's a human created matrix for people to be herded into workhorses and the division of labor, so that human society can function into what we have created it to be. But on a grander scale or at least from a spiritual lens, that's not real.

—Rosie Thunderchief, Community Organizer¹

The predominance of vowels in one language, or of consonants in another, and constructional and syntactical systems, do not represent so many arbitrary conventions for the expression of one and the same idea, but several ways for the human body to sing the world's praises and in the last resort to live it.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*²

Redeemer Community Church shares a building with Dayspring Partners, its companion software company, and Rise University Preparatory School (Rise Prep), its companion neighborhood school. As their lease was coming up in the Fall of 2020, the leaders approached the building's owner with an idea. Since agreeing on terms favorable to all parties wasn't working, maybe the owner could simply give them the building. For free. Their case was

¹ Natalie Avalos, "Re-Enchanting the Land of Enchantment: Religious Regeneration in a Native/Chicanx Community," *REvista* 5, no. 2 (2017): 1–21 (8).

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Donald A. Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 187.

straightforward enough: the building is in BVHP and God is doing important, life-saving work there—why not take part? In making their appeal, they acted as if the earth and everything in it, including the building, belonged to God. It did not matter that the building's owner did not see things, including her \$17 million building, that way.³ It could be, they optimistically suggested, one of the best things she's done. She would get in return more than she could ever ask or imagine: "to create a place that would bring people, including especially children, joy and to gain 'eternity' for herself in having a respected legacy after she passes."⁴ Plus, the tax benefits would be great. They made their pitch in unapologetically Christian terms, using explicitly religious language without holding back any of their pietistic fervor. They spoke confidently, even as they made their appeal with fear and trembling, as if premised on facts readily available to anyone. They hoped that the conviction of their lives would be translation enough.

If racial capitalism racializes in order to justify dominative exploitation, then antiracism should set about two tasks: first, diminishing racialization's ability to facilitate domination, which involves deflating racist identitarian modes of thought, and, second, displacing exploitation as the basis of political economy, which involves highlighting alternative idioms by which political economy is imagined and practiced. The first task was the burden of Part I. In this chapter I continue with the second. In portraying Redeemer's place in BVHP, and characterizing that place as a certain kind of presence, I have already laid the groundwork for *ecologically* imagining life under racial capitalism. I develop that idiom in this chapter. I attempt to work out what Redeemer means when it speaks of BVHP as "an ecology that we have devoted ourselves to."⁵ BVHP itself subsists in a larger ecosystem described in the previous chapter, one situated at San Francisco's margins, understood for much of its life as resourcing its center which BVHP exists solely to serve, first with heavy industry and now with real estate. More than most American settings, the Bay Area with Silicon Valley linking whole municipalities and powering entire economies serves as a metropole connecting the Americas and Asia and beyond that the world, the north star of an enormously impactful tech industry and a paragon of internationally scaled cultural diversity. Nested within that transnational ecology, within San Francisco and

³ The \$17 million figure had been put forward in November 2018. Chi-Ming Chien, *A Prophet Economy* (Unpublished manuscript, 2018), 41.

⁴ "Bubbles, Board Games and Borsch 2.0" Group email, November 5, 2020.

⁵ *Ibid.*

within BVHP is Redeemer, comprising its own microecology, itself a body comprised of different parts. There is the church itself, which I had occasion to describe in the previous chapter. There is a for-profit software company, Dayspring Partners, also started out of Grace Fellowship and now exclusively a subsidiary of the church. And there is Rise University Preparatory, the microecology's private school serving to equip and empower BVHP children. In this chapter, I detail the microecology's currents circulating through and within Dayspring Partners, including Dayspring's own internal ecological practices. What I hope to depict is an ecology where economy is imagined differently, not in terms of exploitation but rather through the idioms of participation, revelation, and repair. Combined, the idioms amount to what I call "deep economy" betokening the story Christians call the divine economy. Accordingly, the chapter takes an explicitly theological cast, so far only implied in my account of political economy.

In Part I, I described what I have been calling racial capitalist aftermarkets as specific structures of opportunity that arise within standing systems of inequality. Aftermarkets exploit economic opportunities historically created by *de jure* racist political arrangements like those facilitating the political economy of second slavery. Even as the political economies move on, the political arrangements leave in place inequality ripe with opportunity for further exploitation. One can find aftermarkets everywhere dotting the neo-liberal landscape. Part of what the idea of aftermarkets is meant to convey is that human activity does not take place in a vacuum. Rather, the past haunts the present and plays a significant role determining its future. America's past, present, and future share an ecology, the content of which is racialized inequality and injustice. If, as I showed through historians of capitalism, chattel slavery set in motion a political order that holds sway to this day, then present economic activity has roots deep in America's history. Aftermarkets, and in this book the Delta Chinese and their complicated legacy, remind us of the political stakes of our economic lives. One can seek to redress and repair that legacy or one can, wittingly or unwittingly, take advantage of the opportunities it presents. Such is the ecology we live in. Such is the ecological shape of moral existence. In the past, taking advantage took the form of *de jure* activity that sought to exclude people of color so as to maintain white advantage. Today, people of color are included for predatory purposes, and once again to the benefit of the racially advantaged. The Delta Chinese found themselves in a situation where they were in a position to benefit by servicing an unjust state of affairs. And so they did. And while we can blame them for

doing so, the bigger story to be told is racial capitalism's aftermarket legacy. Again, within such a world one can choose to take advantage or seek to redress and repair disadvantage.⁶ Redress and repair necessitate changing the basic idioms by which economic life is imagined, from the extractive and expropriative grammars of exploitative capitalism to idioms conducive to humane forms of life. This is the work of antiracism. It must first demythologize ideologies that hide in plain sight oppressive exploitation. And then it must dismantle structures and systems of exploitation. Without both, domineering exploitation will conjure racism again and again.

This book proposes divine economy as accomplishing both. I recount through this chapter a moment of divine economy, not at its climax in Christ's life, death, and resurrection but downstream as a group of people attempt to come to terms with the horrifying effects of racial capitalism by living into a political economy deep enough to challenge it. What will be discovered is an ecology where radical forms of political economic redistribution push against current constellations of power and value and move into the natural order of things. Attention to these surprising movements and the vibrancy of life teeming across the spectrum of creaturely ecology opens up conceptual sightlines that see past narrow distinctions like church/state, sacred/secular, politics/economics, race/class, local/global, and inclusion/exclusion.

It should be acknowledged, given this chapter's attention to a specific church's antiracist efforts, that there is every reason to give up on the Christian church. It has not only been a site of racism, but in a significant sense the church in America *is* American racism—the church, America, and racism an inverted *vestigium trinitatis* of a broken world.⁷ It is as much as anything an act of faith to think oneself into the church's faithfulness. The promise that God is reconciling the racist world in, through, and as the church is not an evasion of the church's ongoing racism but an indictment of it. The promise of the church provides the operative criteria by which we

⁶ While the broader reparations debate exceeds the goals of this chapter, there is no question, given my racial capitalist approach, that I believe something like reparations is both necessary and required. For what that would entail, see Thomas Craemer et al., "Wealth Implications of Slavery and Racial Discrimination for African American Descendants of the Enslaved," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 47, no. 3 (June 19, 2020): 218–254. More broadly, Janna Thompson, *Taking Responsibility for the Past: Reparation and Historical Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002); Raymond A. Winbush, *Should America Pay? Slavery and the Raging Debate on Reparations* (New York: Amistad, 2003); Roy L. Brooks, *Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

⁷ For a recent account, see Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

can judge and direct its faithfulness. Its perfectionist sensibilities (the very idea that the church cannot afford to rest on its laurels) built around doctrines of participation, revelation, and moral repair prepare the occasion of its perfection through processes and commitments of repentance, what I call “doxology.” God’s liberating presence certainly extends beyond the church, just as it begins with Israel, but if that presence does not also remain as promised with Israel and the church, then divine presence and promise come to nothing.

BVHP as Ecology

Coming in touch with Redeemer enlivened something in Chris and his friends. He recalls experiencing, after a Rise Prep fundraising event, “an overriding physical sensation . . . like I got plugged into a wall socket, like I had tasted a piece of heaven. It was really weird, honestly, but I remember it had a real effect on me.”⁸ Redeemer seemed to peel back the layers on a world benighted—even deadened—to its own possibilities. Recall that ideology obscures the nature of things so as to take advantage of them. Racially identifying some creature as but a thing to be used rather than a creature made to participate in and reveal God speaks lies about it. To rip it from its naturally occurring ecology, from the structures by which it has life and gives life to others, so as to extract capital is to act ruinously toward it. Racial capitalism takes what is most natural about the world and covers it with lies until the divine justice and mercy running through its life is all but forgotten. Through Christ’s communion, God returns creation to the integrity of its ecological life. In Redeemer Chris and his friends found a manner of mutuality with the world that was alive in these ways.

When Chris’s friends Amy and Brian first started visiting Redeemer, they remember being “struck by the intergenerational aspect of Redeemer. Kids were just talking to adults; they don’t even sit with their parents. Yeah, it was hard to tell whose kids were with which family. Because people just are so comfortable with each other.”⁹ Gathered together were young professionals hanging out with retirees, recent college grads taking care of young children, a youth group directed by middle-aged adults, multi-generation

⁸ Author interview, May 27, 2020.

⁹ Author interview, June 5, 2020.

families together in the same Bible study. In my “Bubbles, Board Games, and Borscht 2.0” midweek group, it took me months to figure out that the older couple in our group was the parents of one of our young adults. A family within a family. Generations blended in other ways. Amy and Brian, the first in Chris’s friend group to join Redeemer, were especially impressed by how welcoming older Redeemer members were. The older generation is comprised of those who started Redeemer—Cindi and Danny Fong, Barry and Gaylene Wong, Ann and Daniel Kim, and others—whom Amy and Brian affectionately call the OG’s (“older generation” or, in the vernacular, “original gangsters”). The OG’s had deep relational ties developed over decades and so could have easily focused on those relationships. Yet, they were eager to befriend Amy and Brian, get them involved, share meals with them, involve them in leadership, and connect their experiences to the church. Redeemer Community Church was, like any living ecology, an open environment.

The ecology was unique in other ways. Certainly this included different racial histories. There was a heavy Asian American presence. Just as well, there were white, Latinx, black, and “mixed-race” folks around, and they played no less central roles for being non-Asian American. For Chris and his friends, the church’s heavy Asian American contingent cut both ways. Few of them considered it a draw, in part because their social networks already included plenty of Asian Americans. They didn’t need church to meet that need. Several had grown up in immigrant Asian churches. They had a range of experiences, some good and some not so good. Either way, they didn’t necessarily want to end up in another Asian American community. Still, the group noticed that, once there, Redeemer’s Asian American constituency, perhaps because of its cultural familiarity, made it easier for them to settle in. Redeemer’s uniqueness *and* familiarity blended into something important for Chris and his friends: the church’s Asian Americanness pressed in interesting new directions and raised important but often untouched possibilities. The familiarity would permit some footholds as the church took them into uncharted territory.¹⁰

Redeemer’s ecology also opened the group to BVHP. Through its walls they could feel the broader community, its life flowing through the church building and running down its halls. Its emplacement in BVHP allowed the church to inhabit an ecology extended through spacetime. Alive here

¹⁰ Author interview, October 22, 2020.

was a history of dispossession and joy, migration and marginalization, of alienation and home, of industrial extraction and environmental racism which now poisoned the whole ecology, every creature, human or otherwise, inheriting the toxic legacy. BVHP's past is present throughout its landscape, from the names of community organizers honorifically adorning its streets to Peanut Johnson's blood absorbed into its soil to the effects of nineteenth-century Chinese shrimpers on its bay to the emplacement, displacement, and replacement of populations from Muwekma Ohlone natives to Mexicans to Italians to Japanese Americans to African Americans, and so on. Present also in BVHP's ecology are a variety of questions about its future which looks less African American and more Latinx, Asian American, and gentrified under the Lennar Corporation stamp of approval. These questions arise from every kind of perspective and angle existent in BVHP—questions like Redeemer's appeal, and the questions it put to the building's owner.

And there is the Bay Area's broader biotic life. As *Natural History of San Francisco* elegantly describes, "San Francisco Bay is an estuary where rivers draining 40 percent of California's landscape meet and mix with the Pacific Ocean; where coastal and inland ecosystems overlap; where seabirds and songbirds ply the skies; where sharks swim with sardines; and where species both native and alien compete for space and food alongside some equally competitive primates."¹¹ Yet the bay's toxic legacy has resulted in something far less quaint: "The toxic accretion of the past is not an academic point. It is a pressing issue. Hundreds or possibly thousands of people—no one seems to know how many and no one is counting—eat fish and shellfish from San Francisco Bay each day. They and their families are imperiled by mercury in fish and PCBs in clams."¹² Unsurprisingly, the greatest consequences of BVHP's ecology come to its nonhuman inhabitants. One Bay Area report measured the effects of global warming on sea-level rise (SLR): "Species that rely on marsh habitat for feeding, reproduction, or cover from predators will be negatively affected by SLR. Our projections show the loss of high and mid-marsh vegetation by 2050 in most areas. . . . Low marsh was projected to be lost at 96 percent of the surveyed areas by 2100, and, if representative, could result in the loss of a significant amount of habitat for the California clapper

¹¹ Ariel Rubissow Okamoto and Kathleen M. Wong, *Natural History of San Francisco Bay* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 18.

¹² Matthew Morse Booker, *Down by the Bay: San Francisco's History between the Tides* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 187.

rail population.”¹³ The lives of creatures like clapper rail birds are no less integral for the ecology’s well-being than the humans who take them for granted. Upsetting the ecologies humans inhabit with others does not come without consequences for both. San Franciscans learned this yet again during my time with Redeemer in 2020. Viruses from across the Pacific colluded with wildfires up and down the coast, each the direct consequence of human predation, making breathing suddenly something no one could take for granted. In this environment everything is connected. The persistent inability to recognize the obvious connections between thingifying human and nonhuman creatures, and the dire consequences therein, would be a depressingly familiar theme throughout this book’s research, even—and maybe especially—among the most ardent antiracists. The enclosures of identarian thinking could sadly be found far afield from fixations on human race.

What drew Chris and his friends to Redeemer was the church’s willingness to live into connections that are no less important for our benighted denials, these ecologies linking past and future, nations and communities, humans and non-humans, redevelopment plans and living estuaries, stories we pass on and stories we deign to pass on and all this under the canopy of God’s reign and grace, the divine economy charging all creaturely existence with meaning and purpose. Chris and his friends found in Redeemer a church open to seeing their ecology as the story of God’s economy. Chris said about Redeemer, Dayspring, and Rise Prep, “Somehow they’ve nurtured the topsoil of the community and the three organizations such that real life can grow.”¹⁴ With his friends he wanted more than anything to live into the natural justice of things, the way things rightly enjoyed drew one deeper into the life of God. Together they came to believe that Redeemer’s investments tapped into who they were and wanted to be as well as who they were and didn’t want to be. Mostly it spoke to them of God. Amy and Brian did not join Redeemer because they saw there an opportunity “to change the world,” an ambition respectively ingrained in them by their educations at Yale and Harvard. They joined Redeemer because it saved them from such pretensions. They rather saw themselves catching a glimpse, if only a glimpse, of God’s good news. They knew enough to know that attempting to save the world from the manifest injustices and inequalities of thingification would

¹³ John Y. Takekawa, *Final Report for Sea-Level Rise Response Modeling for San Francisco Bay Estuary Tidal Marshes* (Reston, VA: U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, 2013), 24.

¹⁴ Author interview, May 27, 2020.

waylay them, overwhelming them on the one hand with unbearable need and enticing them on the other with the consolations of withdrawal. They found something else at Redeemer: an opportunity to ease into what God was already doing, reparations they believed Christ paid for them and others. They came to understand Redeemer as one community among others doing its part in making legible a cosmic economy. Asked if they felt themselves put off by Redeemer's high-commitment culture, Amy and Brian said, "We think it's inspiring because they have the courage that we want to be able to have to live faithfully and live radically."¹⁵ If there was to be revolution in BVHP and beyond, it would not be something they would make happen. Indeed, it was not even something to come. It already was. Chris and his friends needed only to ease into it. In these ways, Redeemer felt strangely easy.

Deep Economy

The Christianity of Chris's youth—received through a network of Chinese Church in Christ (CCIC) congregations in Silicon Valley—revolved around what evangelicals typically refer to as their "personal relationship with Jesus." In his case, this entailed daily devotional readings that made faithfulness an issue of individual piety. In his freshman year at MIT, he heard an IVCF message on the systemic nature of American racism. "The scales fell off." He began to see how society's most intractable problems directly relate to Christianity, which meant that his faith could positively—or negatively—contribute to society's problems. He took this as "a hopeful thing." A religiosity that began and ended with morning devotions wasn't bad. Just small. He came to believe that a personal relationship with God should connect him to God's world and thereby everything else. Faith became "one hundred times bigger."¹⁶

To make better sense of this, let me offer a theological account of what Chris and his friends came into contact with at Redeemer. Later I fill out the account by detailing the work of Dayspring Partners. I name this account "deep economy" and oppose it to aftermarket racial capitalism.¹⁷ In

¹⁵ Author interview, June 5, 2020.

¹⁶ Author interview, May 27, 2020.

¹⁷ My account of deep economy differs significantly from the important notion developed in Bill McKibben's *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007). While both notions intend "deep" to contrast unsustainable *cum* superficial extractive economies (in his case global capitalism, in my case racial capitalism) McKibben's sense of depth tracks with how "small nodes hook together into something much larger, but not so monolithic it can't easily hive off into new sites and communities and forums," whereas my account

the book's introduction, I said that the skin-deep racist ideology justifying dominative exploitation sticks because it gets conventionalized (returning to Audrey Smedley's term) within structures and systems that give it life.¹⁸ What we find in places like *Redeemer* is the converse: thick descriptions trying to find traction in societies dominated by institutions enveloped in justifying ideologies. In order to challenge racist institutions, these thick descriptions require their own conventionalization in order to present a different picture of the world. Racist ideology's thin claims are given life through institutions that lend racism a semblance of naturalness. Embedded within whole structures and systems, racialization feels like it betokens something real. Over time, systemic inequality (e.g., in education, employment, healthcare, and criminal justice) presents itself as natural. The naturalness gets put on those suffering inequality, as if natural to who they are—something about their nature—rather than exposing the inequalities and justifications for what they are. What is needed are structures and systems that tell different stories and, equally important, conceptual lenses that help us into those stories.

"Deep economy" employs a constellation of concepts adopted from a wide range of political economic discourses I draw on in order to make sense of what *Redeemer* calls "the neighborhood ecology that we have devoted ourselves to."¹⁹ First is what agroecologists call "cosmicvision," an orientation toward justice that properly appreciates "the necessary equilibrium between nature, the cosmos and human beings. We recognize that as humans we are but a part of nature and the cosmos. We share a spiritual connection with our lands and with the web of life."²⁰ A sense of things as irreducibly common charges life with moral purpose. For Latin American liberation theologians Pedro Casaldáliga and José María Vigil, commonness and mutuality (the agroecologists' "spiritual connection") play a central role in a "Christian spirituality of liberation" which "must be able to combine, to their mutual enrichment, a theophanic experience of nature, so characteristic of our indigenous root-peoples, with the theophanic experience of history

emphasizes how moving in that direction involves keeping sight of God's liberating presence as an operating principle of creaturely economy (174).

¹⁸ Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), 108.

¹⁹ "Bubbles, Board Games and Borscht 2.0" Group email, November 5, 2020.

²⁰ "Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology, Nyéléni, Mali: 27 February 2015," *Development (Society for International Development)* 58, no. 2–3 (2017): 163–168 (163). See also Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 56 and 113.

and action, the particular contribution of the Judeo-Christian faith.”²¹ For Casaldáliga and Vigil, theophanic experience depends on “magic realism” taking in the interconnections that constitute ecosystems by dint of, borrowing from David Kelsey, “God actively speaking wisely to evoke a wise creation into being” (45).²² This realism interprets human ecologies with the widest possible frame, concentrically nested as they are within animal ecologies, biotic ecologies, creaturely ecologies, and God’s life as “perpetual eucharist” for all of creation.²³ A cosmicvision of ecological liberation arrives by seeing the world through the lens of “the Reign of God” (*sub specie Regni*) which Casaldáliga and Vigil describe as “the total overturning and transfiguring of the present condition of ourselves and the cosmos, purified from all evils and filled with the condition of God. The Reign of God does not claim to be another world, but this old world changed into a new one, for human beings and for God” (80).

Liberationists act toward the world, Casaldáliga and Vigil believe, not as they want it to be but rather as it is in Jesus Christ. The reign of God—“by definition the Source of all that is, the One who places each ‘order’ of being precisely where it is destined to flourish in ecstatic response to the Spirit’s own ecstatic lure”—knows no bounds, and so neither does the substance of that reign which is love.²⁴ Casaldáliga and Vigil quote fellow liberationist Leonardo Boff’s *Witnesses to God in the Heart of the World*: “Justice, freedom, brother- and sisterhood, mercy, reconciliation, peace, forgiveness, closeness to God; all these make up the cause for which Jesus fought, for which he was persecuted, arrested, tortured and condemned to death” (*ibid.*).²⁵ As Boff shows, God’s justice and mercy do not oppose one another in the infiniteness of God’s love. The mercy God shows in Christ reveals what justice recounted through the infinity of God’s economy—what David Bentley Hart calls “the infinite motion of God’s love”—comes to, the endlessness of God’s reign

²¹ Pedro Casaldáliga and José María Vigil, *Political Holiness: The Spirituality of Liberation*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 130. Further citations will be noted in the text.

²² David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 173. See earlier, “Wisdom, Theological Anthropology, and Modern Secular Interpretation of Humanity,” in *God’s Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 44–60.

²³ John Milbank, “Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic,” *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (1995): 119–161 (152).

²⁴ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 321.

²⁵ Leonardo Boff, *God’s Witnesses in the Heart of the World* (Chicago: Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, 1981).

translated into spacetime.²⁶ Such mercy is everywhere displayed in the world through justice. Justice and mercy touch everything, extend everywhere, involve everyone. The divine economy casts the world, and everything in it, as invitation to God's justice and mercy. Casaldáliga and Vigil's liberative spirituality expands the usual idioms (blurring distinctions between, say, forensic and political accounts of justice) so that ecological concern moves beyond preserving nature *qua* nature or prompting proper symbiosis between human and non-human nature toward viewing environment as the locus of God's justice—and therefore God's mercy—now received as an observable fact of the world, connecting ecoliberationists throughout the world with the Mothers report encountered in the previous chapter.²⁷

When Casaldáliga and Vigil speak of theophanic experience everywhere available in nature, they anticipate recent theological insights regarding "deep incarnation," the idea that, according to Niels Henrik Gregersen, "the incarnation of God in Christ can be understood as a radical or 'deep' incarnation, that is, an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature."²⁸ According to Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The flesh assumed in Jesus connects with all humanity, all biological life, all soil, the whole matrix of the material universe down to its very roots."²⁹ Apologists for deep incarnation hone in on the reparative possibilities of situating God's infinite justice and mercy within the interconnection of all things: "This theology of the cosmic body of Christ is not only about creation theology but about an ongoing reconciliation between Creator and creature. It is not only about Christ being there in and with the world of creatures but also being there for the creatures. Moreover, it is not only God's incarnation that is described in the biological terms of flesh and blood, of living and dwelling. The purpose of life (redemption) is also described as a still-deeper growth into the body

²⁶ See David Bentley Hart, "A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*," *Pro Ecclesia* 7, no. 3 (1998): 333–349 (347).

²⁷ See also Joan Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflict and Valuation* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2002), 16–53; Richard Peet and Michael Watts, eds., *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

²⁸ Niels Henrik Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40, no. 3 (2001): 192–207 (205). Gregersen continues, "Understood this way, the death of Christ becomes an icon of God's redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as with the victims of social competition. God bears the costs of evolution, the price involved in the hardship of natural selection."

²⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 196.

of Christ, who is the deep coinherence of everything that exists: ‘In him all things hold together’ (Col. 1:17).³⁰

Crucial for deep incarnation theologians are creedal formulations about the nature of Christ’s incarnation and what incarnation means for the salvation of the world. Their insights come down the line from early doctrinal formulations about Christ’s person. Fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nazianzus wrote of Jesus Christ, “He was born for a cause—and that cause was, that you might be saved. . . . Our humanity was joined to and made one with God . . . in order that I too might be made God as truly as He is made human” (3.19).³¹ In assuming humanness, the second person of the Trinity saves it. Patristic scholar Christopher P. Beeley observes about Nazianzus’s *communicatio idiomatum* formula, “Gregory views Christ’s identity in dynamic, narrative terms; his divinity is not a static thing, but the agent of the drama of salvation who unites with himself the fullness of human existence.”³² Similarly does twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth discuss “the humanity of God”: “Who God is and what He is in His deity He proves and reveals not in a vacuum as a divine being-for-Himself, but precisely and authentically in the fact that He exists, speaks, and acts as the partner of man.”³³ Christ’s incarnation accordingly presents a picture of redeemed and reconciled human life. In *Christ the Key*, Kathryn Tanner states, “In virtue of being one with the Word, the humanity that the divine image assumes is itself healed and elevated, shaped and re-formed according to the character of the Word itself with which the humanity of Jesus has been united. In Christ, human nature, in short, is itself re-fashioned in the divine image so as to become humanely perfect.”³⁴ For advocates of deep incarnation, the story Nazianzus, Barth, and Tanner collectively tell involves all of creation. In communing with creation, the Word communicates divinity to every living thing. Salvation entails creation’s divinization (*theosis*). Drawing on another early church theologian, Denis Edwards puts it this way: “Irenaeus sees the

³⁰ Niels Henrik Gregersen, “The Extended Body of Christ: Three Dimensions of Deep Incarnation,” in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 225–251 (244). See in the same volume Celia Deane-Drummond’s explanation of how deep incarnation avoids pantheism: “The Wisdom of Fools? A Theo-Dramatic Interpretation of Deep Incarnation,” 177–202.

³¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Five Theological Orations*, trans. Stephen Reynolds (n.p.: Estate of Stephen Reynolds, 2011), 65.

³² Christopher A. Beeley, *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 185.

³³ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 45.

³⁴ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17.

one great economy of God as eternally embracing both creation and salvation. He uses the term *economy* in the truly universal sense, bringing together all that God does for God's creatures.”³⁵

Jesus Christ reveals what it means for God to be creature and for creatures to bear divinity. Simultaneously, divine economy—the story Christ's incarnation enacts and exhibits—becomes the lens through which one sees restored creation, akin to the “cosmicvision” agroecologists speak of. *Inside* God's economy of salvation, one observes *sub specie Regni* the fact of the world's destiny in Christ.³⁶ In the eighteenth century, the Lutheran philosopher Johann Hamann would wander into a discovery about the incarnation's communication of divine and human idioms (*communicatio idiomatum*). Nazianzus's formula supplies the “master-key of all our knowledge and of the whole visible economy.”³⁷ This notion also turns out to be crucial to liberation theology's “preferential option for the poor.” Casaldáliga and Vigil hold the conviction that only from a vantage uniquely available to oppressed peoples can one see the world as it truly is (35-41). Because Christ's person serves as the structure of divine/human communion and his life with the oppressed as the mechanism that perfects communion, Christ becomes the interpretive key for understanding recapitulated creation. Through Christ's liberation we gain access to Hamann's “whole visible ecology.” In Christ, we witness “a divine destiny seeded in our very flesh” according to womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland.³⁸ Christ serves as the master-key not only by unlocking the meaning of creation reconciled to God, relating *what* is seen, but also restoring, in reconciling creation to itself, the *ability* to see. Christ is both revealed and revealer. Ecotheologian Willis Jenkins speaks of an “ecological literacy” that arrives by a “Thomist synthesis” that permits of “a sanctifying epistemic spiral in which coming to know God requires learning what to make of creation and knowing creation requires coming to know God” that

³⁵ Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 32, emphasis in the original.

³⁶ Regarding observable moral facts *inside* ethics, see Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). Crary speaks about how “our subjective responses contribute internally to our ability to grasp features of the world” and that linguistic practices, like speaking of the liberative reign of Christ, “make necessary contributions to our ability to bring the world into focus” (55). Related to matters of liberation, see Crary's “Cavell and Critique,” *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 6 (2018): 14–23.

³⁷ Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, trans. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.

³⁸ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 65.

turns one “alive to the world.”³⁹ Incarnation puts one into the world, enlivened to it while on mission to hear the divine economy tell its gospel story. Enlivened by inhabitation, one learns from the world, witnesses its testimony, and receives its lessons.

What agroecology and Christian orthodoxy have in common, then, as embodied by Casaldáliga and Vigil’s liberation theology, is the thought that the entirety of creation bears witness to Christ’s justice and mercy. The eco-theology issuing from these constellated concepts amounts to the claim that liberation is natural to the world insofar as it is natural to God. Christ recapitulates the world to what it is in God, or, returning to Hart, “Christ’s sacrifice merely draws creation back into the eternal motion of the divine love for which it was fashioned.”⁴⁰ Those whose eyes are trained into “this comprehensive moral order” have the ability, according to theological ethicist Matthew Philipp Whelan, to glean through “complex processes of discernment and judgment” justice and charity with biomimesis serving as “model, measure, and mentor.”⁴¹ Whelan reads agroecology continuous with an agrarianism he hears in liberation theologian Óscar Romero’s prophetic call for land reform: “Integral ecology acknowledges how all God’s creatures give glory by their very existence, that there ‘is a message contained in the structures of nature itself’ that we disregard at our peril.” Thus can Whelan say that “all creatures are complexly integrated into more comprehensive moral order that is written into the fabric of creation.”⁴² Situating political economy within ecotheology not only turns out a fuller understanding of non-human creation, but as such a fuller picture of the destiny of humankind. As Whelan writes, “In Christ, God gives God’s own life as a common gift, for all people to share in its richness—a giving so complete that Christ willingly bears suffering and violence in order to give it. Conformity to this very same manner of giving is the destiny of all members of Christ’s body.”⁴³ Christ’s presence illuminates the truth of a world obscured by injustice: “The belief that creation is a common gift alerts us to a violence that, although right before our eyes,

³⁹ Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 117 and 129.

⁴⁰ David Bentley Hart, “A Gift Exceeding Every Debt,” 348.

⁴¹ Along these lines, see Willemien Otten, *Thinking Nature and the Nature of Thinking: From Eriugena to Emerson* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 30–34.

⁴² Matthew Philipp Whelan, “Agroecology and Natural Law,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 40, no. 1 (2020): 127–144 (142, 133, 130, and 141).

⁴³ Matthew Philipp Whelan, *Blood in the Fields: Óscar Romero, Catholic Social Teaching, and Land Reform* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 206.

might nevertheless escape notice. Such descriptions serve to unsettle everyday perceptions of the world already habituated to violence by offering a clearer picture of how the world really is, conforming human perception, we might say, to God's.”⁴⁴ One sees in creation God, and God's justice and mercy.

Reading political economy in terms of ecology and ecology in terms of divine economy (what Bruno Latour calls the “short-circuit” between the cries of the earth and the cries of the oppressed) yields an account of economy as deep.⁴⁵ Deep economy's constellated concepts overlap in a salvation story Christians call “the divine economy”:

1. In the ecology of God's creation, everything is connected.
2. The substance of these connections, and therefore running through everything, is God's love.
3. Under the conditions of sin, God's love takes the reparative form of justice and mercy.
4. Creatures participate in and reveal God's reparative justice and mercy through processes and commitments of liberation.
5. Liberation, by which creatures participate in and reveal God, is the most natural thing in the world.

The interconnections adjoining a Christian spirituality of liberation mean that the primary political key of Christian witness is not resistance but proclamation. These are matters of worship and witness. Accordingly, before drawing out the implications for racial capitalism, let me delineate what the constellation of concepts amounts to explicitly (and scripturally). The account begins by recognizing that everything is connected (Ps. 148:1–6). God connects all things insofar as they exist at all (Ps. 24:1–2). God is the author of every thing and of every connection between things (John 1:3). Behind and between all things is God (Heb. 1:1–2). To see the deep truth of things is to see this (Job 38). To see God in things is to see God's activity in things, to see creation as divine activity (Ps. 33:6–9). The substance of that activity is joyous love, love within God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the love God has for everything that is not God (Luke 3:22). God exhibits God's love for all that is not God by creating and sustaining all—infinitely

⁴⁴ Matthew Philipp Whelan, “You Possess the Land That Belongs to All Salvadorans’: Archbishop Óscar Romero and Ordinary Violence,” *Modern Theology* 35, no. 4 (2019): 638–662 (653–654).

⁴⁵ Bruno Latour, “The Immense Cry Channeled by Pope Francis,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 251–255 (253).

so, considering how God's love knows no bounds (Jer. 31:3). From the surfeit of divine love that comprises the Trinity does God joyously create and sustain creation (Prov. 8:30–31). Since the beginning Christians have identified the infinity of God's love for creation—the lengths to which God goes in loving creatures—as the divine economy (Eph. 3:9). The divine economy begins with Israel, never leaving it behind, and extends to the whole of creation, which is anticipated in God's covenantal life with Israel (Isa. 49:6). God in Christ assumes all that God the Father creates and all that God the Spirit sustains (1 Pet. 1:2). Through Christ, God communicates divinity to creation, thereby bestowing it with everything it will ever need (1 Cor. 8:6). In the person of Christ, the substance of this bestowal is specified and intensified (John 1:18). In Christ's crucifixion, the Son assumes humanity's sin bondage, including the full range of its oppressions, now communicated to God the Son through Christ's enhypostatic union of humanity and divinity (Isa. 53:5). In the face of human bondage, God's love shows itself as justice and mercy (Luke 23:34). In Christ's resurrection, the Son bestows divinity for the sake of liberation (Col. 3:1). One finds throughout creation indication of the Word's specific human incarnation, not that God is multiply incarnated but that in his human incarnation the Word communes with, and therefore communicates divinity to, all creation (Col. 1:15). Christ reveals the nature and destiny of every thing (Job 19:25–27). Just as Christ's incarnation assumes the diversity of creaturely life, so his crucifixion and resurrection respectively recapitulate the full range of creaturely oppression and liberation (Rev. 21:5). Coursing through creation is God's life given for the salvation of the world (Isa. 43:17–19). Creation exists as the story of divine economy (Ps. 19:1). Seeing creation rightly entails seeing creation in light of this liberation story (Rev. 5:13). Inhabiting creation rightly arrives by enacting its story, its loving economy of justice and mercy (Micah 6:8). Those who live inside this story see signs of it everywhere, for the whole of creation is charged with its significance (Rom. 1:20). Not only in human affairs but throughout the cosmos is the Spirit liberating creation (Rom. 8:22–25). Attunement to God entails attunement to the way the divine economy—the story of God's saving mission—accrues toward the integrity of each created thing and the integration God's economy grants to all things in the ecology of God's life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Col. 3:11). Deep inside every thing and between things is the story of this ecology, *θεία οὐκονομία* (Eph. 1:9–10). Living into this ecology, participating in it and revealing it, is the most natural thing creatures do (Luke 19:39–40). Each creature in its endless particularity

does so uniquely and in so doing expresses with all creation the diversity of God's creation and the mutuality of sharing in God's salvation (Gen. 2:20). Martin Luther King, Jr., appealed to this mutuality when he, imprisoned in a Birmingham jail, said to clergymen who claimed themselves racially set apart, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."⁴⁶ Invoking Saint Francis, Pope Francis speaks of a "sense of deep communion" reminiscent of King's mutuality when he writes, "Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth."⁴⁷ Attunement to mutuality—to God's reign connecting everything—enlivens creatures to the deep truth of the world (1 Cor. 15:52).

Deep economy contrasts with the superficiality of racial capitalism, which, as discussed, focuses attention on the ideological surface, all the while extracting value from that which lies beneath. Being alive to the world's deep economy contrasts with the way racial capitalism both deadens things and deadens one to them. Its racist dynamic of use-identification-justification reduces creatures to things and thereby, using King's language, thingifies them specifically and the world generally: "A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will 'thingify' them and make them things" (recall Figure 2.1).⁴⁸ Rather than idioms that portray creatures as God's (i.e., *sub specie Regni*) it racializes creation through dumbed-down language (i.e.,

⁴⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

⁴⁷ Pope Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015), 57. In terms of Francis's inclinations toward deep incarnation, he says, "Jesus lived in full harmony with creation, and others were amazed: 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?' (Mt 8:27). His appearance was not that of an ascetic set apart from the world, nor of an enemy to the pleasant things of life" (61). See Celia Deane-Drummond's reading of the encyclical explicitly in the direction of deep incarnation in Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Primer on Ecotheology: Theology for a Fragile Earth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 54–88.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go from Here?" accessed October 24, 2020, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/where-do-we-go-here-address-delivered-eleventh-annual-sclc-convention>. Those society racializes as black, argues Vincent Lloyd, have particular purchase on justice and mutuality because the suffering such racialization imposes avails an ability to "see that the world is not as it seems." Lloyd views King's appeal as performing the natural law to which African Americans by dint of oppression are naturally attuned: "Blacks are privileged, in King's view, because their oppression makes it easier for them to appreciate God's image and God's law." Resonant with Casaldáliga and Vigil's "preferential option" hermeneutics, Lloyd concludes, "Indeed, blacks are gifted with the role of saving the world." Vincent W. Lloyd, *Black Natural Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 10 and 99.

colony, labor, property, land rents, law and order, etc.). The creature is no longer seen as a creaturely thing connected to others in God's deep economy but a bare thing to be used, the product of an enclosure mentality that cordons off possibilities beyond use justified by racial identification. In order to force productivity, it pushes nature (returning to Edward E. Baptist's Heideggerian imagery) to the breaking point.⁴⁹

An ecological view of political economy illuminates sin as inclination against the doxological shape of creaturely existence. As anti-doxology, sin is anti-God; it rejects God's ecological ordering as creation's orientation toward worship. The creature is most fully alive in worshipping God, in whatever particular way she is given to worship. To say that creation is ordered toward justice and mercy is to say that justice and mercy doxologically tell us about God, God's world, and what it means for human creatures to flourish in God's world. She pursues justice and mercy as she pursues God. Doxologically she finds in the delicate particularity of creation occasion to sing God's praises. Anti-doxology can only think to consume it, not on occasion of its flourishing, but simply for raw, insatiable consumption. That he justifies his blood-lust by identifying creatures as something less than creature does nothing to ward off truth he cannot fail to know, not simply of the humanness he denies others, but also of his own inhumanity—that the world and everything in it belong to God. Similarly does moral theologian Brian Brock speak about the consumptive violence of modern culture, against which he proclaims, "To be caught up in God's work is to be learning to live into an embodied recognition of God's grace and care and unlearning anti-doxologies that exalt other powers as salvific."⁵⁰

Liberationists live into this cosmicvision. No matter the violence racial capitalism enacts, no matter the structures and systems it erects, no matter its cultural processes and commitments, it cannot contain God's world, which God has ordained with reparative capability, what ecologist Aldo Leopold called a "capacity for self-renewal in the biota."⁵¹ John 12:24 relates Jesus

⁴⁹ Edward E. Baptist, "Toward a Political Economy of Slave Labor," in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 56.

⁵⁰ Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 79.

⁵¹ Aldo Leopold, *For the Health of the Land: Previously Unpublished Essays and Other Writings* (Washington, DC: Island Press for Shearwater Books, 1999), 22, quoted in Lisa H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection: Suffering and Responsibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 194. In her turn, Sideris envisions the natural world graced with respective gifts (*charisms*)—"skills, talents, ways of existing in the world that are mysterious and foreign . . . at which we can only wonder"—ordered toward flourishing (when interpreted

interestingly analogizing God's liberative mission to creation's self-repairing processes: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (NRSV).⁵² Christ recapitulates, reimagines, and resuscitates natural cycles of life, death, and repair. The Son's inhabitation of native structures and systems transforms them into conduits through which the Spirit communicates idioms of liberation as "justice rolls down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24, NRSV). Even as racial capitalism operates at the shallow reaches of creation, all below the surface life rises up. Against anti-doxology, creation tells God's story, the irrepressibly good news of life in Christ, the uplift of God.

As will be seen, Dayspring's unique economic ecology (consisting of radical economic sharing and redistribution, divested wealth, just labor practices, and personal liberation, and each emanating from "a place of shared time" recounted in the previous chapter) heralds the divine economy's story and thereby scuttles racist ideology, demythologizing its justifying logic and, reminiscent of Oliver Cromwell Cox's world-systems approach (encountered in Chapter 3), calling time on racial capitalism. On the surface of renewed creation emerge structures and systems fending off exploitative aftermarkets pushing their way into BVHP. Against racial capitalism's use-identity-justification dynamic deep economy catalyzes a more fundamental dynamic, participation-revelation-reparation (see Figure 5.1). By participating in and revealing God's incarnational salvation of the world—by indeed doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly—Christ repairs creation, in part by drawing creation into the divine economy's reparative work. Communicated into the idiom of God's saving Word, creaturely participation in God's reparative work importantly if incompletely repairs creation as God allows creation to play a meaningful role in its own redemption. The dynamic is one where creation as a function of participating in God's liberative economy reveals who God is. Here, rather than positioning oneself in a use-relationship with others, one participates with others in an inescapable

as "multiscaler") in the face of suffering, speaking of pain's systemic instrumental benefit (Sideris, 188, 192, and 195). Sideris espouses Leopold's land ethic for its ability to adequately understand suffering as natural and necessary to creaturely flourishing. Accordingly, she explicitly worries that liberative interests threaten ecologies that cannot avoid suffering and the natural charisms fitted to its conditions.

⁵² Describing Christ's cross as "a parable of all natural and cultural history," Holmes Rolston III writes, "The cruciform creation is, in the end, deiform, godly, just because of this element of struggle, not in spite of it . . ." in "Does Nature Need to Be Redeemed?" *Zygon* 29, no. 2 (1994): 205–229 (220 and 221).

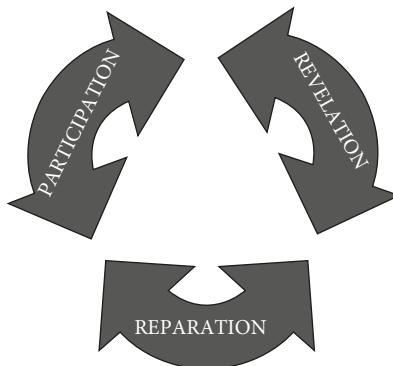


Figure 5.1 Participating in the divine economy.

network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny such that whatever affects one directly indirectly affects all, where justice anywhere effectuates justice everywhere. Rather than identifying others through use, participation reveals what the world is and what each one is within that world, both what one is particularly—this thing and not that thing—and what one is universally—what all things are to God. Identity, then, arrives as a revelatory achievement of participating with others. Participation in and revelation of God's liberative economy puts one on the path not of justifying use through racial identification but rather repairing what has been damaged by racial capitalist anti-doxology. One's focus turns away from ideologically justifying oneself to God's justification *cum* reconciliation of creation to God and thereby itself. The cosmic reparation God pays in Christ comes sharply into relief here as God in Christ, having fully inhabited creation's wide ecology—having fully given himself to it—pays for all that cannot be repaired, which is much. The world as open wound becomes open invitation to participate in the divine economy's reparation whose impossible costs are paid by the deep surfeit of divine love. Divine repair resets the world from the inside, rescuing it from use-identity-justification and putting it on an eternal course of participation-revelation-reparation. Each rotation of the dynamic draws deeper into God's life, Jenkins's “sanctifying epistemic spiral” sharpening one's ability to see the world *sub spacie Regni*, bringing into focus with increasingly clarity God's love as the world's deep truth.⁵³ Once inside God's

⁵³ Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 117.

preferential option one sees the world anew: “Justice, freedom, brother- and sisterhood, mercy, reconciliation, peace, forgiveness, closeness to God; all these make up the cause for which Jesus fought, for which he was persecuted, arrested, tortured and condemned to death.”⁵⁴ One comes in touch with how the Spirit’s infinite infusions perfect capacities for moral repair. By living into a story they understand as God’s economy, Redeemer and Dayspring come enlivened to the world—its wounds and capacities—without being waylaid by shouldering responsibility for its liberation. More than revolutionaries, they are witnesses. Doxology as political speech. In proclaiming through their actions God’s economy, they lay claim to a story not of what is to come but of what already is, not something they need to make happen but what God in Christ eternally makes happen. Seeing the world *sub spacie Regni* brings forth not quietude, such that they do nothing, but rather liberation, as to do anything.

Their Ecology Is a Story Called the Divine Economy

BVHP’s built-in capacity for repair does not guarantee that something will happen, just that it can. God enables, through creation and salvation, repair. The divine economy sets the stakes of the drama—that something has and therefore can happen—but what follows is up to the place. What comes next depends on choosing, or not, into God’s world and embracing its possibilities, including its capacities for repair. These are matters of depth, instances of love.

In the late 1990s, while still at Grace Fellowship, Danny (who studied computer science at nearby Cal Berkeley) started Dayspring along with Chi-Ming Chien (who as an undergrad and graduate student at Stanford had studied electrical engineering) and fellow Grace Fellowship member Elisa Leberis (also a Stanford undergrad). Danny and Chi-Ming had each been splitting their time between day jobs as computer engineers and volunteering free time at Grace Fellowship’s urban ministries. Their friendship and shared values went back to Stanford where Danny had served as Chi-Ming’s campus minister with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. This was the same campus fellowship that Cindi, Ann, and Daniel, along with Juliette (Chi-Ming’s future

⁵⁴ Leonardo Boff, *God’s Witnesses in the Heart of the World* (Chicago: Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, 1981).

spouse and founder of Rise Prep), had all attended. The Chiens and Kims would follow Danny and Cindi from Stanford IVCF to Grace Fellowship, which had been drawing Stanford InterVarsity students for years.

Once at Grace Fellowship, Danny began to wonder whether the tech industry might not be a resource for the city's disenfranchised, if one of the industries regularly blamed for pushing the poor to the margins might for a change prove to be a resource. Specifically, he wondered about a software company that could extend the benefits of tech to surrounding communities of color. The dotcom explosion of the 1990s powerfully demonstrated the benefits of tech, and he wondered about harnessing its powers for good. He put together a business plan and shared it with Chi-Ming who had been looking for something similar. Years later, Chi-Ming summarized Danny's ideas as they came to shape Dayspring's vision:

The dominant economy that we have shaped—and that shapes us—is Mammon's economy. Mammon's economy has at least three characteristics: It presumes scarcity rather than abundance. It operates out of the law of exchange. That is, every space is transactional; there is no such thing as free gift, only exchange for value. The combination of these two and initial random distributions of power then results in increasing injustice, where the powerful accumulate scarce resources and, in their exchanges, continue to protect that accumulation. Thus, idolatry leads to injustice as we see throughout history. But rather than believing that the economy is ultimately governed by the invisible hand of capitalism—that the economy belongs to Mammon—Christians believe in a divine economy of grace—where all is gift and all is grace. Rather than operating as though Mammon reigns, we live out of the reign of the God who gives God's self. If that is the case, then our call as Christians is to bear witness to that reality. The powers are powerful—that's why we call them "powers"—and Mammon is no exception. So, we don't actually expect to transform the entire culture. But we do look for opportunities to bear faithful witness, though, and practice a faithful resistance.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ See Chi-Ming's Ekklesia Project plenary address where he lays this out: Chi Ming Chien, "Gathering 2019: Plenary 2: Redeemer Community Church," Ekklesia Project, July 22, 2019, https://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-sr56m-b8c033?utm_campaign=w_share_ep&utm_medium=dlink&utm_source=w_share. On November 22, 2020, Redeemer held a celebration honoring Danny's seventeen years as senior pastor. During this time, Chi-Ming credited Danny with teaching him to see Christianity in economic terms.

With a business plan in hand, the two of them started with an initial idea of connecting at-risk youth to technology and building job possibilities around that exposure, hoping to give local teens they had gotten to know through Grace Fellowship's afterschool programs enough of a taste that they might continue. They had other hopes as well. What if a tech company could serve to resource the church itself, using its profits to fund its urban ministries? And what if the combination of a tech company and a church could create networks of economic redistribution? For Danny and Chi-Ming working for others was fine, but that came with minimal possibilities for asking such questions. If the dotcom boom had taught them anything, it was that venturing out was good and risky, and that you could not have one without the other. Hence in 1997, just a few years before Grace Fellowship launched Redeemer, Grace Fellowship members lent Danny, Chi-Ming, and Elisa \$80,000 so that they could, along with their \$35,000 investment, quit their jobs and start a software company with the vision, "In dependence on God and for His glory, in view of God's desire to reconcile all things to Himself in Christ, as a business rooted in the local church, to embody and bear witness to God's redeeming of the workplace, marketplace, and community."⁵⁶ Chi-Ming worried out loud about the risks inherent in taking such a large loan from the church community, to which one church member responded, "If the business succeeds, we'll all rejoice together. And if it fails, we'll learn how to be church family."⁵⁷

Today Dayspring Partners resembles, at least on the surface, many small, privately held technology companies. It has a healthy portfolio of diverse products with a wide variety of clients. Its revenues total in the millions of dollars and its staff has averaged 10 percent growth each year for twenty years. Its leadership has remained steady and its corporate culture has the feel of a mom-and-pop shop that values quality, familiarity, and stability over quantity, succession, and expansion. In its current configuration, Dayspring Partners focuses on four essential businesses: website design, brand design, software development, and nonprofit consulting. Its software development business has produced popular apps that have been downloaded millions of times and websites that have transacted over a billion dollars in business across multiple platforms. As an example, Goodbudget (which Dayspring

⁵⁶ California laws afford Dayspring SPC (social purpose corporation) status so that its fiduciary duties can extend beyond shareholders to social responsibilities.

⁵⁷ Author interview, May 22, 2020.

both developed and manages) is an envelope-style personal budgeting app. The influential tech website CNET, along with others, included it on its “best of” list for budgeting apps.⁵⁸ Dayspring has developed other solutions for companies like Accel Partners, Alliant Capital, the Golden State Warriors, and The North Face as well as universities, NGOs, and government agencies. Its nonprofit consultancy revolves around Salesforce, specifically focused on nonprofit companies’ needs related to workforce customization and configuration. In terms of clients, Dayspring decided early that it would not work for just anyone and would carefully cull potential clients, which limited from the start the kinds of success it could have. “We don’t need to believe that our clients have that kind of power over us because God is a generous God and abundant and providing. And so we are free to live in ways that can be vulnerable or sacrificial or that that may not be ‘the best thing for us economically’ because God’s able to handle that.”⁵⁹ Hence it is not surprising to find a pretty mixed portfolio with entities like Toshiba and Serena & Lily along with Asian Pacific Islander American Health Forum and Christians for Social Action.⁶⁰

Below the surface, Dayspring is much more than a comfortably successful small technology company. Like many ambitious companies, Dayspring started out in the city’s financial district. But with early success came the realization that the company could, simply as a function of its locale, move away from those original values that launched it in the first place. Dayspring didn’t simply want to be successful, the formula for which seemed straightforward enough. The company wanted to be committed to a place, a people, something indeed larger than itself. It sought to integrate itself within a community where “part of being a business is that we are interconnected with everyone, every organization around us.”⁶¹ As Redeemer got closer to Black San Francisco, as their families set roots in the area, the company’s future revealed itself. They would wed themselves to BVHP. Rather than “fix” it, they wanted to be a part of it.

⁵⁸ Dori Zinn, “The Best Budgeting App for 2021,” CNET, January 20, 2021, <https://www.cnet.com/personal-finance/best-budgeting-app-for-2021/>.

⁵⁹ Author interview with Chi-Ming Chien, May 22, 2020.

⁶⁰ Dayspring services entities internal to its immediate microecology (Redeemer, Rise Prep, and Neighbor Fund) as well as others that have played important roles in its history: Grace Urban Ministries, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Ekklesia Project, and Cal, Stanford, and UCSF.

⁶¹ *Dayspring (Monastery 2.0)*, Seattle Pacific University Faith & Co. (Untamed, 2018), <https://faithandco.spu.edu/film-detail/monastery-dayspring/>.

Today the company along with Redeemer and Rise Prep comprise a microecology. Each brings in monies (e.g., budgets, revenue streams, tuition dollars, donations, savings) and resources (e.g., ideas, personnel, services, support, space) and distributes according to the needs of its specific mission and operation. The three working together has the effect of clarifying common goals and redirecting distribution lines. Each entity works toward the goals of its own business plan but also toward a common good. Coordinated under Redeemer's unifying commitment to ultimate ends, monies and resources are redistributed to serve the broader BVHP ecology. A prime example is the Neighbor Fund, one of the microecology's mechanisms for redistributing community monies. The Neighbor Fund, which Dayspring runs with Redeemer, offers \$3,000 to \$10,000 microloans to local businesses. The idea here is that businesses are often better served by tapping into local financial networks rather than going to banks with minimal attachments to neighborhoods.⁶² Accordingly, Neighbor Fund borrowers go through an altogether different application process. Instead of submitting credit reports to anonymous reviewers, they present personal references to a loan committee whom they get to know over a shared meal. The low-interest loans (3 percent to 7 percent over twelve to thirty-six months) are based on relationships through which communal resources can be matched to specific needs. Borrowers then sit on loan committees for future borrowers. A story Chi-Ming tells reveals the aftermarket challenges, and opportunities, Neighbor Fund faced early on:

Yolanda stands 6 feet tall, not including her 4-inch heels. She grew up in the Bayview/Hunters Point area and seems to know everybody. When she first heard about the fund it was through an email that Marcus from the entrepreneurship center had sent. She recounted how she sat around in the Southeast Community Center, which happens to be a block from my house, with other African American business connections. She said that they laughed out loud wondering if this was some kind of joke. "What's the underlying? Who's lending money and what do they want in return?" At the meal where she was sharing this, Jeff Boyd, from Redeemer, and Becky, from Dayspring, and I were, frankly, somewhat surprised. We didn't realize how much mistrust there could be. We're just trying to bear witness

⁶² "Neighbor Fund | Loans for Bayview Small Businesses," Neighbor Fund, accessed February 25, 2021, <http://www.neighborfund.org>.

to the gospel, right? But of course, if you step back and think: “Hey, we’re loaning money at really low interest to borrowers who wouldn’t otherwise be bank-creditworthy”—it *does* sound suspicious. And then she shared a story of how her aunt owned property in the Bayview. One day, a Chinese man came to their house and offered a cashier’s check on the spot to sign the deed over. Her cousin took it—and essentially got swindled out of hundreds of thousands in property value. Chinese investors had apparently been targeting tax delinquent properties and going door to door to make cash offers on the spot. It’s no wonder that she wondered what the “underlying” was—especially when looking at me. But she did decide to trust us and now she refers folks to the Neighbor Fund. And I realized, through that meal, that Yolanda was extending just as much trust toward us as we were toward her. In this story, I see that the Neighbor Fund is announcing the gospel: transforming their view of the church and of Christians and participating in Christ’s work to reconcile all.⁶³

Through the Neighbor Fund, Dayspring seeks to “be good neighbors by participating in the economy of the place.”⁶⁴ Chi-Ming, Dayspring’s CEO (or “principal”), helped start Neighbor Fund after spending months regularly walking BVHP’s streets in order to get to know the local ecology. By so “participating in the economy of the place” along Third Street did Chi-Ming come to see neighbors’ hopes and dreams and how they nourished the entire community. He also saw the barriers people faced and the costs neighborhoods paid when racial capitalism crushed those hopes and dreams. The Neighbor Fund became a way for Dayspring to share a common life with its neighbors so “that we’re not just here to gather as much as possible for ourselves for our own profit, but to build relationships, that at the core we’re people and other folks are people too.”⁶⁵ Later, when the COVID-19 pandemic started decimating local businesses, Dayspring dug further in with its neighbors. Whereas it previously committed 10 percent of its net income toward Neighbor Fund monies and other outlets, through “#revenue5for5” for five months it gave away 5 percent of its *revenue*, a risky venture considering the pandemic’s substantial impact on the company’s earnings.⁶⁶ A significant

⁶³ “2019: The Church as Politics,” Ekklesia Project, July 2019, <http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/the-gathering/2019-church-politics/>.

⁶⁴ *Dayspring (Monastery 2.0)*.

⁶⁵ *Dayspring (Monastery 2.0)*.

⁶⁶ As #revenue5for5 ended, a 15 percent decline in revenue from the year before meant that Dayspring, which normally operates with 10 percent margins, was running below profitability. It

portion of that money would be distributed through Neighbor Fund, which reached out to previous borrowers to see how #revenue5for5 monies could support them during the historic economic downturn.

Chi-Ming uses “ecosystem” to describe Dayspring’s relationship with its BVHP neighbors: “What we’re doing is investing in the ecosystem in the Bayview. That ecosystem includes Dayspring, a business that’s committed to the good of the Bayview because we do think that there’s a way in which a business in the marketplace can live out a calling to be Christian.” The ecosystem includes neighbors and neighborhood businesses, schools, churches, public and private institutions, and all their hopes and dreams and the pressures racial capitalism exerts on them. And it includes God: “What we recognize is that God has been here at work for a long, long time, so we really see ourselves as participating in the work of God.”⁶⁷ At the heart of Dayspring’s work is the belief that BVHP’s local ecology tells God’s story. Their desire to participate in that story as the best thing they could do with their lives makes Neighbor Fund and #revenue5for5 natural choices.

Dayspring’s internal ecology consists of around twenty-five employees, having started two decades ago with just Chi-Ming, Danny, and Elisa. The company spends a lot of time thinking about its work environment, and the leadership is quite intentional about how the company is organized and run. In one regard, the company’s success speaks for itself. On the other hand, Dayspring’s success comes with its share of challenges. Much of this has to do with being a consultancy business. Just about everything at Dayspring revolves around billable hours and so every minute matters as employees are constantly on the clock for clients. The company’s need to accurately track hours can take a toll, straining some relationships and keeping others from starting. One employee observed how the practice ran at cross purposes with Dayspring’s other values: “Even though I am not working overtime, the amount of time I spend at work is so intense that by the time 5 p.m. rolls around, I’m exhausted.” This can lead to a felt conflict between the company’s responsibilities to its clients and its responsibilities to its employees. The stress is balanced by the company’s insistence on fixed work hours and forty-hour work weeks. Once the workday ends, people go home. Since the beginning, Dayspring has intentionally avoided the all-consuming work culture

secured a government CARES Act Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan, which allowed for a “significant amount of buffer” and much “less anxiety.” Author interview, December 5, 2020.

⁶⁷ *Dayspring (Monastery 2.0)*.

common among Bay Area tech startups. Yet the company's shared ecology with the church, and increasingly the school, blurs boundaries. Not everyone who works at Dayspring attends Redeemer (the company has no religious requirements for its employees) but those who do move directly from one to the other. Their Redeemer evenings begin just as their Dayspring days end, more so because the two entities share a building. Leaving work might involve simply walking down the hall to a church prayer meeting. Dayspring doesn't want its employees working after hours, but Redeemer members do return to the same building for midweek church meetings and Sunday services. Throw in the fact that Rise Prep has increasingly taken up residence in the building, and things begin to look a lot like an all-consuming startup. Sharing neighborhoods and homes, as a number of Redeemer and Dayspring people do, further charges the microecology with meaning and purpose, which can feel like a lot. The intense communal experience has the desired effect of fending off the atomizing consequences of contemporary work culture, reflected in Dayspring's low turnover rate, but keeping all of that straight only comes, insofar as it does, with a great deal of effort. One employee put it this way, "In other work environments we would joke, 'Man, these guys, they work so hard that they eat, sleep and live and work together.' Well, at Dayspring, that's not a joke, it's actually true, right? They actually do work together and go to church together. They're married to, some of them, each other. They're together and they've been together, almost like a church community or a convent or something like that has been together, which is why turnover is not high."

Checking in with one another through supervisory lines, regular all-company meetings, and instituted conflict resolution processes have helped to maintain a healthy work environment despite the challenges. One employee spoke of a "remarkable lack of office politics. People treat one another well and work hard to resolve conflicts. Those of us who have worked at other jobs notice the difference significantly."⁶⁸ Each week employees are given an opportunity to hear from others, raise concerns, and contribute to the company's direction. During my time with Redeemer, Dayspring underwent an external diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) assessment, findings of which

⁶⁸ Author interview, May 11, 2020. This employee, however, wondered whether the lack of conflict spoke more to cultural reticence than corporate health. He wondered "as a white person coming into the company" whether in a "primarily Asian American cultural text where conflict isn't as direct or open, I think there are cultural aspects where people don't necessarily give you direct feedback if you've offended them. The ongoing question that I try to be aware of is how much of that lack of office politics is really true, and how much of it is indirect conflict-avoidant cultural aspects that I'm not seeing all of what's happening underneath the surface?"

produced suggestions which the company attempted to implement.⁶⁹ The company allots part of its time to community service. Some use this time to volunteer at Rise Prep, but others focus their efforts elsewhere, and no one I spoke to felt obligated to attend Redeemer or volunteer at Rise Prep. While employees had qualms about this or that (one employee said, “I think the time tracker is universally not liked” and at least one employee wished the company went further with its social justice commitments), the overall sense was one of satisfaction and contentment. People were grateful for the company’s intentionality and believed that it lived up to its stated mission of avoiding “untrammeled, competitive capitalism” and the pressures capitalism puts on both “relationships within a company when we see ourselves in a zero-sum struggle with our coworkers” and “relationships with neighbors when corporations pursue the narrow financial interest of shareholders while disregarding the impacts that has on the communities in which we operate.”⁷⁰ Even those employees least bought into its broader mission were impressed by its consistency toward that mission, “So they really live into the Christian value of trusting in your daily bread, trusting that God will provide. And when

⁶⁹ I had the opportunity to view the DEI assessment. Major findings included concerns for diversity related to Dayspring’s Christian identity and mission, seemingly under the presumption that Dayspring’s Christianity itself presented a problem. The report harbored two telling oddities. First, the assessment did not correlate DEI matters with Dayspring’s forward-looking antiracist efforts. Second, when assessing racial diversity, the fact that Asian Americans comprise a large part of company personnel and culture did not register. Both are telling given the larger ethos of DEI training and assessment. Knowing I was writing a book on antiracism, Dayspring asked me to comment on the report. Part of my comments included the following: “The rise of DEI coincided with the demise of (a) civil rights movements committed to dismantling structural and systemic injustice and the ascendency of (b) therapeutic culture, where DEI discourse amounts to (b) taking over for (a) (drawing from Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Race Experts: How Racial Equity, Sensitivity Training, and New Age Therapy Hijacked the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001)). Yet without something like (a), without larger ends that DEI discourses/practices serve, it’s very hard to tell what DEI is doing or supposed to be doing. In this particular assessment, it often seems like the ends to which DEI serves are vague notions like p. 10’s ‘full authentic self.’ The problem is the vagueness. In its vagueness, ‘diversity’ operates like a vanishing horizon—we know we should pursue it but we never know if we’ve arrived, only that we should and haven’t, eventuating in those all-too-familiar recitals of white guilt. With so few operational criteria, it becomes very hard to adjudicate the difference between, say, concern for gender dysmorphic inclusion which one might encounter .0039 of the time and concern for African American inclusion while operating in the last vestige of Black San Francisco (Esther L. Meerwijk and Jae M. Sevelius, “Transgender Population Size in the United States: A Meta-Regression of Population-Based Probability Samples,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 2 (2017): e1–8.). Because each counts as a relative good, an entity has to know how to rank them in relationship to each other and other goods, which it can only do by relating them to ultimate goods. The vagueness makes all of that unlikely.” Dayspring sought to learn from and implement the assessment’s recommendations especially as it related to gender dynamics within the tech company. Smartly, it contextualized and attached the assessment’s concerns to its largely Asian American context and forward-looking BVHP mission.

⁷⁰ “Values,” Dayspring Partners, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.dayspringpartners.com/values/>.

money gets tight that may actually be a signal, not for you to be more frugal, but to actually even be more generous trusting that God will take care of you and will use you as a vehicle to take care of others.” One employee provided an example from the company’s COVID-19 response: “They said, ‘Hey, we’re going to spend quite a substantial amount of money blessing the restaurants in our neighborhoods.’ I was tasked to go buy gift certificates from certain restaurants that were closed and couldn’t offer food. And so incredibly generous during this time when Dayspring’s pipeline is not secure. So that has been amazing to witness and personally convicting for me as well.”⁷¹ Another employee said, “I don’t necessarily think that it always works out in the ways that they’ve intended it to work out. However I do fully believe that at least the people making decisions and the people moving Dayspring as an entity are genuine. They believe what they say. It’s not necessarily true for every single person like myself who doesn’t really have any input into these pillars, but I do believe that Chi-Ming and the board and the leadership team do believe that this is what we are doing and what we can do.”⁷² For this Dayspring employee, and for many I talked to, much of that had to do with Chi-Ming.

Dayspring’s current valuation stands at \$3.1 million. Because Grace Fellowship’s \$80,000 seed money was a loan (rather than an investment, which would yield ownership shares) that Dayspring quickly paid back, and because Danny and Elisa earlier divested their shares, Chi-Ming and Juliette own 85 percent of the company (the remaining 15 percent belonging to a community development entity)—with their shares valued at over \$2.6 million. They recently decided to transfer all their shares (their 85 percent ownership) to Redeemer, which makes Dayspring Partners now a subsidiary of a church with an average annual budget of \$300,000.⁷³ In transferring majority ownership, Chi-Ming and Juliette don’t see themselves giving something up, not even paper money. In their eyes, Dayspring was never *theirs* to begin with, not even partially. And not only not theirs, but, according to Isaiah 58:7, Matthew 25, and Luke 12:18 as interpreted by fourth-century theologian Basil of Caesarea, the possession of the needy: “The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the

⁷¹ Author interview, May 8, 2020.

⁷² Author interview, May 20, 2020.

⁷³ There are laws regulating for-profit subsidiaries of nonprofit organizations, with the nonprofit’s tax-exempt status being one of the biggest concerns. Nonprofits are subject to UBIT (unrelated business income tax) if they are paid by the subsidiary. The Redeemer-Dayspring relationship is set up to avoid these issues. More generally, its ecological relationship to BVHP makes it unlikely that these particular problems will arise.

shoes that are rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy.” Chi-Ming, who has served as Dayspring’s CEO since Danny began pastoring Redeemer in 2002, has always viewed himself stewarding, using Basil’s language, something that belonged to others, and therefore imagined his responsibilities not to his own investment but to the broader Redeemer and BVHP ecology.⁷⁴ The Chiens understand themselves sharing stewardship rather than surrendering ownership of Dayspring and its \$3.1 million net worth. It belongs first to the church’s microecology and then to the broader BVHP ecosystem.⁷⁵ Indeed, as part of the transfer agreement, Redeemer itself will transfer Dayspring shares to other microecology entities (most likely, Rise Prep) in five years. As well, the transfer furthers Dayspring’s commitment to BVHP, further tying itself to the welfare of the city. It stipulates the terms of stewardship:

- Income generated by Dayspring assets, including any dividends, as well as the proceeds from the sale of any or all assets of Dayspring, will be used exclusively for local economic and community development in the BVHP community until such time as the percentage of the population living in poverty within BVHP is at or below that of the rest of San Francisco.
- During this period, for the use of proceeds from a sale amounting to more than 5% of Dayspring assets in any one calendar year, Redeemer will include input from BVHP’s black community with the form of that input to be determined by Redeemer (e.g., consultation with pastors of black churches with whom Redeemer has relationship).⁷⁶

⁷⁴ “Are you not a robber? The things you received in trust as a stewardship, have you not appropriated them for yourself?” Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 69 and 70.

⁷⁵ Dayspring redeemed the Fongs’ shares for \$38,040, a number far below its investment value. As the largest single investor (accounting for \$15,000 of the \$35,000 he, Chi-Ming, and Elisa initially invested), Danny’s ownership share today would amount to just under 43 percent of the 85 percent share, or \$1.3 million. The number increases significantly when factoring in Elisa’s divestment. Had Danny at that point kept his 60 percent share, he and Chi-Ming would have split, 60/40, 85 percent of the company’s \$3.1 million value, bringing his investment worth to just under \$1.6 million. In choosing to divest for the far lower number of \$38,040, Danny essentially treated his investment as a modest loan rather than as an ownership stake. This is in keeping with his and Chi-Ming’s vision for the company. Neither of them saw Dayspring and its net worth as theirs to begin with, but rather the possession of a local community as stewarded by a church Danny also founded. In this way, the question of who owns the company (and its \$3.1 million value) matters much less to Danny and Chi-Ming than does the question of how it (and its value) benefits BVHP, as evidenced by the terms of Danny’s divestment and Chi-Ming’s shares transfer. Accordingly, “divestment” doesn’t quite capture Danny’s continual relationship with Dayspring Partners or the significant sacrifice he and Cindi have made.

⁷⁶ “Stewarding Shares of Dayspring,” August 29, 2020. Internal Dayspring document.

The Redeemer community sees all this as “putting into effect Dayspring’s commitment that 100% of its equity be devoted to the common good.” Notice how the transfer agreement views “the common good” specifically in terms of BVHP’s African American community, vesting authority in the black churches that have played such significant roles in Redeemer’s history.

To appreciate Chi-Ming’s decision and the way his leadership bears on the company’s moral profile, one has to take a closer look not only at Dayspring and its CEO, which I do later, but also at the broader economy within which they exist. A recent Economic Policy Institute (EPI) study reported that compensation ratios between company CEOs and employees grew nationally from 20:1 in 1965 to 58:1 in 1989 to 278:1 in 2018.⁷⁷ During that period wages for high earners grew 339.2 percent compared to 11.9 percent for typical employees (note: “typical” here designates median-paid, not lowest-paid workers) and, significantly, 52.6 percent compared to 5.3 percent since the 2008 Great Recession (between 2017 and 2018, worker wages actually dropped 0.2 percent). In San Francisco particularly, the average 2016 income of the top 1 percent was forty-four times the average income of the remaining 99 percent.⁷⁸ Nationally, the growth rate of CEO compensation from 1978 to 2018 was 1,007.5 percent, significantly outpacing the 706.7 percent market growth over the same period. In other words, “CEO’s are getting more because of their power to set pay, not because they are increasing productivity or possess specific, high demand skills. This escalation of CEO compensation, and of executive compensation more generally, has fueled the growth of the top 1.0% and the top 0.1% incomes, leaving less of the fruits of economic growth for ordinary workers and widening the gap between very high earners and the bottom 90%.” The study’s conclusion: “The economy would suffer no harm if CEOs were paid less (or taxed more).” One of the implications the EPI draws is the damning, and predictable, revelation that rising CEO and executive compensation reflects income that could otherwise accrue to other

⁷⁷ Lawrence Mishel and Julia Wolfe, “CEO Compensation Has Grown 940% since 1978” (Economic Policy Institute, August 14, 2019), <https://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-compensation-2018/>. Importantly, “Stock-related components of compensation—stock options and stock awards—make up two-thirds to three-fourths of all CEO compensation, depending on the particular measure used. The shift from stock options to stock awards leads to an understatement of CEO compensation levels and growth in our measures as well as in other measures, including the measure prescribed in SEC reporting requirements.”

⁷⁸ Luke Reidenbach, Mark Price, Estelle Sommeiller, and Ellis Wazeter, “The Growth of Top Incomes Across California” (California Budget & Policy Center, February 2016). In 2020, only London and New York had more billionaires than far less populous San Francisco. See “Global Billionaire Wealth: The Billionaire Census 2020,” Wealth-X, January 30, 2020, <https://www.wealthx.com/report/the-wealth-x-billionaire-census-2020/>.

employees. Since “most of the rise of inequality took the form of redistributing wages from the bottom 90% to the top 1.0%” then “wage growth for the bottom 90% would have been nearly twice as fast over the 1979–2017 period had wage inequality not grown.”⁷⁹

The EPI study maps onto Thomas Piketty’s landmark *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, which uses the formula $r > g$ to gauge economic inequality across time. Piketty’s formula shows that inequality follows disequilibrium between return (r) on capital and economic growth (g), concretely demonstrating how the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. “Whenever the rate of return on capital is significantly and durably higher than the growth rate of the economy, it is all but inevitable that inheritance (of fortunes accumulated in the past) predominates over saving (wealth accumulated in the present). In strict logic, it could be otherwise, but the forces pushing in this direction are extremely powerful.”⁸⁰ Piketty’s $r > g$ formula (i.e., return on wealth outpaces return on growth) amounts to the fact that those who start out with more are put in positions of increasing advantage over those who start out with less. Over time, the difference between those with income-generating wealth and those without it exponentially grows as the wealthy accumulate further wealth, until one reaches a point where a very small percentage of the world owns the vast majority of its wealth.⁸¹ Piketty states, “The inequality $r > g$ in one sense implies that the past tends to devour the future: wealth originating in the past automatically grows more rapidly, even without labor, than wealth stemming from work, which can be saved. Almost inevitably, this tends to give lasting disproportionate importance to inequalities created in the past, and therefore to inheritance.” In the long run, what one makes (income) matters far less than what one starts with (wealth). When it comes, then, to those who directly or indirectly inherited second-slavery wealth (or, for that matter, those who inherit Delta Chinese wealth), they start with an insurmountable advantage over those descended from the slaves of the very same system. We are talking about racial capitalism’s aftermarket writ large across

⁷⁹ On this point, see also Josh Bivens and Lawrence Mishel, “The Pay of Corporate Executives and Financial Professionals as Evidence of Rents in Top 1 Percent Incomes” (Economic Policy Institute, June 20, 2013), <https://www.epi.org/publication/pay-corporate-executives-financial-professionals/>.

⁸⁰ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 477. For an account focused on American labor and workers, see Oren Cass, *The Once and Future Worker: A Vision for the Renewal of Work in America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018).

⁸¹ See Noam Chomsky, *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999). More recently, see Chomsky’s Waterman Lecture in Noam Chomsky and Mary Waterstone, *Consequences of Capitalism: Manufacturing Discontent and Resistance* (New York: Haymarket Books, 2021), 203–254.

time.⁸² The income inequality reported by the EPI study certainly contributes to wealth inequality, both in terms of raw income and the form that income takes (i.e., equity options and the like). Yet in a system driven by wealth rather than income ($r > g$), wealth inequality sets the stage for income inequality because it contributes (along with what the EPI study calls “the power of CEOs to extract concessions”) to late capitalism’s dehumanizing spirit. The dominance of perpetuated wealth makes it seem like the wealthy *should* be rich and the poor, no matter their labors, poor. Behind the ideological facade of the market’s invisible hand, we discover machinations within machinations, the aftermarket principle of exploitation begetting exploitation.

Piketty’s study has another wide-ranging implication. At this point the broad consensus is that the best way to improve economic conditions for the poor is to grow markets so that impoverished peoples can benefit at least residually from growing economies, the notion that a rising tide lifts all boats.⁸³ However, $r > g$ shows that growth necessarily comes with growing inequality. Should life for the poor improve, it will not be able to do so at a rate that keeps pace with disproportionately growing inequality. Between poor and rich will be this chasm, fixed in place by political institutions bent to maintaining the distance. These antidemocratic forces will politically disenfranchise the poor (through ever new revolutions of the use-identity-justification dynamic) even should their respective economic situations improve. In the next chapter, we encounter a large instance of this in regard to San Francisco school segregation and inequality. No wonder Piketty champions government-imposed taxes on wealth as a way (he thinks the only way) to even the economic playing field and check antidemocratic politics.⁸⁴ His is a

⁸² For example, as related to housing, “The 1968 Civil Rights Act made housing discrimination illegal, but subtler forms prevailed. . . . Landlords and property management companies tried to avoid discriminating by setting clear criteria and holding all applicants to the same standards. But equal treatment in an unequal society could still foster inequality. Because black men were disproportionately incarcerated and black women disproportionately evicted, uniformly denying housing to applicants with recent criminal or eviction records still had an incommensurate impact on African Americans.” Matthew Desmond, *Eviction: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Broadway, 2017), 252. See also Matthew Desmond and Bruce Western, “Poverty in America: New Directions and Debates,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 44 (2018): 305–318.

⁸³ As one example that wealth does not “trickle down” as proposed, see David Hope and Julian Limberg, “The Economic Consequences of Major Tax Cuts for the Rich” (International Inequalities Institute, December 2020).

⁸⁴ During my time with Redeemer, San Franciscans voted in favor of surcharging corporations that had 100:1 or greater CEO-to-worker compensation ratios. Proposition L, which passed with over 65 percent support, is expected to net between \$60 million and \$140 million each year. Joshua Sabatini, “Voters Favoring Prop. L Tax Hike on Companies with Highly-Paid CEOs,” *The San Francisco Examiner*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.sfxaminer.com/news/san-francisco-voters-appear-in-favor-of-tax-hike-on-ceos/>.

standard democratic socialist move, but it will be a tough ask of those whose wealth already narrows their scope of moral responsibility and those who pursue wealth for the sake of sharing in that advantage. One can guess how things will go based on how things have gone. Institutions will be further bent toward protecting proprietarian regimes and the pecuniary desire of the wealthy, and the disenfranchised will increasingly find violence their only recourse, which only further justifies (in the name of law and order, or what have you) proprietarian and pecuniary arrangements.⁸⁵ Life becomes, in the language of ecofeminist Ivone Gebara, “vulgarized.”⁸⁶ Things could look different if we had people whose lives were already given to dispossession (to be distinguished from those whose dispossessions are forced on them), who already imagine the sources of their lives, including their wealth, intertwined with surrounding ecologies without whom they could not exist and in which they find joy. Without that disposition, it will be incumbent on states, and their licensed forms of coercion, and the cycles of violence and justification that follow. Ideologies and machinations require continuous maintenance, which bears on the whole society—dependent as it is on inequality—to supply, returning again and again to those antidemocratic concessions. In such a world, income inequality becomes a sacrament to the system.

It is a sacrament Dayspring is determined to break, in part by showing that income inequality is parasitic on a founding sacrament of the world. The power of $r > g$ comes with the implication that wealth is something to be held on to, mainly for the wealth it further generates. In this frame of mind, surrendering wealth would be absurd. Piketty’s formula all but bears that out. But what if creatures exist, inasmuch as they exist at all, within an altogether wider ecology? In this wider ecology abundance begets abundance, as Piketty shows to be materially the case, but with implications that go in the other direction, not toward wealth generating wealth and exploitation begetting exploitation, but toward justice and mercy and what I will later describe as an ellipse between dispossession and joy.

Dayspring’s reparative work here begins by committing to a 3:1 CEO-worker compensation ratio. This means that no employee, including the company’s CEO, can make more than three times the salary of any other

⁸⁵ On “law and order” and the relationship between proprietarian concerns and mass incarceration, see Joshua Dubler and Vincent Lloyd, *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 65–104.

⁸⁶ Ivone Gebara, “Ecofeminism: A Latin American Perspective,” *Cross Currents* 53, no. 1 (2003): 93–103 (101).

employee, including Dayspring's janitorial staff. This would be relatively easy to manage, if still hard to swallow, if Dayspring's personnel were fixed, if there were never transition or turnover. But of course there is. Keeping to 3:1 while also attracting talent and balancing budgets then requires discounting executive salaries in order to compensate for above-market incoming salaries. Dayspring pays its highest earning employees less so that its lowest earning employees can earn more, inverting the logic behind the income inequality ratios reported by the EPI. One employee said, "I actually love how they've leveled salaries, so that the topmost person only makes a certain percentage more than the lowest paid person. In that sense, I look at Dayspring as a model of some sort that actually more businesses should follow, that there shouldn't be this huge discrepancy between the topmost and the lowest most." Another employee whose long tenure meant her salary was now being discounted said, "I was just like, 'Oh, that's totally fine. I'm okay with it,' especially because I had been on the receiving end the years before."⁸⁷ Understood in terms of the nested ecologies of God and creaturely life, just compensation is shown to be a matter of repair. Dayspring refers to this as "smoothing the way of the Lord," envisioning itself in the role of Isaiah the Prophet/John the Baptist who "make straight in the desert a highway for our God; Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain" (Isa. 40:3-4 and Matt. 3:3, ESV). Such smoothing occurs by smoothing the curve of income inequality, the highest paid "made low" and uneven ratios "shall become level" so as to make inequality "a plain" and "every" employee "shall be lifted up."⁸⁸

The Liberation of Chi-Ming Chien

Recall that in Chapter 2, I drew on a distinction theological economist Mary L. Hirschfeld makes between households and merchants, "Whereas households enter into the market with one kind of good and exit the market with another kind of good, merchants begin with money, which they use for the purchase of goods, and end with money, which they obtain by reselling those goods. Merchants appear to be engaged in the art of moneymaking, which is

⁸⁷ Author interview, May 21, 2020.

⁸⁸ Hear Redeemer's public presentation "Local Church Politics" at Chien, "Gathering 2019."

'directed to making a great deal of money and wealth as its end.' It is this evolution that leads to the confusion between money as a medium of exchange and moneymaking as an art in service of the disordered concupiscence that places riches as an end rather than as a means."⁸⁹ Hirschfeld goes on to qualify her critique: "Aquinas offers room for a merchant to practice his art in service of household management" (143). The merchant does so by first providing real services for the community of households, and, second, keeping her gains minimal and using them for good. Optimally, servicing real needs would become the merchant's service to her community.⁹⁰ Morally ruled out, then, are merchants who set up shop in communities from which they extract value and in which they neither participate nor invest. Further ruled out are relational modes that abstract from concrete realities while taking advantage of them. For Hirschfeld this is precisely the problem that merchants and money present. By dealing in money one increasingly distances oneself from the kind of market activity through which communities discern common goods. Money defers these crucial judgments, turning instead to abstractions that preclude them, drawing attention away from concrete needs toward profit extraction and disordered concupiscence.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Delta Chinese merchants traded in two kinds of abstractions. First there was the cash economy that was the grocery store itself, where goods were not exchanged for goods but rather for money, lending itself to an initial degree of abstraction (the lauded credit system abstracted further, from cash money to credit money). Mediating relationships through money reduces communal mutuality (say, of needs and services) to its lowest common denominator. Market exchange becomes less about communal goods and more about money changing hands between strangers. But all this rests on a prior abstraction, one unique to racial capitalism. The Delta Chinese grocery market proceeded as an aftermarket opportunity ensconced in the abstraction of race. Financialization and securitization through which humans became commodities combined with race and its ideological justification to together systematically prepare the conditions of aftermarket exploitation, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The Delta Chinese business model simply followed suit. By the time they showed up

⁸⁹ Mary L. Hirschfeld, *Aquinas and the Market: Toward a Future Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 141. Further citations will be noted in the text.

⁹⁰ For an account of "civil economy" along these lines, see Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni, *Civil Economy* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Agenda Publishing, 2016) and Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni, *Civil Economy: Efficiency, Equity, Public Happiness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

as customers in Delta Chinese grocery stores—after Hirschfeld’s “evolution” had been racialized—African Americans came less as community members with communal gifts to share, or not, and more as racial kinds with predetermined justifications.

Later, Hirschfeld offers “Aquinas’s framework” for “what a humane economy would look like,” worth quoting at length here for its uncanny resemblance to what Dayspring aspires to and in significant measure has already accomplished:

Virtuous individuals would have a proper relationship with material wealth, ordering them to higher, more fully human goods, and would have a clear sense of how much was enough. Because their demand for natural wealth would be satiable, they would be able to identify income above the level they need as surplus and would be able to generously make that surplus available to others. Indeed, they would not experience such altruism as coming at their own expense. Because their own desire for wealth would be satiable, it would be easier for them to vote for taxes to support public programs aimed at promoting the common good. Because they understand their fulfillment as coming from leading lives that reflect God’s ultimate goodness, they would be in a position to draw more genuine satisfaction out of the natural wealth with which they are blessed. Being free from the relentless pressure to raise their incomes, they would have more time to attend to their families, cultivate their relationships with friends and neighbors, and pursue higher goods. Virtuous firms would see their main goal as provisioning goods and services that are of real value to their community and as opportunities to exercise their own creativity and skill. Such firms would use prices and profits as signals about how to best direct their efforts. Because their aim would not be to maximize profits, they would more often be in a position to offer fair wages to their employees. They would view customers as fellow humans to be served, not as wallets to be emptied, and would accordingly be less likely to produce shoddy goods or to pressure or persuade customers into buying goods and services they do not genuinely want or need. In short, the economy would be in service of human life. (191–192)

My ecological portrayal of Dayspring with its microecology and broader ecosystems sought to illuminate what enables the company’s “proper relationship with material wealth” so as to contribute to an economy that “would be

in service of human life.” To get a sense of what Hirschfeld means by the “satisfiable” desires running through such an economy, I turn now to Chi-Ming’s particular history. We will see how a dynamic between dispossession and joy laid on top of an ellipse between racial capitalism and deep economy shapes his life, and thereby the processes and commitments of Dayspring Partners.

Chi-Ming Chien grew up in Southern California. His mom and dad each left China during the Cultural Revolution, his mom aboard the fabled “last boat out of Shanghai.”⁹¹ They each grew up in Taiwan, both in Christian families, before emigrating to America for graduate school at Cornell where they met in a Bible study. Chi-Ming’s mom studied veterinary sciences and his dad did a doctorate in electrical engineering. For the family it has always been the case that “education was super important,” and not just for the immediate family. Chi-Ming’s relatives include leading academics and business leaders whose own kids skipped multiple grades on their ways to elite universities. Before Cornell, both of Chi-Ming’s parents had graduated from National Taiwan University, which only admits the country’s top students, and his dad was among the very few who studied electrical engineering, considered among the school’s most competitive majors. After graduate school, the family settled in Southern California, where Chi-Ming’s dad worked at the same aerospace firm for his entire career. They arranged for their own kids’ academic success by moving the family to one of the wealthiest school districts in America. Chi-Ming remembers life revolving around “two poles”—“the academic pole on the one hand, and then church life.” Their efforts paid off—all four kids went to Stanford University.

Growing up, Chi-Ming’s academic success did not always bode well with classmates who tended to be older due to his advanced academic standing—especially in the 1980s with all of its accepted and expected racism. Today, the region boasts the nation’s largest concentration of Asian Americans.⁹² But that was not the case when Chi-Ming was growing up. He was bullied often, for being smart or Asian—“Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these” or “Go back where you came from”—or what many figured to be the same thing. At one point, an older white kid held him over a trashcan; this would be a lasting memory. Later, when Chi-Ming told a cousin about the bullying,

⁹¹ Author interview, May 8, 2020.

⁹² Gustavo López, Neil G. Ruiz, and Eileen Patten, “Key Facts about Asian Americans,” Pew Research Center, September 8, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/08/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>.

she responded, “Don’t worry about it because they’re all going to be working for you anyway.” He remembers taking comfort in what she said.⁹³

His family attended a local immigrant Chinese church. The church provided him with his closest group of friends, and a context that celebrated his family as a “poster child, what everyone wants their family to be like.” At Stanford, he joined the school’s InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) chapter, where he met other students like Ann, Daniel, and future spouse Juliette, a Korean American also from Southern California, along with IVCF staff workers Cindi and Danny. Chi-Ming had grown up Christian and led youth groups at his church and public high school: “Being a Christian was really important to me, not just to my family, but to me.” The Stanford IVCF chapter would change his life. Or, part of it would.

For much of its history, IVCF understood itself as a solidly evangelical organization centered around theologically Reformed commitments.⁹⁴ Its heavy emphasis on individual salvation paired with rather disconnected attitudes toward politics, economics, and other social concerns. While not specifically Baptist like the Delta Chinese, IVCF shares the broadly evangelical goal of developing morally sound Christians able to contribute positively to society, especially under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as imagined by influential charismatic movements of the day. The vision is a familiar one. Christians evangelize for the sake of winning souls. Structures and systems matter mainly as platforms for evangelism. There is nothing to these structures or systems (say, whether or not they are just) themselves that warrants Christian concern. For the Delta Chinese this meant upright citizens who operated businesses with integrity and respect, paused for church on Sundays, and assumed continuity with the broader American political economy. At a place like Stanford, it meant connecting Christian faith to the university’s broader aspirations, which is often articulated in terms of “changing the world.” The world needs changing and Stanford grads are best able to change it. If the 1990s of Chi-Ming’s generation are any indication, Stanford alum have far exceeded those aspirations, with Stanford students heading up Silicon Valley tech industries that have indeed changed the world. For IVCF, changing the world meant getting specifically these sorts of people to become Christian. Christians with Stanford degrees were especially well positioned to convert a lot of people. The vision of reaching “Greek” students had everything to do

⁹³ Author interview, May 8, 2020.

⁹⁴ For a history, see Keith Hunt and Gladys Hunt, *For Christ and the University: The Story of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship of the USA / 1940–1990* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1991).

with the belief that the combination of Stanford brains, Silicon Valley ambitions, and fraternity/sorority social skills held the best prospects for reaching the most people. It was a very self-conscious effort to influence the influential, what IVCF at the time generically called “leadership development.” With that vision IVCF presumed something about what changing the world looks like and who it involves.⁹⁵ And who it doesn’t involve. It included neither social justice nor Asian Americans. Its Reformed sensibilities held to neatly defined spheres of influence that overlapped in ways that included some and excluded others. It had a place for social justice and it had a place for Asian Americans, but neither sat at the center of its concerns, much less did they overlap with one another or any of IVCF’s primary commitments at the time. In this way it simply never occurred to Stanford’s IVCF that its mission included the likes of a Danny Fong or a Chi-Ming Chien. At Stanford, there were organizations like Asian American Christian Fellowship or Korean Christian Union that did for Asian Americans what IVCF did for white students, just as there were Christian groups that thought that Christianity had plenty to do with social justice. What no one was doing was developing Asian American Christians for social justice, “the whole gospel” as Chi-Ming calls it. That was a work not many at Stanford or anyone else cared much about. IVCF staff workers Danny and Cindi cared about it, but doing so increasingly put them on the outside looking in on the very organization they had given their lives to. This theme of living at the margins of the margins would prove to be a big part of their stories, paving their way to San Francisco’s margins.

It fell to the Oakland Urban Project (OUP), a niche ministry within IVCF, to fill the gap for Chi-Ming and his friends. Given the limitations of the Stanford IVCF vision and how little his upbringing prepared him for the experience, it is pretty surprising that Chi-Ming ended up at a place that would radically change his life. He did it because of a girl. Actually he did it because he was interested in taking a leap of faith, and the girl he was interested

⁹⁵ James Davison Hunter makes the point that as much as Christians talk about “changing the world” they are not in positions (politically or theologically) to do so, and would be better off couching American Christianity under different terms. Davison Hunter’s point is not irrelevant for the purposes of this chapter. Redeemer, Dayspring, and Rise Prep exist largely at the fringe of the larger religious, business, and educational scene in America. Davison Hunter argues that such an existence is indicative of the kind of influence religion can have in this day and age and appropriate for Christianity, which should wary of pursuing greater influence. The ecological account I press in this book confirms Davison Hunter’s larger point, while also trying to situate fringe realities within a larger theology of creation so that Redeemer, Dayspring, and Rise Prep are not just fringe realities, though they are also that. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

in, Juliette, had already taken that leap. To get there, though, he would need to clear another hurdle. Taking the summer to learn about social justice instead of doing an internship that would secure him a job after graduation didn't jive with Chi-Ming's family. It's not that his parents weren't generally supportive of whatever direction life might take him. It's just that they didn't anticipate this particular direction; in fact, they didn't know it existed. "I definitely remember having a pretty difficult conversation with my dad in particular about me doing that over the summer rather than getting a summer job that would advance my career." Chi-Ming doesn't recall many specifics about the conversation but "I remember there were tears, potentially from both sides, or maybe just from my side." When Chi-Ming said, "I need to follow Jesus and this is just a decision I need to make," they came to a shared understanding.

OUP is a summer immersion program that thrusts college students into inner-city Oakland in order to open their eyes to the material consequences of racial inequality. Along with a few others, Chi-Ming lived in a community house. The program required the five of them live off a weekly budget of \$12.50 per person to cover expenses (groceries, laundry, transportation, etc.). First was the shock of living off a budget at all and then the shock of how little \$12.50 covered. Days were spent working in neighborhood programs in Oakland's San Antonio district, often tutoring at-risk youth and otherwise learning about life amid the challenges of racial capitalism. Evenings were spent studying the Bible in order to make sense of what they were seeing. The goal of the summer was hardly to change the neighborhood, much less the world. It was rather to impress upon Chi-Ming and his peers the demands that injustice puts on Christians. They would not change the world, but perhaps the world would change them. OUP used John Perkins's community development theology based on relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution.⁹⁶ This theology pushed the idea that none of "the three R's" can be achieved without drastically changing one's life, without which "changing the world" was little more than an abstraction afforded by privilege. These were tough lessons, asking of participants much more than they bargained for, making of

⁹⁶ See particularly John Perkins, *With Justice for All* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982); John Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down; John Perkins Tells His Own Story* (Glendale, CA: G/L Regal Books, 1976); John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution: The Christian Response to Human Need, a Strategy for Today* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976). For a general account of how evangelicals like those at Redeemer have taken up Perkins's work, see Gary VanderPol and Soong-Chan Rah, *Return to Justice: Six Movements that Reignited Our Contemporary Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 17–38.

Christianity more than they could imagine. Chi-Ming encountered an experience of joy he had not known before.

I think the main thing that I experienced was just an incredible amount of joy that summer. So that's the overriding experience of it was a lot of joy, joy in the household, joy in hanging out with the kids as part of the after-school programs. So it felt like even though we're really quite limited in terms of what we could do, or spend money on, there was a sense of joy. The experience of you don't need a lot and if the community is in the same place in terms of expectations about what we do or don't do or can do or can't do, then it can be a very joyful experience in the midst of not needing or having very much materially. And then the Bible study from Amos was transformative for understanding who God is and God's desire for the people of God and love for the poor. That's probably where I began to be more familiar with things like "the preferential option for the poor" or "God's a God of justice," what that means. And then the study of Ephesians of the church as intended to be that people, and has been brought into that people who can live out very concretely what it looks like to be that people.⁹⁷

Not long after OUP, Chi-Ming heard God speaking through a fire hydrant to confirm his path to the city. The world had come alive for him. He joined the others in San Francisco at Grace Fellowship, soon after starting Dayspring with Danny and Redeemer Community Church with the others. The direction that his immigrant parents had prepared for him and his three siblings now seemed a distant memory. In its place was a life of radical dis-possession based on the recognition that one was either repairing injustice or taking advantage of it. Chi-Ming wanted to participate in God's liberation, that of others and himself. Doing so would not be so easy as getting a good engineering job, tithing 10 percent, and volunteering at soup kitchens during holidays. God wanted much more, and increasingly so did Chi-Ming. Liberation would require his whole life. And then some.

A story about a rich man in Mark's Gospel has been particularly meaningful for Chi-Ming. In it, Jesus surprises the rich man by telling him that worship of God requires more than the usual sacrifices (i.e., in his day, keeping the Mosaic Law; in our day, a respectable job, 10 percent tithing, volunteering one's free time, etc.). Jesus tells him to additionally go and

⁹⁷ Author interview, May 8, 2020.

sell everything he owns, give to the poor and only then “come follow me” (Mark 17:22, NRSV). After arriving at Grace Fellowship, Chi-Ming remembers asking Pastor Appleby, somewhat half-heartedly, whether God might be calling him to likewise sell, give to the poor, and follow Jesus. Like the rich man, Chi-Ming was surprised to hear the full-throated response, “I have no doubt God is calling you to do that.” Chi-Ming came from a family that wasn’t so much rich as comfortable, but he was making his way there. That was what his cousin promised him all those years ago when she said, “Don’t worry about [the racist bullies] because they’re all going to be working for you anyway.” It wasn’t just a worldly promise either, but something the Christians with whom he grew up wanted for him as their “poster child.” The same direction was passed off as “leadership” in the Stanford IVCF chapter. Save for Danny and Cindi, OUP, and a girl, he likely would have continued down that path. But he didn’t. Three decades later Chi-Ming sits inside what Casaldáliga and Vigil called “a spirituality of liberation” (replete with revelatory fire hydrants and \$17 million rental properties) and views his life *sub specie Regni*, as if everything in it belongs to God.

The direction he has taken has not been easy. To this day, Chi-Ming hears those voices encouraging a less demanding Christianity, one with less costs. The choices he made ruled out a whole host of opportunities. His credentialing, abilities, and personal drive could have easily afforded him a different life. He looks around at those in his family and those he went to school with and realizes that he could have just as well ended up with the high-powered job, making a name for himself amid San Francisco’s influential cultural capitalism. Sometimes he envies their impressive resumes, luxurious homes, and amassed wealth. His two Stanford degrees have garnered for him and his family all of a single house which he shares with another family in one of the city’s least desirable neighborhoods. More than the luxurious home, he recognizes that he craves the validation it represents.⁹⁸ After all, according to his extended family’s high standards, his life doesn’t amount to very much. And by Silicon Valley standards, Dayspring amounts to even less. The sense of loss comes not in his lowly station, but the strong sense that he could have achieved so much more. From that perspective it is hard for him not to feel somewhat like a loser, someone who has foolishly lost what was there for the taking. There is another opportunity cost that Chi-Ming feels regularly: for all its shiny brilliance, Redeemer’s microecology

⁹⁸ Chi-Ming Chien, “A Prophet Economy” (unpublished manuscript, 2018), 26.

impacts very little. Dayspring employs only around twenty-five people, and its \$3.1 million net worth doesn't come close to "a meaningful amount of money" by most Bay Area financial metrics. For all its promise, Rise Prep will never educate more than a few hundred kids at a time, and so will barely put a dent in San Francisco's unjust educational structures and systems. Meanwhile, Redeemer, with its ninety congregants and oddball culture, will likely remain in the shadow of churches like Reality SF, the kind of place members have to rationalize to others, and themselves. Redeemer had early committed to being a community church, one possessed of a very particular ecology, hardly positioning itself to "change the world." It's not even clear if Redeemer will change BVHP. For a community heralding a cosmicvision, the net effect seems rather small. There is hope that the church's faithfulness will have ripple effects down the line, but just as likely it will come to nothing. After Juliette and Chi-Ming pitched their everything-belongs-to-God idea, the building's owner didn't so much reject their appeal as ignore it.

In the Mark story, Jesus's words don't shock just the rich man. The disciples tell Jesus that they have left everything to follow him and fear he does not recognize as much. Jesus tells them, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Mark 10:29–31, NRSV). Decades into giving so much for the cause of justice and mercy, Chi-Ming describes his life in terms similar to the joy he felt God inviting him to all those years ago in Oakland: "My experience of Redeemer is one of joy in partnership in the gospel and community, purposefulness. There is cognizance of what's lost, or what's not chosen for. But I think that is probably much less of the primary experience. The primary experience is this life is good, it's worthwhile, God is in it. We are experiencing the goodness of God, partnership of the gospel, life of the Spirit." The realization "in this age" of what Hirschfeld calls "satisfiable" goods has the effect of relativizing the empty desires that fuel an inhumane economy. If Jesus promised only goods "in the age to come" and therefore an earthly life full of abstract desire, then Aquinas's humane economy would remain permanently out of reach. That Christ does more (indeed providing "my experience of Redeemer" just as Christ provided him in Oakland "a lot of joy, joy in the household, joy in hanging out with the kids") properly orders the deep ecology he has come

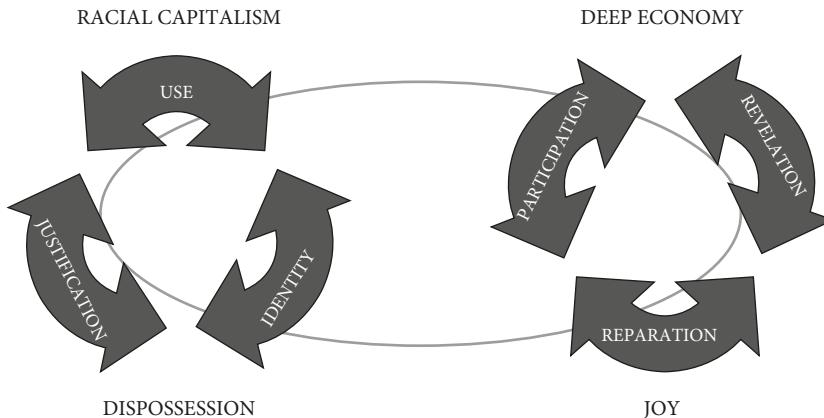


Figure 5.2 Ellipse of dispossession and joy.

to know as God's saving economy. To be sure one feels what's lost, what's not chosen, but, as Chi-Ming says, that's not the primary experience. The primary experience is praise for this life and its foretaste of things to come, that God is in it, deeply so. Chi-Ming points to treasures here on earth: "the treasure of the relationships that I have with folks in the church that are partners. I experienced the treasure of relationships with neighbors that I would not have expected to have relationship with like Yvonne, partnership in leading whether in Dayspring or Redeemer. So there has been incredible treasure as I've sold what I have." Hence, he walks Third Street, divests wealth, discounts his salary, takes care of his employees, and participates in and reveals God's reparations for his and the world's liberation.⁹⁹ All as forms of worship.

The life Jesus invites, the one Chi-Ming has come to live, involves an ellipse between two points, dispossession and joy, Mark's rich-man story doxologically diagrammed (see Figure 5.2). One cannot be had without the other. Joy without dispossession is escapist. Dispossession without joy is sadist. The two together order the Christian life. At least the one offered by Jesus "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2, WEB), and the one racial capitalism provokes. Parallel to dispossession and joy sit use-identity-justification and participation-revelation-reparation, twin polarities around which revolves the life of worship. From one angle those who fail

⁹⁹ Author interview, May 22, 2020.

to take advantage of opportunities that come their way look like losers, foolishly missing opportunities right in front of them. The other angle sees joy, though a joy that puts them at odds with a world ripe with aftermarket opportunity. Between this world and them, experienced together as an ellipse of dispossession and joy, arrives the world as it is in God, that is, as it really is, as Christ himself shows. Seeing as much is the trick—recall Casaldáliga and Vigil’s “magic realism”—a trick only achieved by living the ellipse, standing inside by which things come into focus.¹⁰⁰ Catching a glimpse of it changed Chi-Ming’s life. A glimpse similarly pulled in Chris and his friends. More than a glimpse is what they and the Redeemer community offer. It may not be much, but for some it is more than enough, infinitely more.

Theologian Kathryn Tanner, in her analysis of “the new spirit of capitalism,” gets at something similar, again worth quoting at length for the uncanny resemblance to Chi-Ming Chien, Dayspring Partners, and Redeemer Community Church:

That future state of the world to come, in which transparency to God will be perfectly realized, remains an absolutely other world in that only God and nothing about the world’s own tendencies and trajectories makes it possible. Despite this never-filled gap between the whole world of continuing struggle against sin and the next without it, this other world has been entering into every present moment in a disruptive way so as to form an otherwise impossible historical trajectory of history’s apparent losers, a historical movement made up of all those who, swimming against the stream of their times, never seemed to get anywhere. What will finally come will establish once and for all what could never be predicted: that their efforts were not in vain, were not for nothing, that their efforts to bring in another world did not, as they appeared to, come to nothing, vanish without consequence.¹⁰¹

Everything Is Connected

During World War II, Japanese military scientists harnessed the Pacific jet stream connecting Asia and North America to send approximately ten

¹⁰⁰ For an account that might be termed “the hermeneutics of discipleship,” see Jens Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 148–182.

¹⁰¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 165.

thousand “Fu-Go” balloons carrying thermite incendiaries and high-explosive fragmentation bombs to their enemies across the sea.¹⁰² Most of the intercontinental weapons were assembled by Japanese schoolgirls conscripted by the empire. An estimated one thousand balloons successfully made it to North America, reaching as far east as Michigan and as far south as Mexico.¹⁰³ None had the desired effect—except one. Elsie Mitchell, along with her husband, Archie, a local minister, had taken a group of church youth on a picnic in the nearby Gearhart Mountains of Bly, Oregon. While Archie unpacked the car, Elsie, at the time five-months pregnant with the couple’s first child, took the kids to explore.¹⁰⁴ They found one of the downed balloons lying conspicuously among the trees. They were dragging it out of the woods when it went off. Along with Elsie and her unborn child, five children (ages 11–14), including two of Betty Patske’s siblings, were killed that day in 1945.¹⁰⁵ In the years that followed, Archie and Betty would marry, and America would get its revenge for Elsie, Betty’s siblings and the other children, and the hundreds of thousands of Americans killed during the war. U.S. atomic bombs would take over half a million Japanese lives, nearly all civilians.¹⁰⁶

Betty’s great-nephew, Jeff Boyd, is a long-term member of Redeemer Community Church. Jeff, his spouse, Joanna, and their son, James (a Princeton grad the Rise Prep kids refer to as “Mr. Boyd 2.0”), all teach at Rise Prep. Jeff has served in all areas of the church’s lay ministry and together with Joanna shares a home with the Chiens. As a white person with a white family, he admits not always knowing how to navigate life at Redeemer. On the one hand, he feels grateful to be working with others, and their many differences, toward racial justice. He doesn’t expect the work to be comfortable or easy, especially as a white man working through his own issues. On the other hand,

¹⁰² Linton Weeks, “Beware of Japanese Balloon Bombs,” NPR, January 20, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/01/20/375820191/beware-of-japanese-balloon-bombs>.

¹⁰³ Robert C. Mikesh, “Balloon Bomb Attacks on North America” (Washington, DC: National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973). See also *On Paper Wings* (documentary film), dir. Ilana Sol (Film Is Forever Productions, 2008).

¹⁰⁴ “Japanese Balloon Bombs ‘Fu-Go,’” Atomic Heritage Foundation, August 10, 2016, <https://www.atomicheritage.org/history/japanese-balloon-bombs-fu-go>.

¹⁰⁵ “Six Killed in Oregon by Japanese Bomb,” HISTORY, May 4, 2020, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/six-killed-in-oregon-by-japanese-bomb>. Betty and Archie later married, though their lives would take another turn as missionaries in Vietnam; see “The Betty Mitchell Story,” *Alliance Women* (blog), October 2, 2017, <https://www.alliancewomen.org/the-betty-mitchell-story/>.

¹⁰⁶ “In 1945, a Japanese Balloon Bomb Killed Six Americans, Five of Them Children, in Oregon,” Smithsonian Magazine, May 22, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/1945-japanese-balloon-bomb-killed-six-americans-five-them-children-oregon-180972259/>.

he often finds the church's racism discussions worrying and wounding, both crucially necessary yet overwrought, cast in such broad strokes that his family's long history in the church, school, and neighborhood gets discounted.

While his kids graduated from Princeton and Cal, Jeff grew up in working-class rural communities and was the first in his family to go to college. When Redeemer talks about whiteness, it's hard for him to recognize his place in the story given how repulsive he too finds white supremacy. Jeff describes instances at church when the topic comes up. He lowers his head, bracing himself, "Oh my gosh, here it comes again. We're gonna hear how white culture sucks, and Western culture sucks." Jeff thinks about his family, "Hey, we're here. We're in a church where we've been for 17–18 years. We love these people. We're doing a lot that is directed toward crossing racial lines of division. It's not, 'Look at me, I'm doing a lot here. Can you just give me a break?' But 'Hey man, I'm really trying to be a part of overcoming this together.'" Jeff balances these tensions with instances where Pastor Danny publicly says, "If we can't have Jeff at our church, a guy who's white, I don't know what we're about. I value you. I trust you." To which he thinks, "Alright. I can do this. I can be here. And I know Danny loves me and thinks that way about me." Jeff is not unaware of racial dynamics, including those that advantage him as a white man. He's seen how people in BVHP find it easier to acknowledge him than, for instance, the Asian American women in his congregation. Jeff's and the church's ability to recognize as much in order to check the pretensions of white benevolence seem critically important. But one wonders whether doing so requires focusing on whiteness in ways that preclude sharing enough in common that racism's divide-and-conquer strategies become obvious. Rather than stoking division, we might lean into the natural connections that help us understand why our differences and deficiencies matter.¹⁰⁷ From there we can build out sightlines connecting us to a whole array of creaturely belonging.

For all its talk about ecologies, ecosystems, and environments, despite its place of shared time amid BVHP's toxic ecology, regardless of its belief that injustice anywhere threatens justice everywhere, Redeemer gives little

¹⁰⁷ For evidence of the benefits of such an approach, see Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Brookman, "Reducing Exclusionary Attitudes through Interpersonal Conversation: Evidence from Three Field Experiments," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 1–16; "How To Defeat Trump and Heal America: Deep Canvassing and Political Persuasion in the 2020 Presidential Election" (People's Action, 2020), <https://peoplesaction.org/deep-canvass-experiment/>; Ian Haney López, *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America* (New York: New Press, 2019).

thought to ecological justice and mercy. During my year with the church barely was the topic mentioned.¹⁰⁸ Climate change, ocean acidification, deforestation, species loss, soil depletion—none was mentioned, as if none was happening. Preachers didn't preach about it, even at those moments when one thought they might. People perhaps prayed about it; perhaps they worried about its effects on the disadvantaged, but they didn't do so publicly. Except for an optional adult Sunday school sequence (tellingly led by the generation of Chris's friends) no one seemed to care very much about the planet.¹⁰⁹ Jenkins's sanctifying epistemic spiral conjured for the church the 1966 uprising and the Muwekma Ohlone, but not clapper rail birds long integral to bay ecology. Apparently, everything including their building belonged to God, but not quite the world itself. Not that it wasn't speaking. The year 2020's viruses and wildfires, all direct consequences of environmental overreach, sounded the familiar alarms (what I called in the Preface the pandemic's "planetary instruction") only to be silenced when anti-doxology again stole the show. None of this is terribly surprising given American Christianity's rather shallow incarnations. Yet for a church that spends so much time talking about race and racism, one might expect more. The omission suggested that Redeemer had not yet learned racism's deepest lessons, those related to thingification and its awful extractive business. For Redeemer, racism proved to be an inadequate analogy since regularly discussing its violations did not surface continuities with what we similarly do to the planet—again, even in a year when the COVID-19 pandemic allowed the meaning of "the yellow peril" to jump from people to pathogens. In fact, the strong grammatical distinctions Redeemer held in its regular habits of speech, committed as they were to the singularity of human life, suggested that at least here use-identity-justification got the better of participation-revelation-reparation. More worrisome was the prospect that all that talk about race and racism, rather than getting them inside the world and its literal groaning, distanced them further from it. Race would

¹⁰⁸ In previous years, the church had some engagement with environmental issues.

¹⁰⁹ The group met for nine Sundays after service and discussed Sandra L. Richter, *Stewards of Eden: What Scripture Says about the Environment and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020). Richter's study makes mention of how "acre after acre of monocrop agriculture" in the Mississippi Delta has destroyed what I described in Part I as "one of the most fertile places on Earth" (27). She later specifies the destruction in terms of the relationship between habitat and species loss (57–59). Richter curiously mentions cotton specifically without gesturing to any connection between King Cotton's slavery and analogous forms of predation.

win again. Just because something can happen doesn't mean it will. Much depends on a place.¹¹⁰

Jeff's family reconciled with the Japanese schoolgirls who built those bombs that floated all the way across the sea to kill Elsie and the children. Years later, when a Japanese American professor (by coincidence himself interned during the war a mere sixty miles from Bly, Oregon) heard the story and made the connections, the two parties came together across distances of war, time, and contingency.¹¹¹ The Japanese schoolgirls, now elderly women, and Jeff's relatives with grandchildren in tow shared, apologized, and forgave one another. Japanese paper cranes (traditional symbols of peace, healing, and redemption) were made to mark the occasion, one thousand for all of the suffering and regret.¹¹² Jeff says about his great-aunt, "My auntie let the gospel save her."¹¹³ At least on this occasion, when the many connections between us become too much to bear, reconciliation might be its own reparation.

¹¹⁰ "Deep economy" is meant to show how creation is ordered to justice and mercy, that they are natural to creation because they are natural to God. But *ordered* to justice and mercy is not quite the same as *fated* to them. In the internecine between the two arises for Christian theology a whole doctrine of sin, which I have thematized throughout in terms of desire, justification, and anti-doxology. No one has better documented the depth and scope of society's failures on the environmental crisis (the pace of which has, tragically and tellingly, picked up at the same rate as our awareness of it) than William T. Vollmann. See his two-volume *Carbon Ideologies*, vol. 1, *No Immediate Danger*, and vol. 2, *No Good Alternative* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018). For a political economic account analogous to racial capitalism, see Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York: Verso, 2016).

¹¹¹ Yuzuru J. Takeshita, "Sowing Seeds of Peace: Gestures of Reconciliation between U.S. and Japan Years Later," *Ann Arbor News*, June 11, 1995. Takeshita, who taught at the University of Michigan, was interned at the Tule Lake Camp in northern California. See his account, Yuzuru Takeshita, "Japanese Internment a Stain on Our History," *Ann Arbor News*, February 16, 1992.

¹¹² See Ilana Sol's documentary, *On Paper Wings* (Film Is Forever Productions, 2008).

¹¹³ Author interview, July 29, 2020.

6

Rise University Preparatory and the Politics of Hope

All I really remember is the pain, the unspeakable pain; it was as though I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me. . . . If His love was so great, and if He loved all his children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far? Why?

—James Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind”¹

What history demonstrated to Marx and Engels was that dialectical change was never a total negation of the conditions from which it generated, but a transformation of the meaning, intent, and directionality of the elements and forces of the preexisting whole.

—Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism*²

To say we *must* be free of air, while admitting to knowing no other source of breath, is what I have tried to do here.

—Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black*³

I need not look in the mirror or at the faces of my fellow men to find a likeness to God. I need only look at their selves and inside my own to realize we would not be killers if God Himself was not one, too.

—Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*⁴

¹ “Letters from a Region in My Mind,” *The New Yorker*, November 10, 1962, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>.

² Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 43.

³ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 338.

⁴ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (New York: Grove Press, 2016), 256.

Chris and his spouse settled on Redeemer for the most ordinary of things—though perhaps for the least common of reasons. He and Betsey wanted different lives for their children than what the world, or at least the wealthy Asian American part of it, had to offer. They found this at Redeemer. It took Chris years to realize that the world was “one hundred times bigger” than the small Christianity he grew up with, one that earlier had him on the model minority track.⁵ As an undergraduate at MIT, he was blown away when he heard about Christians dispossessing privilege for the joy of taking up residence in places like BVHP. “Tell me more” was his thought then. It would take a while for him to fully accept that such a life was better than what the model minority myth promised. He and Betsey hoped it would occur more naturally to their kids. They didn’t want them to start with the scales that only later fell off when Chris heard about systemic racism. They wanted their children to learn about racism at the same time they learned about God’s liberation, where the latter helped communicate the real problems of the former. As Chris and his friends now wrestled with where to educate their children and where to lead Redeemer’s next generation, they wanted their kids in the middle of those questions, pursuing scripts that would take them deeper into God’s economy.

We turn now to a leitmotif appearing throughout this book, children and education, and the question of hope in the context of racial capitalism. Accordingly, this chapter integrates two extended arguments regarding the origins and aspirations of the Redeemer microecology’s neighborhood school, Rise University Preparatory. An initial argument revolves around Rise Prep’s origins. A second deals with objections to its aspirations. Rise Prep, and by extension the Redeemer community, presented in terms of the best possible light of its aspirations, sets the stage for an extended engagement with Afropessimism with which this chapter concludes.

The school originates in flipping a particular script of the model minority myth. This script entails a pathway that secures upper-middle-class advantage as a uniquely Asian American rendition of the American Dream. The script revolves around education and it involves Asian American parents in actively hoarding educational opportunities to the benefit of their children. Two cases are given as examples. I argue that identarian modes of analysis, evacuated as they are of political economic content, prove insufficient for making out the morally salient features of the two cases. Discussions of

⁵ Author interview, May 27, 2020.

Asian Americans related to education have only indirectly related to questions of justice, mostly about whether affirmative action advantages or disadvantages Asian American representation.⁶ An antiracist approach that subordinates political economy to identity will be unable to avoid this because it separates questions of representation (specifically the representation of constituent identities) from questions of justice. Questions of justice are then hollowed out into questions about who is and who is not represented, where just representation involves mere presence in what amounts to a numbers game. A fuller conception of justice requires a fuller conception of representation, where just representation entails just distribution. Moving in this direction would reconceptualize representation as recognition and make recognition an issue of what political philosopher Nancy Fraser calls “participatory parity” where justice entails parity in relationship to cultural valuing and material distribution.⁷ An approach that subordinates identity to political economy’s entwinement of representation and justice makes representation an issue of redistribution. The identitarian approach knows not how to morally assess the demands of justice beyond the mere presence of people of color, committed as it is to identitarianism’s controlling constructive and deconstructive tasks. As such, it does not know how to take up the unsavory bits of Asian American life. It can only celebrate the mere presence of Asian Americans and count that as a victory over against whiteness (though, as already discussed, with the identitarian schemes race-ranking Asian Americans relative to other people of color). About the specific character of that presence it remains silent. We already saw this limitation in the identitarian reception of the Delta Chinese. Likewise, the educational leitmotif becomes about how immigrant Asian Americans succeeded in America despite a woefully uneven playing field. There is no question then about the terms of

⁶ For my treatment of Harvard University’s famous anti-Asian American affirmative action case, see Jonathan Tran, “‘The Spirit of God Was Hovering over the Waters’: Pressing Past Racialization in the Decolonial Missional Context; Or, Why Asian American Christians Should Give Up Their Spots at Harvard,” in *Can ‘White’ People Be Saved? Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, ed. Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramírez-Johnson, and Amos Yong (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 229–249.

⁷ Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003), 47. See also Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” *New Left Review* 212 (1995): 68–93; Nancy Fraser, “Recognition or Redistribution? A Critical Reading of Iris Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference*,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995): 166–180. For objections to Fraser’s “two-dimensional” conception, see Honneth’s companion essays in *Redistribution or Recognition* as well as Iris Marion Young, “Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser’s Dual Systems Theory,” *New Left Review* 222 (1997): 147–160.

that success. Nor do considerations arise about how the upper-middle-class wealth of subsequent-generation Asian Americans complicates that narrative. I try to get to those complications here by talking about educational opportunity hoarding, especially as it becomes one of the scripts by which Asian immigrants become Asian Americans. Rise Prep begins as Redeemer's Asian Americans flip this script, and thereby differently imagine Asian American life. In the same way that the identitarian approach misses Asian American opportunity hoarding, so it misses the moral accomplishment, and considerable costs, of refusing it.

I present opportunity hoarding as part of racial capitalism's aftermarket effects on education. Opportunity hoarding and its contribution to durable inequality are driven by *de facto* forces that conspire against black life even in the absence of sensationalized *de jure* racism. In the case of education, one finds, especially in San Francisco, sympathetic progressive elites purportedly committed to educational equity, believers in education as the great equalizer and the model minority success of immigrants as warranting such confidence. Yet the fact that it is more often than not liberal progressives who hoard opportunities to facilitate advantage over African Americans suggests that progressive sympathies arrive as wolves in sheep's clothing. Indeed, the inability of the most committed progressives to carry through on the promises of liberal modernity suggests that it is nonblack antiracists that should worry us the most. It is their missional posture and baked-in justifications that are likely to exact the greatest damage. This casts serious doubts on Redeemer's Rise Prep aspirations. Motivated by religiously-driven progressive ideas about the liberative ends of education, Rise Prep's Christian leaders and teachers might end up doing more harm than good. That is what turns out to be the case with an analogous BVHP school whose progressive aspirations only quicken its part in the school-to-prison pipeline at the heart of American antiblackness. In the second of half of this chapter, I use this case study to assess Rise Prep's aspirations. If those most committed to liberation only further harm black life, then perhaps the persistence of antiblackness reveals a reality we not only have failed to come to terms with, but perhaps constitutionally cannot bring into focus. "Afropessimism" styles itself as a mode of thought able to tell the truth about an ontological antiblackness at the core of a *libidinal* economy. By arguing that what makes any economy political are its core desires and by identifying antiblackness as the driving desire of liberal modernity, Afropessimism presents a direct challenge to my racial capitalist *political* economic framing and an indirect challenge to Rise

Prep. Concluding, I take up the challenge by offering an account of history where the church's material witness serves as the only Christian answer adequate to the challenge of black theodicy. Such an answer does not mean that Rise Prep will solve the problematic Afropessimism emblematises. Only that it must try.

Model Minority Hoarding

In the Fall of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic touched off a firestorm for the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). Lowell High, the district's most prestigious school, uses a competitive application process rather than SFUSD's usual lottery-based system. It has to in order to sort through all the students trying to get in. Lowell boasts the same elite status as public schools like New York City's Stuyvesant and New England's Boston Latin.⁸ For working-class and immigrant families who cannot afford private school educations (elected for an astonishing 25 percent of the city's children), Lowell's pathway to elite universities like Stanford and Cal is like gold.⁹ Each year two thousand students apply for six hundred coveted spots.

But COVID-19 blew up Lowell's usual application process. The pandemic's stay-at-home orders made a mess of the grades and standardized test scores the application uses to assess applicants. Given the messy state of things, SFUSD decided to throw out the competitive process altogether and seat Lowell's incoming class by lottery. A firestorm ensued. Parents protested that deserving students were getting a raw deal. Teachers worried that students wouldn't cut it academically. Alumni floated concerns about ruining the school's reputation. Others applauded the decision, seeing it as long overdue, a necessary check on the school's "country club" elitism.¹⁰ They pointed to Lowell's abysmal record with regard to matriculating and retaining black and brown students, who make up only 2 percent and 10 percent of the student body, respectively. In the middle of it all are Asian Americans, 61 percent

⁸ "The Daunting Struggle to Diversify Elite Public High Schools," *PBS NewsHour* (PBS, June 15, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVMmT9k5rYk&feature=emb_logo.

⁹ "Demographic Analyses and Enrollment Forecasts, San Francisco Unified School District" (Saratoga, CA: Lapkoff & Gobalet Demographic Research, Inc., February 16, 2018), <https://archive.sfsu.edu/en/assets/sfusd-staff/about-SFUSD/files/demographic-analyses-enrollment-forecast.pdf>.

¹⁰ For a sense of the comments attacking the lottery system, see John Rothman's podcast, "Lowell High School Entry Debate Turned Chaotic," October 14, 2020.

of Lowell's student body, dwarfing the 18 percent white population (similar trends occur at Stuyvesant and Boston Latin).¹¹

This wasn't the first time Asian Americans stood in the middle of a Lowell fight around race and school admissions. They had in fact helped create the current conflagration. Long after desegregation became the law of the land, San Francisco remained a segregated city, all the way into the 1970s. As discussed in Chapter 4, *de jure* and *de facto* forms of discrimination had long pushed African Americans to the city's margins. A series of measures sought to correct things and force schools across the city to desegregate. The measures utilized a two-pronged strategy. First, SFUSD got rid of school zoning, opting instead for a system based on parental choice that allowed families to choose according to need. Second, SFUSD mandated quotas and capped numbers so that racial groups were equitably represented and evenly distributed. The measures set in place a process that, at least in principle, mandated a significant African American presence and blocked whites from dominating. This would give the city's marginalized children a chance at what had hitherto been the exclusive possession of whites. Yet the strategy (beholden as it was to race thinking's founding white-black binary discussed in Chapter 3) had the unintended consequence of working against Asian Americans seeking admission to Lowell. Now they would need to additionally compete against other Asian Americans for a limited number of Asian American spots. The results were predictable. "From the beginning, Chinese parents had taken the lead in opposing the agreement; white parents who opposed it tended to leave the city. To fight this set-up designed to help black children, they boldly borrowed from the civil rights movement, setting up what they called private 'freedom schools'—it was brazen, really—to protest the new ethnic limits in the district."¹² Through *Ho v. SFUSD* (1994) Chinese Americans brought suit against the city, charging that the measures unfairly discriminated against them by making their admission to Lowell

¹¹ "Lowell High School Profile (2021) | San Francisco, CA," Public School Review, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/lowell-high-school-profile>. A remarkably similar drama played out simultaneously in Boston: "Asian American Educators Assn. Supports the Exam School Changes but Has Concerns and Proposals," *School Yard News*, November 10, 2020, <https://schoolyard-news.com/asian-american-educators-assn-supports-the-exam-school-changes-but-has-concerns-and-proposals-6405383f42b2>; Meg Woolhouse, "Citing Racial Inequities, Boston Public Schools Suspend New Advanced Learning Classes," WGBH, February 26, 2021, <https://www.wgbh.org/news/education/2021/02/26/citing-racial-inequities-boston-public-schools-suspend-advanced-learning-classes>.

¹² Joan Walsh, "A New Racial Era for San Francisco Schools: A Court Settlement Ending the City's 16-Year Experiment in Desegregation Marks Acceptance of California's New Racial Realities," *Salon*, February 19, 1999, https://www.salon.com/test2/1999/02/18/news_182/.

quantifiably harder.¹³ Eventually the city conceded and allowed Lowell's admissions to proceed without quotas and caps, now to be determined by the one thing complainants deemed acceptable: raw academic competition.¹⁴ Many Asian Americans celebrated the decision, while some lamented being again wedged against other people of color.¹⁵ In the decades that followed, Lowell's numbers would trend as some hoped and others feared, setting up the COVID-19 firestorm to come.

The five hundred people who joined the Fall 2020 Zoom meeting set to discuss the district's proposed lottery plan arrived with all this history behind them. People were not happy and let their feelings be known in what turned out to be an especially contentious meeting. A large contingent believed that the lottery system was not temporary at all.¹⁶ They saw identity politics exploiting COVID-19 in order to re-prosecute *Ho v. SFUSD*. The pandemic was being hijacked to replace Asian Americans with black and brown students—not the first time Asian Americans had gotten the short end of the stick, they argued. They reminded people that as late as 1947, segregation had shut Asian Americans out of the city's best schools. They questioned why their children should be penalized for working hard while less-deserving students were rewarded with something they could neither appreciate nor make use of. Others, while singing the praises of American meritocracy, railed against removing merit from consideration. The familiar language of "lowering standards" came up and the old prejudices spilled out. The clumsy code language brought objections about privilege and systemic racism, forcing into the open vulgar presumptions about who deserves what. One district leader described being "overcome by the ugliness" as personal threats were thrown about in the days to come. In something that came to epitomize the whole affair, a board

¹³ "HO BY HO v. SAN FRANCISCO" Leagle, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.leagle.com/decision/19981001147f3d8541875>; "The Ho v. SFUSD Case – The Battle to End Racial Discrimination in San Francisco Schools" (Asian American Legal Foundation), <https://www.asianamericanlegal.com/the-ho-v-sfusd-case-the-battle-to-end-racial-discrimination-in-san-francisco-schools/>.

¹⁴ Racy Ming, "Desegregation in a Diverse and Competitive Environment: Admissions at Lowell High School," *Urban Education* 37, no. 2 (2002): 173–192.

¹⁵ Jeff Chang, "On the Wrong Side: Chinese Americans Win Anti-Diversity Settlement—and Lose in the End," *ColorLines*, May 20, 1999, <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/wrong-side-chinese-americans-win-anti-diversity-settlement-and-lose-end>.

¹⁶ Indeed, these fears came to fruition as the district soon after ended Lowell's merit-based application process. See Jill Tucker, "S. F. School Board Strips Lowell High of Its Merit-Based Admissions System," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/S-F-school-board-strips-Lowell-High-of-its-15938565.php>.

member was caught in a hot-mic moment for all to hear, “I’m listening to a bunch of racists.”¹⁷

Not far across town, in Potrero Hill, where Chris and his friends live, a similar drama had been playing out. Potrero Hill embodies the city’s rapidly changing demographics. The area is the site of San Francisco’s largest and oldest housing project as well as home to a growing number of whites and Asian Americans whose wealth is gentrifying Potrero Hill. Nowhere are these tensions more alive than at Starr King, one of the area’s two public elementary schools. Often held up as the city’s most diverse, Starr King embodies all of the promise of San Francisco’s mixed-income, racially diverse, liberal-minded global culture. For much of its history, Starr King primarily served the area’s low-income children. But the addition of academically themed programs changed that. A Mandarin Immersion (MI) program quickly doubled Starr King’s student body by attracting a large number of Asian Americans looking for culturally inclusive educational opportunities.¹⁸ Combining the two populations made for a picture of diversity. Starr King now resembled, at least for some, the hard-fought win-win scenario long sought but rarely achieved by the city’s desegregation strategy.

A closer look reveals a different story. According to one inside report, “There is some small crossover of these demographics, but anyone who visits the school will quickly note the *de facto* segregation when looking at classroom lines in the morning or lunch tables at noon. Black and Brown bodies are separate from white and Asian ones, giving the school an appearance of something out of a new Jim Crow era. The achievement gap between students in the two programs is searing and, by some accounts, the worst gap within a single school in the entire district.” The same report claims that the school’s PTA (parent-teacher association) has been scheming to

¹⁷ Fifth & Mission, “A Battle over Lowell High School,” accessed December 8, 2020, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/a-battle-over-lowell-high-school/id1457274965?i=1000494691413>; Jay Barmann, “SF School Board Members Suggest Racism Is at Play in Blowup over Lottery Admissions for Lowell High,” *SFIST*, October 14, 2020, <https://sfist.com/2020/10/14/meeting-discussing-lottery-lowell-high-school-gets-chaotic/>; Ida Mojedad, “Proposal to Change Lowell Admissions Triggers Angry Response,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.sfexaminer.com/news/proposal-to-change-to-lowell-admissions-triggers-angry-response/>; Jay Barmann, “Fight over Lowell High School Admissions Escalates with Threatening Video Focused on Two Female School Board Members,” *Hoodline*, October 26, 2020, <https://hoodline.com/2020/10/fight-over-lowell-high-school-admissions-escalates-with-threatening-video-focused-on-two-female-school-board-members/>.

¹⁸ Jill Tucker, Heather Knight, and Greta Kaul, “Living Together, Learning Apart: Lessons on Desegregation,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/schools-desegregation-districts/?psid=3kN0W>.

direct resources away from its GE (General Education) program, which serves most of Starr King's black and brown kids, toward the MI program, which serves most of its white and Asian American kids.¹⁹ Ideally, GE and MI are supposed to work in tandem, not only pairing academic programs but also blending respective demographic populations.²⁰ However, over time MI's presence at the school began to exert its own gravity, consuming more than its share of resources. Little of this was intentional, coming mostly as a by-product of the school's new academic profile. But the intentional stuff was there too. The inside report portrays the PTA involved in a series of audacious appropriations of school funds and personnel. Many of the PTA leaders are, like their children, Asian American. Most consider themselves politically progressive and believe a merit-based system need not work against the interests of local black and brown children. Indeed, many are believers in education as the great equalizer and tout its benefits for working-class and immigrant families, even if that is not their story as subsequent-generation upper-middle-class professionals. Segregation here is not intentional and it is not driven by racial animus. It just happens. Or it just seems to happen. In reality, the gravity exerting all that influence has a history, serves a purpose, and follows a logic. It even has a face. The Asian Americans on Starr King's PTA don't mean to hurt black and brown children. They just do. Money, like race in America, moves in a certain direction. As one report on the city's schools stated, "Segregation extracts wealth and creates barriers that exclude people of color from various resources. It functions to hoard these resources among the groups that are included and restrict the access of the excluded groups."²¹ The only thing the report misses is how wealth segregates people of color and, at least in the case of Starr King, pits them against one another.

Starr King offers an example of what the previous chapter described as the antidemocratic forces that emerge as a function of gross inequality. One might think that wealth naturally generates concern for those whose needs

¹⁹ A. M. Hennessey, "Segregation, Wealth and Education: The Politics of Liberal San Francisco's 'Separate but Equal,'" CounterPunch, October 24, 2019, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2019/10/24/segregation-wealth-and-education-the-politics-of-liberal-san-franciscos-separate-but-equal/>.

²⁰ Since then, the school has rebranded the GE program around its own focused EXL "experiential learning" program. See "Academic Programs," Starr King Elementary, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.starrkingschool.org/academic-programs-1>.

²¹ "Racial Segregation in the San Francisco Bay Area," Othering & Belonging Institute, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/segregationinthebay>.

wealth is uniquely positioned to serve. At Starr King and Lowell, one finds the opposite to be true. It is not hard to see each—and both as representative of SFUSD more broadly—in terms of what sociologist Charles Tilly calls “opportunity hoarding” as a chief contributor to durable inequality. Tilly is interested in how inequality sustains itself despite our best efforts. He characterizes opportunity hoarding as networked systems that monopolize access to goods like education.²² Tilly is especially interested in how immigrants enact novel modes of opportunity hoarding while navigating standing opportunity hoarding—that is, how immigrants contend with the limited opportunities natives afford them. One of his most suggestive observations is that immigrants develop their American identities together with their unique modes of opportunity hoarding: to be X-American is to opportunity hoard as other X-Americans do and have. Tilly points to how immigrants (precisely by participating in niched networks bounded by ethnicity, language, and history) are identified and identify themselves through “the *creation of a category*” that endures as a racial identity (151). It is not necessarily problematic, Tilly thinks, for “modest” people to opportunity hoard in order to scratch out lives and identities under desperate circumstances. Opportunity hoarding only becomes problematic when “a resource-owning elite” develops protected networks that exploit their “favored” status in ways that contribute to durable inequality (154).

How, then, do we think about Asian Americans who hoard educational opportunities for their children? On the one hand we might excuse it as behavior immigrants adopt in order to get a leg up on the competition in an uneven playing field.²³ But what about Asian Americans operating under less-than-desperate circumstances? What if their respective immigrant families’ ability to successfully navigate that playing field has the advantage of putting them at a distance from the desperate circumstances faced by their parents? In this case, their parents’ “modest” opportunity hoarding has now landed them in a class of “resource-owning elites” whose opportunity hoarding trades on their “favored” status as model minorities. Situated among adjacent concerns, the push to secure resources now answers other obligations. Recall the revealing quote from Chapter 2, about familial piety

²² Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 155. Further citations will be noted in the text.

²³ See Laura Hamilton, Josipa Roksa, and Kelly Nielsen, “Providing a ‘Leg Up’: Parental Involvement and Opportunity Hoarding in College,” *Sociology of Education* 91, no. 2 (2018): 111–131.

charging Chinese Americans with vocational purpose: “I guess you can say it was part of the culture that you would have to leave each generation to get better. That was your charge. That is what Dad used to say, ‘You owe me. You owe me to be better than I was. My grandchildren will be better than you are.’”²⁴ If Tilly’s identity-forming niche conveys something of the form of Asian American hoarding, then particular concerns like familial obligation fill out its motivational content.

As argued in Chapter 1, the model minority refutation cottage industry has it right (over against those seeking to evacuate the myth of political economic content) that disaggregating Asian Americans from the myth’s crude misrepresentation reveals a great many Asian Americans who have not achieved model minority status (including BVHP’s growing number of working-class Asian immigrants). These Asian Americans labor under the myth’s disciplinary powers while also navigating the uneven playing field it mythologizes. If they should opportunity hoard, they do so for the “modest” reasons Tilly deems necessary. Accordingly do they participate in the narrative identity of all those whose path into the American Dream follows a similar trajectory. They become “Asian American” in just this way. The problem with the myth is that it removes from view these kinds of political economic features. One such feature is how the uneven playing field blocks some from ever achieving the American Dream. Another is how reaching the American Dream despite the uneven playing field involves some in opportunity hoarding, including forms of hoarding that are more problematic than Tilly lets on. With Chapter 2’s Delta Chinese, I attempted to get at some of the inherent problems. In Chapter 1 I worried that model minority myth refutations evacuated of political economic questions—focused instead on identarian considerations—would miss these aspects of Asian American existence. For them, Asian American identity can be separated from its political economic constitution. Opportunity hoarding matters very little in this mode of analysis. Under the identarian banners of diversity, inclusion, representation, multiculturalism, and the like, celebration of the mere presence of people of color precludes such eventualities from mattering as morally salient aspects of Asian American life. My thought is that such lives cannot be understood, much less properly celebrated, if the focus on diversity grants a free pass to less savory aspects of Asian American life. Economics historian

²⁴ Delta State Oral Histories Archives, Fay and Juanita Dong interview, May 1, 2000.

Richard Reeves says about opportunity hoarding, “The anticompetitive practices represent the tip of the iceberg in the overall opportunity structure. In the same way, they should act as important warning signs of what lies beneath.”²⁵ Telling the story of Asian Americans entails relating the ways Asian Americans have succeeded even when severely disadvantaged by opportunity structures, as well as the ways such structures have unfairly advantaged them. Without both, one will fail to recognize the unevenness of opportunities (Reeves’s “what lies beneath”), what it means to navigate them, and the moral witness of those who refuse problematic hoarding when given the chance. Each plays a role in the narrative identity of Asian Americans. But they will be lost from view should we bracket out the political economic questions.

When we look at opportunity hoarding of the kind Lowell and Starr King represent, we come to see the consequence of identarianism’s conceptually thin mode of analysis. It proves insufficient for making sense of what is happening in both cases. Its vaunted uplift of non-white bodies obscures the ways Asian Americans have opportunity hoarded on their way into the model minority myth. Antiracists should certainly show where and how the myth proves untrue, indeed mythical, as in the case of those many Asian Americans far removed from model minority status (e.g., BVHP’s working-class Asian immigrants). But what about those closer in? And what if their inroads have been paved by unjust benefits? And what if these pathways become part of the way Asian Americans gain standing and identity? What if this path becomes the means by which they become Asian American? Describing it (its discrete set of activities, networks, and narratives, what in Chapter 1 I called “the double-edged sword of refuting the model minority myth”) would then have the effect of filling out the identity of those who take this path just as claiming it would concretize the identity of those who successfully navigate it. Here we get to perhaps the most pernicious effect of the myth’s disciplinary power, not that many labor under its impossible expectations, but that some act unjustly in order to meet them. In such a way, Asian Americans become Asian Americans through the opportunity hoarding that is the model minority myth.

²⁵ Richard V. Reeves, *Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class Is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What to Do About It* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2017), 97.

Available Scripts

John Diamond and Amanda Lewis, in *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools*, pick up largely where Tilly left off, examining what opportunity hoarding looks like in regard to education and the managerial classes. They write, “white middle-class parents are not just advocating for their own children. They are also advocating for the maintenance of the structures of inequality that facilitate their advantage.”²⁶ One might read their study as suggesting that hoarding is a feature unique to white people as white people. But the study is better interpreted as showing how hoarding is a function of upper-middle-class privilege inextricably but not exclusively tied to whites.²⁷ Accordingly, hoarding becomes crucial for maintaining the benefits of class standing despite one’s race and despite one’s political views toward race and class. In this case the advantage is not pressed by white people explicitly against black and brown people as much as it is pressed for the sake of benefits to which they feel entitled as a function of the benefits racial capitalism uniquely bestows to them. They think explicitly in terms of those benefits, not in terms of another’s race for which their liberal sensibilities might very well show sympathy. Commitment to the benefits granted by the interwoven advantages of race and class keeps them from asking the question Lewis and Diamond think critical for a more just order: “How do we encourage folks to be committed to the common good and broader humanity? How do we encourage folks to act on the principle Dewey articulated—to get the community to advocate for all its children, not just their own children?”²⁸

The individualist benefits doled out by racial capitalism work directly against the ecological mindset discussed in the previous chapter. The long-term consequence is the very segregation that San Francisco’s desegregation measures were meant to overcome. Even as neighborhoods have grown more integrated, the city’s schools are more segregated today than they were in the 1990s. The drivers are the usual structural and systemic inequalities (e.g., transportation, work schedules, educational backgrounds, housing markets)

²⁶ Amanda E. Lewis and John B. Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 156.

²⁷ Consider the fascinating five-part *New York Times* podcast “Nice White Parents” with Chana Joffe-Walt.

²⁸ Lewis and Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions*, 164.

and the hoarders who exploit them. A recent *New York Times* assessment concluded that the parental choice system comprising the first of SFUSD's two-part desegregation strategy backfired along these lines: "Parental choice has not been the leveler of educational opportunity it was made out to be. Affluent parents are able to take advantage of the system in ways low-income parents cannot, or they opt out of public schools altogether."²⁹ In the Lowell case, Asian Americans lobbying for more spots combines with more diffuse realities that discourage black and brown children from applying at all. Structural and systemic forces answering to no one in particular conspire to create a scenario where some hoard opportunities others never even see. Even if it turns out that Asian Americans hoard opportunities for resources more than the resources themselves, the nature of the problem (i.e., hoarding in relationship to others) will mean that the distinction comes without a difference.³⁰ Quoting sociologist Prudence Carter, San Franciscans "are not thinking about the larger project of American democracy and being representative of the beautiful diversity of this country. That means you have to think grander, and beyond your own self-interest. So long as we live in an individualistic and self-interested country, we're going to probably continue to have this problem."³¹ Pressing the case for Asian American access as an issue of racial equity, as *Ho v. SFUSD* did, has the effect of separating out race from the political economy that gives race meaning ("Asian American" now the class of the crazy rich), in turn furthering the model-minority-myth-friendly impression that Asian American students share nothing in common (e.g., racial stigmatization, poverty, migrancy, limited English efficiency)

²⁹ Dana Goldstein, "San Francisco Had an Ambitious Plan to Tackle School Segregation. It Made It Worse," *New York Times*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/us/san-francisco-school-segregation.html>.

³⁰ For an analysis of how the differences play out, see Paul Hanselman and Jeremy E. Fiel, "School Opportunity Hoarding? Racial Segregation and Access to High Growth Schools," *Social Forces* 95, no. 3 (2017): 1077–1104. They write, "We find that Black and Hispanic students not only attend lower-achieving schools than Whites and Asians, but also attend schools with lower rates of learning. These results suggest some hoarding by advantaged groups of school learning opportunities, as measured by achievement growth. However, these disparities in learning opportunities are much less pronounced than disparities in students' initial advantages. Racial differences in growth-based school quality are much smaller than differences in achievement levels, both because there is less between-school variation in achievement growth, and because almost all variation in school growth is within rather than between racial groups. Our results imply that pre-existing learning differences weigh much more heavily than school opportunity hoarding in spatial between-race educational inequality" (1097).

³¹ Jeremy Adam Smith, "As Parents Get More Choice, S.F. Schools Resegregate," *San Francisco Public Press*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.sfpublicpress.org/as-parents-get-more-choice-s-f-schools-resegregate/>.

with black and brown students.³² We come, then, to another broad-scale aftermarket, one wedded to the housing issues discussed two chapters ago, that of education and the particular problems that come from refusing the ecological shape of moral life. Again, the issue is not with racism of the *de jure* kind we tend to sensationalize. More so it has to do with how racism comes on the back end of processes and commitments that make race a reliable excuse for unjust states of affairs. In the case of education, it is the individualist approach that leaves one, returning to Diamond and Lewis, “advocating for the maintenance of the structures of inequality that facilitate their advantage.”

In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, political scientist Robert Putnam sketches a dim picture of American cultural life as aggressively atomistic.³³ Putnam examines the dissolution of associational networks that had for many generations gathered communities around shared pursuits of the common good. Putnam’s work came in the stream of a number of empirical studies that demonstrated similar trends across broad swaths of American life.³⁴ More recently, in *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Putnam examines how the dissolution of associational community affects public education.³⁵ Putnam’s arguments from *Bowling Alone* and *Our Kids* coalesce in the realization that in educating our children, we are each left to our own devices, and because, as Piketty’s $r > g$ formula demonstrates, resources float downstream from severe historic and continuing racial inequality, an individualist approach only prepares the ground for hoarding and durable inequality.

We encounter again the three-step aftermarket process hit upon repeatedly in this book, another instance of the racial capitalist principle that exploitation begets exploitation:

1. Racialization facilitates pervasive thingification.

³² Calvin Cheung-Miaw’s “The End of ‘United People of Color’? Asian American Legal Theory and the Debate over Education Access in the 1990s” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Washington, D.C., 2021) shows how this is the case.

³³ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

³⁴ Most prominently, Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

³⁵ Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015). See also Elizabeth Aranda and Elizabeth Vaquera, “Racism, the Immigration Enforcement Regime, and the Implications for Racial Inequality in the Lives of Undocumented Young Adults,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 1 (2015): 88–104; Rosalind Chou, Kristen Lee, and Simon Ho, “Love Is (Color)Blind: Asian Americans and White Institutional Space at the Elite University,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 2 (2015): 302–316; Desmond and Western, “Poverty in America.”

2. Pervasive thingification produces standing opportunities for others to exploit.
3. Individuals exploit standing opportunities.

Notice that the third step presumes and perpetuates racialization in a vicious circle, thereby repeating and intensifying the process over and over (see Figure 6.1). Asian American opportunity hoarders, then, come downstream from momentous processes that carry the weight of history. In some cases, as discussed with Tilly, participation in aftermarket processes include a niched step by which opportunity hoarding contributes to Asian American identity formation (see Figure 6.2). Asking anyone to marshal the herculean effort it would take to refuse the opportunities and resultant identities conferred by these titanic forces seems too much to ask. In a culture where enveloping individualism comes hand in hand with the titanic forces, in which participation individuates constituent identity, the ask will likely not register. Perhaps the best one can hope for is Bobby Jue's regret (described at the end of Chapter 3). No wonder people would rather talk about individual racial identities.

SFUSD's controversial lottery system makes two exceptions for admissions to Lowell. Siblings of current Lowell students gain automatic admission, as do students who graduate from Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School,

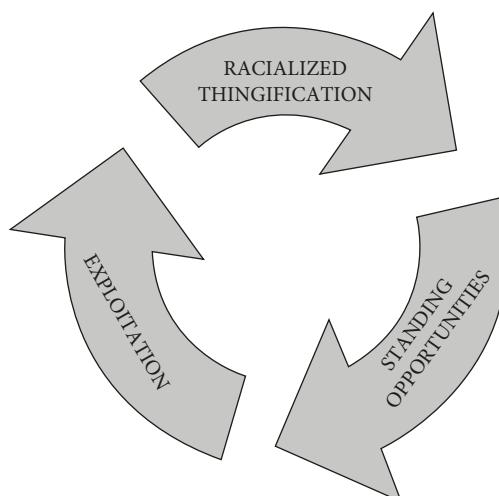


Figure 6.1 An aftermarket's vicious circle.

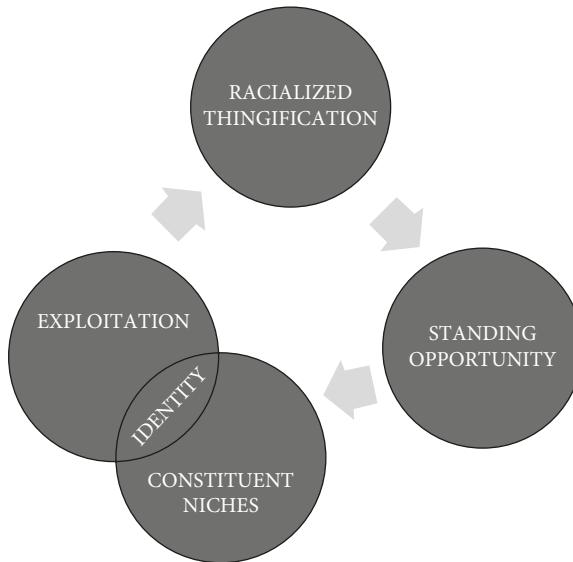


Figure 6.2 Opportunity hoarding and identity formation.

a new school located in an area that SFUSD has, in granting the exception, deemed especially marginalized, BVHP. Precisely the area where Juliette Chien started Rise University Preparatory School.

For a long time, Juliette didn't think of herself as Korean American. She rather saw herself as Korean. Despite growing up in Southern California, she didn't consider herself American. In high school, she curiously imagined a future life in Korea even though her entire life had been spent in America. "Korean American" and "Asian American" were labels she only later adopted. When she thinks back, she finds it all rather strange given how a life in Korea would have been, given her Americanness, "wildly untenable."³⁶ She now realizes that what Korea represented was something other than America. She didn't know what she was—maybe Korean? She just knew she didn't want to be American.

She grew up the only child of Korean immigrants. They lived in Orange County, the more conservative, whiter part of Greater Los Angeles. While not religious, her parents "wanted to be Christian," which meant sending Juliette to a small Christian elementary school. She later moved to the local public school. Through it all she recalls her education as entirely white, with

³⁶ Author interview, May 4, 2020.

but a handful of Asian Americans. Now looking at her high school yearbook, she realizes there were plenty of non-white people, especially Latinx students. She simply experienced her world as white. By high school her parents had indeed become Christians and the family of three attended a small Korean immigrant church. As a reprieve from her white world, the church was “a haven.” Like it did for Chapter 4’s Ann Kim, the church played the dual role of acclimating Juliette to Christianity and to Korean American life. The church offered a niched pathway (its own network bounded by ethnicity, language, and history) into America by becoming Korean American. And like Ann, Juliette didn’t feel completely at home in the Korean American church. Particularly at issue was her sense that the dual functions confused Christianity with Korean American culture—“the culture was mixed in” in ways she suspected impoverished Christianity’s promise and demands. Korean American Christianity made it hard to distinguish Christianity from the model minority variant of the American Dream which whiz kids like Juliette and Ann already exemplified. Similar to Ann’s and Chi-Ming’s stories, these tensions grew in proportion to her academic accomplishments. Her church viewed her Stanford-adorned academic success as a model of Christian faithfulness. She didn’t know how to articulate it then, but something seemed off about elite universities qualifying one for Christian-posterchild status.

But neither was Juliette interested in relinquishing her ethnic background and assimilating to an American culture abstracted from any particular identity. That sounded like reverting to the default white position everywhere around her. The friction she felt with the Korean American church was matched by the rub she experienced being American. She had the distinct sense that America didn’t want her, no matter what she accomplished. She noticed that her many successes failed to grant her entry into institutions and experiences seemingly preserved for *real* Americans. Getting into Stanford seemed more the exception than the rule. She watched less-successful kids get rewarded for lesser achievements as her accomplishments went unacknowledged. She recalls a senior banquet where her friend, far less accomplished and successful, went up time and again to receive awards that would be hers if she were white. She knew enough to recognize that her issue wasn’t envy so much as the dawning recognition of racist exclusion. She responded in kind. She “didn’t want to assimilate to a country that wasn’t that welcoming” and so she “rejected America back.”

Juliette's imagined future in Korea became a third way beyond two equally unlivable options. The first was perpetual exclusion. This path would put her on the outside of her own life in America. She would be here, but not. She would be forever shut out of institutions and experiences preserved for those *really* from America. The second was a model minority path lined with enough benefits to make for a vicarious American life. If the country didn't want her, she would force her way in, use her success to scratch out an alternate existence and identity. Stanford would kick things off. The future procured by a Stanford degree would open other doors. Being "a credit" to Koreans would be an added bonus. Her success would outflank the racism, her class would circumvent her race. She would outsmart and outwork the exclusion, getting ahead of it until her success procured those things America withheld from her. She would get into America like she got into Stanford, earning her way in. This route would put her on the path of graduating from Stanford, pursuing a successful career as an attorney in San Francisco, moving into Potrero Hill, sending her kids to Starr King, joining the PTA, and hoarding opportunities to ensure her children's own model minority inclusion. Because she had not chosen a materially committed antiracist path where representation requires redistribution, she would not concern herself with how the school's opportunity structure systemically disadvantaged other kids. She would content herself knowing that her kids' Asian American identities contributed to the school's diversity numbers.

Juliette's imagined but wildly untenable Korea represented something beyond this false alternative to perpetual exclusion. Interestingly, it was Christianity that saved her from the path of model minority inclusion. The tensions she felt with her church helped her realize that fulfilling the myth did little to repudiate American racism, instead only cloaking it as her success got appropriated to the myth's disciplinary powers—in the forensic language of Chapter 1: "Here is a racial minority whose Stanford diploma proves that American racism is not so bad that no minorities can succeed." Her kids would similarly be made to get in on the act, serving as their own wedging models for how Starr King's black and brown kids should similarly succeed, opportunity hoarding and all. God's justice and mercy seemed to demand and promise something more, enlivening Juliette to a different world. All those Stanford IVCF experiences at places like Oakland Urban Project came to a head after graduation when she happened upon a job at a Christian school in San Francisco, which she found more attractive than the

law school internships mapped out for her by the model minority route. Even though she had never considered teaching, she knew it was for her. She loved it, got a teaching credential, made a career of it, and decades later started Rise University Preparatory School. As they watched her leave behind a script that made her legibly Korean American, her parents “hated every decision I made since I got to Stanford.” Little did they realize that their own immigrant stories had opened the door for those choices. Especially painful for Juliette was the realization that choosing a different path didn’t simply mean a different career (i.e., teaching versus lawyering) in a distant locale (i.e., San Francisco versus Orange County) but increasingly a different life, one separate from her parents. It would be its own wildly untenable life.

Daniel Kim too left behind the myth’s script for being Asian American. To even greater consequences. He remembers a latchkey childhood where his immigrant parents worked all the time. He “lived into the Asian American model minority myth” by succeeding in sports and academics. “I used that as a safeguard for a while,” staving off what could feel like perpetual loneliness. Akin to Juliette’s experience, Daniel found problematic the Christianity on offer at the large Korean American church he attended with his family in Los Angeles, where success was equated with the luxury cars in the church parking lot. It bothered him when his church appropriated his academic success to its spiritualized version of the American Dream. He wanted to be both Korean American and Christian but not in the way the church seemed to conflate them. At Stanford he encountered a far different Christianity. And a far different way of being Asian American. One Saturday morning he found an Asian American student spread out on the dorm bathroom floor cleaning up someone else’s drunken vomit. When Daniel asked why he bothered with other people’s messes, the response came back, “Because that’s what Jesus would do.” A new path opened up.

I saw the Korean American church where you had the church life and then you had the secular life that they led on non-Sundays, you know, and then just the mix of the American story with the gospel. Driving BMW, Mercedes, Lexus [cars] to church and it was really about, “What car do you drive to get to church?” That was disturbing to me. And so when I got to college and had this experience where I saw my brother cleaning up vomit, that made an impact on me. That made me more serious about, “Who is this Jesus? Why would this fellow student do this?”

He would be part of the small IVCF contingent comprised of Chi-Ming (eventually his roommate at Stanford), Juliette (eventually his partner at Rise Prep), Ann (eventually his spouse), and others who wound up at Oakland Urban Project learning about relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. At an IVCF weekend conference, he heard God calling him to give up medical school and the upward trajectory inscribed in his parents' dreams for his Stanford degree. Apprising them of his new path would come at some cost. Upon hearing his plan to forgo medical school, his dad told him in no uncertain terms, "Don't call. You're not my son." Daniel had rejected the model minority myth version of the American Dream, and through his father it reciprocated. If he was not a pre-med Stanford student, if he was not a model minority, if not a Korean American Christian, if he was not his father's son, then who was he?³⁷ Like Juliette, he found himself without a plan or a recognizable identity in a world where the model minority myth promised both. He had chosen a different path and would now need to find a different way of being Korean American. It would come with discovering a different way of being Christian—one that came with a great many demands and promises, one that would take him to margins beyond the ones he already knew. America would not be his home. Not really. But neither would Korea, and certainly not a path that traveled through Stanford and ended with hoarding resources through the local PTA. He would be given a home with BVHP's children and an oddball group of Christians, because, as he came to believe, that's what Jesus would do.

Rise University Preparatory School started at the convergence of two overlapping needs. First was BVHP's need for quality education for its children. Second was the need Juliette, Daniel, and others felt for finding a home as Asian American Christians. If it wasn't going to be the usual model minority scripts, then what? At Rise Prep these needs found one another.

While BVHP now has a new school in Willie L. Brown Jr., for a long time it had far less. In the years before Willie L. Brown Jr. opened, SFUSD had shut down the existing school because it was plagued with problems.³⁸ From the time Redeemer folks started investing in BVHP, there was "always a discussion about the need for quality education in the Bayview. We definitely heard that as one of the top concerns in the neighborhood from folks who

³⁷ Author interview, June 2, 2020.

³⁸ About Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School, see Nina Gaensler-Debs, "Is San Francisco's New 'Dream' School Living up to Its Potential?" *KALW*, May 26, 2016; Daniel Duane, "How the Startup Mentality Failed Kids in San Francisco," *Wired*, June 28, 2018.

have been in the neighborhood for a long time and their frustration with the neighborhood schools.”³⁹ As regular volunteers they had witnessed the problems firsthand. Over the years they watched the SFUSD school board try to contend with the problems. They considered sending their kids to the BVHP school before it became clear it would not last. As they moved closer to BVHP, their kids remained at public schools in nearby Excelsior. There, educational experiences varied, sometimes awful and sometimes quite good; either way it helped them understand the student experience in SFUSD’s economically stressed districts. And as teachers they well understood the challenges of resourcing underserved communities. Along with their BVHP neighbors they could continue to agitate for structural and systemic change at the district level. In the meantime, however, generations of students were being passed over. Juliette’s question, to herself as much as others, became, “What to do with the kids right now?”

For nearly two decades Daniel taught English at a public high school in the Sunset district. At Lincoln, he was popular with students, many of whom were Asian Americans who gravitated toward him as a role model. He also played significant leadership roles among the faculty. Between his job as a teacher and Ann’s as a public health doctor, they were living out their calling to the city. But the limitations were evident. The classroom allowed him to exercise a good deal of influence, and he used his time with students to create affirming learning environments. But he could only do so much. He could not control what took place in other classes, much less what happened for students before and after school. After Stanford, somewhat to appease his parents, Daniel did graduate work at Harvard (“Harvard Ed” could be made to sound like “Harvard Med”) and there he learned about structural and systemic injustice and public education’s role in fostering and challenging it.⁴⁰ He studied texts like Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and wondered about the relationship between education and liberation.⁴¹ Because of IVCF’s

³⁹ Author interview, May 4, 2020.

⁴⁰ During my time with the church, Daniel’s father passed away from COVID-19 complications. At the time, he had been suffering from dementia, which put him in and out of memory care facilities, further exposing him to the virus as it ravaged Southern California in the winter of 2020–2021. In the years after Daniel’s decision to forgo medical school, their relationship improved as Daniel and Ann set down roots of their own. Daniel’s father again claimed Daniel as his son. At the funeral, hosted distantly by Redeemer, Daniel spoke about his father’s gentle love for his and Ann’s children and about the role his father allowed him to play at the end of his life. After the funeral, Daniel’s mom said about Redeemer, “Your church, they’re like family.”

⁴¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

influence and his experience at Grace Fellowship and Redeemer, liberationist thought and Christianity commingled in his teaching philosophy, issuing in the same conclusions about how he should lead his life and the ends to which he should teach. As for the day-to-day realities, however, the structures and systems, including the many unjust ones, were much bigger than his influence as a teacher. He saw how his school and his colleagues, despite their heroic efforts, got stuck within processes and commitments that made something like a pedagogy of the oppressed unlikely. He was quite happy to influence the students who found in him a role model on their way to places like Stanford and Cal, but he also worried about the kids, Asian American or otherwise, who never found role models and would never graduate high school. The burdens weighed on him. Nearly two decades into teaching he noticed that the “highs were a lot shorter and the lows were a lot longer.” He knew that something structural and systemic was needed, but also that the “ship was too big to move. I could try to do whatever I could, but it wasn’t going to change.”

Juliette began thinking about starting a school almost as soon as she started teaching. She taught at the private Christian school that first lured her away from law school. Later, when she sought out a public inner-city school, “that job was easy to get” because so few wanted it. She found virtues in each setting, but wondered about the benefits of combining the resources and vision of a religious school with public education’s commitment to social justice. She dreamed about a shared economy that would redistribute local resources for the common good of educating neighborhood children, ideally what public education seeks to do but increasingly what only private schools can. She was frustrated by the way Christians kept resources to themselves by sending their kids to private religious schools, neither investing in local communities nor seriously inviting others in. She wondered about a school that might “not just serve Christian families but serve the community in general.” Yet she was also put off by the narrow vision of education in public school curriculums. Shouldn’t Christians use resources to serve their neighbors, rather than privatizing on the one hand and opportunity hoarding on the other? Shouldn’t those committed to education seek to educate the whole child, which in her mind had to include a vision for moral leadership, character formation, and ethical responsibility? The idea couldn’t possibly be to educate children so they could get into Stanford and leave their communities behind. She wasn’t interested in turning out more model minorities nor transferring the myth’s disciplinary powers onto black and brown children.

And shouldn't those who follow Jesus follow him where he already is, *preferentially* with the poor?

Juliette started asking these questions in her mid-twenties while at Grace Fellowship. Back then she even broached something like a Rise Prep with Pastor Appleby. But it would take years of volunteering, moving (along with other Redeemer families) into local neighborhoods, sending their kids to area public schools, and Dayspring relocating to fully realize the opportunities BVHP presented. Juliette recalls Pastor Danny's specific call to Redeemer: "The church as a whole is called to the Bayview. We haven't just come here by accident or without meaning. The doors have opened and God has led us here."⁴² God's plan now seemed to be coalescing into something specific. Over the years, a number of teachers had joined Redeemer. As Grace Fellowship inspired computer engineers to start Dayspring, Redeemer's educators now seemed on the cusp of something similar. Juliette thought maybe she and Redeemer, like Esther in the Bible, found themselves in BVHP "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14, NRSV). Maybe it was more than coincidence that they were all there together, that she was married to a business owner who had already jumped through the bureaucratic hoops of creating an independent entity in the city. It seemed more than an accident that Redeemer had important relationships with local black church pastors in what just happened to be the city's most densely Christian area. When she thinks back to Rise Prep's humble beginnings, she realizes it was circumstances like these lining up, rather than some grand vision, that got things going. It began with processes and commitments that had long characterized Redeemer Community Church, well before they knew where circumstances would take them. Its origins could be traced back further still, to when she and Daniel, each in their own ways in separate parts of Greater Los Angeles, wondered about different scripts for being Korean American. Now together in Black San Francisco, they felt committed to their neighbors, many of whom were or had children (who were African American, Latinx, and increasingly Asian American). They could go on tutoring in their off-hours and agitating for change where change could be had. Or they could quit their day jobs and go all in. The world had opened up for them and the path seemed clear. When their mentors at BVHP's black churches affirmed their calling and started campaigning on their behalf, they knew they were on the right track.

⁴² Author interview, May 4, 2020.

Things started with Juliette, Daniel, and Jeff Boyd. Jeff had been teaching for years at a well-to-do private school while attending Redeemer. Jeff brought in his colleague Tim. After college, Tim had taught for a few years before he and his spouse left for Ghana to teach at a missionary school. Soon after arriving, they discovered that the Christian missionaries there were more interested in the creature comforts of teaching in Africa than resourcing children. They were familiar enough with postcolonial thought to read the writing on the wall, and left. After returning to California, Tim hooked up with Jeff and the others and became part of the core four that started Rise Prep. Tim traveled all the way to Africa to realize that what he had been looking for was in his own backyard in San Francisco.

We've really been blessed by being a part of that community and seeing it grow. And there's been challenges along the way. There's a lot of long days and long hours. And just heartache. I think in terms of feeling for the students and situations that they're in at certain times. But then there's also been a lot of great joys and victories along the way. It's seeing student growth. And so yeah, I can definitely see how the Lord has brought me into this school, and I've been kind of restored and encouraged.⁴³

It would be the four of them, two whites and two Asian American Stanford alum who had severely disappointed their parents. They would be joined by African American staff and intentionally gather a board of African American leaders. In a city where private schools charge over \$33,000 a year for tuition, Redeemer's redistributive microecology made it possible to provide high-quality private school educations while charging student families \$2,100.⁴⁴ They leaned on their BVHP mentors for recruitment and leadership and developed new partners with city leaders, including the NBA championship basketball team, the Golden State Warriors. The first year, Rise Prep barely reached its goal of enrolling twenty students. But as word spread, they added a new class each year until the 2020 COVID pandemic slowed their momentum. When they graduated their first middle-school class as the nation faced a racial reckoning following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Brionna Taylor, and

⁴³ Author interview, May 7, 2020.

⁴⁴ "Top San Francisco, CA Private Schools (2021)," accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.privateschoolreview.com/california/san-francisco>.

George Floyd, they claimed their graduation “a protest movement for black life.”⁴⁵

For Rise Prep’s leaders, there would be plenty of difficult lessons regarding what it means to teach black and brown kids, of relinquishing their presumptions and privileges and confronting the challenges their kids face on a daily basis. Each of the core four had to confront her or his prejudices, and the ways racial capitalism advantaged them in systems of opportunity hoarding that directly affect their students. Juliette, as Head of School, came to fuller recognition of the advantages afforded her as an Asian American racial minority and the deficits of being otherwise racialized. School discipline, a complex issue in any school and one we return to later, presented challenges here too. As a private school they had the benefit of kids whose families self-selected into Rise Prep. As well, dealing with classes of twenty students allowed processes of reconciliation to develop where students work out together how to get along. Still they continue to wrestle with what “culturally appropriate discipline looks like,” recognizing the trappings of their own premises and expectations. As well they have had to deal with prejudices directed toward them. Save for the efforts of local mentors championing their cause, they would have little legitimacy in the area and the presumptions made about them as *wannabe* white saviors (as Asian American they hadn’t even the status of white saviors) were challenges they would only overcome insofar as they actually benefited the local community.

They will need to raise much more money in the years ahead. Daniel takes the lead here. In the beginning the twenty-student budget was raised entirely from within the Redeemer ecology. But as the school expanded, they needed to develop new income streams. Now, over half of Rise Prep’s annual budget comes from people much less directly connected to Redeemer and BVHP. As it pushes out to include more classes and eventually a larger campus, the budget will grow into the millions of dollars and they will need to significantly increase their donor base. This has forced Daniel to reconsider how he thinks about wealthy people, including those who might have opportunity hoarded their way into the very money they now share with Rise Prep, people who donate large sums of money out of socially progressive values while driving fancy cars to church.

Tim directs admissions. The school’s policy is to reserve 80 percent of its spots for students who fall into one of three categories: BVHP residents,

⁴⁵ Rise Prep Graduation, May 30, 2020.

first-generation college students, and low-income. Most Rise Prep students satisfy all three. Given the school's location, admissions decisions have not yet needed to take race into consideration. Drawing from the local community, the school is almost entirely African American and Latinx. This will likely change as BVHP's poorer Asian Americans catch wind of the largely free private school down the street. The admissions process uses a simple application that requests demographic information, a recommendation from a prior teacher, and a short essay. Tim says the most important part of the process is the point when the applicant comes to the school and talks, often nervously, about whether Rise Prep fits their needs. Last year, of the twenty-five students who completed the process, twenty were accepted to the new class.

The school's curricular goals are relatively straightforward. Rise Prep is a university preparatory school. They expect 100 percent of their (eventual) high school graduates to go to four-year universities. With the highly regarded University of California as a benchmark, they use a common core curriculum that aims to meet University of California admissions standards. They supplement that curriculum with additional material taught by special guests, like community members who can teach mural art or "lyrical opposition" that combines poetry and rap music and local pastors who teach about Christian social justice. They watch as students learn to "code-switch" between school and home life, something Juliette and Daniel are quite adept at, having spoken Korean at home while thriving as English speakers in school. This is all part of a pronounced curricular effort to incorporate both "classical Western literature" with the ethnic literatures each of the core four themselves learned in their undergraduate and graduate educations.

While Rise Prep is explicitly religious and many students come through BVHP churches, there is little formal religious classwork. There will be when the school builds out its high school curriculum. Until then, the school is focused on getting their kids the educations they need to get into places like Cal. Ironically, a common complaint the leaders face comes from BVHP's heavy Christian culture, that there is not more explicit religious teaching. But here, their secular educations and their involvement in San Francisco's liberal culture, and likely their experiences with Western imperialism and American racism, encourage them to proceed with caution. If they can serve the children and their families with educations that practically reflect God's justice and mercy, then they will have earned the right to teach Christianity more explicitly. For the time being they are more than content with letting their practical service teach their Christian values. Plus, they are extremely

aware that they are mostly non-black and non-brown adults teaching mostly black and brown children, and so want to steer clear of pushing religion in ways reminiscent of Christianity's colonialist legacy. The school commits to its broader mission about God's justice and mercy, and they won't be satisfied with students "being successful so you can make a lot of money and change statistics." They just don't think that God's justice and mercy can be taught abstracted from things like good schools, jobs, and equitable institutions.

Juliette and Daniel are finally home—or at least closer to it. The conviction of their lives and the needs of their neighborhood coalesced for them in a certain life with BVHP's children. It is not in Korea. Nor is it the America most of us know. And it is not the wildly untenable opportunity hoarding of the model minority myth. The path they've taken offers a different script, something they think Jesus would do.

Abolition and Theodicies of Quietude

Chapter 5's claim that creation is ordered to God's justice and mercy means to encourage the work of liberation by locating it in the deep truth of things where it will come to something rather than nothing. How and when that work comes to something is a different matter. Liberationists proceed in faith that their work will come to something but with no guarantees of how and when, which raises the question of political hope.

One way to assess Rise Prep's aspirations—say, its hopes—is through the abolitionist paradigm offered in Savannah Shange's *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*. The book takes the form of an ethnographic study of Robeson Justice Academy. Robeson is a pseudonymously named BVHP public school committed to progressive ideals like social justice, racial equality, and liberation.⁴⁶ Shange simultaneously describes the school as "probably the best place to send your kid as a Black parent in San Francisco" and the "bastion of state-funded progressivism" where the "lash has been most deeply internalized" (102). *Progressive Dystopia* means to test whether Robeson's progressive agenda measures up to its liberative vision, or whether it only rehearses, except with a progressivist stamp of approval, the regular circuits between public schools

⁴⁶ Savannah Shange, *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). Citations will be noted in the text.

and privately managed prisons, “the routing and rerouting of power through the uneven, interlocked mechanisms of state, private funders, and civil society” (14). Shange’s assessment assumes as its point of departure a problematic disconnect between Robeson’s lofty ambitions and a student disciplinary record that penalizes African Americans at disproportionate rates: “Despite [its] public stance of opposition to racial bias, Robeson had the district’s highest suspension rate for Black students, as well as far higher rates of disciplinary referrals and expulsions. How, then, do we reconcile Robeson’s exceptionally punitive disciplinary practices with its institutional narratives of social justice and liberation as exceptional?” (2; see also 84–85). Discipline leads to academic failure and expulsion, returning gifted students attracted to Robeson to BVHP streets where they get in trouble, arrested, imprisoned, and sometimes killed. If Robeson’s progressivism turns out to produce the same realities as every other school—if “social reform practices, particularly those that target inequities in communities of color, can perpetuate anti-black racism even as they seek to eliminate it” (14)—then one must question whether its progressivism does much at all to challenge racial capitalist aftermarkets dominating every corner of the political economy. Shange organizes the book around seven instances of what progressives count as “wins” which upon further review turn out to be significant losses. Shange seeks to carry out an assessment that involves Robeson in an amazing balancing act in its “dual role as site and strategy of anti-racist struggle” between “centrist progressives and radical leftists, whereby the former insists on the recovery of the state and the latter are dubious of its legitimacy” (27, 63, and 98). How does one count wins as genuine wins while keeping track of losses along the way, as well as possibilities that lie beyond?

Progressive Dystopia raises the ominous possibility that schools like Robeson, and similar reparative projects like Rise Prep, serve as but a cultural variant of the same state-sponsored capitalism exploiting and expropriating on the basis of devised racial identities. If even progressive institutions like Robeson stamp BVHP’s children as unfit for education and better served by police and prisons, then indeed they as much as the illiberal systems that inspire them are part of the problem, “its story is fundamentally a state romance—‘social justice’ means living happily ever after with the antiracist, distributive state” (4). Rather than challenge racial capitalism, Robeson, despite the heroic efforts of its staff, further legitimizes it. Progressive liberals will prefer the Robesons of the world insofar as their liberal sensibilities prefer their racial capitalism cultured rather than uncultured, liberal rather

than illiberal, progressively dystopic rather than conservatively so. The result of Shange's incisive analysis is not simply an evaluative paradigm that places liberative action on a continuum between progressivism and abolition but also one that shows how progressivism eventually requires abolition. What Robeson amounts to is the state's compulsory inculcation into racial capitalism. Public education becomes the core process and commitment necessary for making unsuspecting individuals into good racial capitalist citizens. Hence does Shange conclude, "I fell out of love with the place I had poured hope into" (155).

Rise Prep exists not only in the same city as Robeson, but in the same area of San Francisco, both set in and vocationally called to BVHP. Like Robeson, Rise Prep boasts a progressive liberative agenda and gears its social justice mission specifically toward the racial uplift of BVHP's black and brown children. Both Rise Prep and Robeson define themselves over against surrounding educational opportunities, or lack of opportunities, epitomized in this chapter by the scenarios playing out at Lowell High School and Starr King Elementary. The differences between Robeson and Rise Prep, specifically as related to Rise Prep's religious identity and mission, also prove instructive, illuminating a question that the case study of the Delta Chinese raised: What difference, if any, does the Christianity make? In the case of the Delta Chinese, the Christianity seemed to make little difference in how the Delta Chinese business model operated and in how the Delta Chinese Christians understood themselves (and their neighbors) as proprietors of the model. If anything, the Christianity made things worse, spiritually endorsing the model as if God enabled its success. The same dynamic applied to Rise Prep—especially as I have presented it in terms of its aspirations (that is, in the best possible light)—would serve as the religious analogue to the cultural capitalism driving Robeson's mission. Just as Robeson's progressivism granted the school's disproportionate disciplinary apparatus the imprimatur of liberal endorsement, so might Rise Prep's religiosity permit its losses a veneer of respectability. Once again would ideology provide cover. Consider first the city's ongoing redevelopment projects (the city's "brutal history of displacement and gentrification" already recounted in Chapter 4), one that began as soon as the Great Migration started bringing African Americans to the city, one that has systematically pushed African Americans out of San Francisco. From that perspective one can see how the ideology works to justify expropriative policies tied to restrictive housing covenants, regular incarcerations, and forced migrations, what Shange aptly calls "the

carcerality of Frisco geography” (24). The similarities between the two mean that assessing Rise Prep using *Progressive Dystopia*’s progressivism/abolition paradigm clarifies stakes. At the end of the day Robeson’s losses, and the way those losses are tied into its antiracist mission, raise the question of whether something beyond progressive repair is needed. Something like abolition. She quotes critical theorist Jared Sexton’s account of abolition: “Abolition is the interminable radicalization of every radical movement, but a radicalization through the perverse affirmation of deracination, an uprooting of the natal, the nation, and the notion, preventing any order of determination from taking root, a politics without claim, without demand even, or a politics whose demand is ‘too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds’” (13).⁴⁷ For Sexton, abolition is an appropriate way to think about eventualities like Robeson’s school-to-prison pipeline, in the same way that abolition was the right way to think about American chattel slavery. Central to Sexton’s thinking is the notion that the same antiblack conditions that obtained during slavery, where abolition was the only appropriate response, obtain today.

Stepping back in order to take in the “Afropessimist” vision informing Shange’s analysis will help us assess Rise Prep’s prospects as well as that of my broader deep economy account. As will be seen, Afropessimism exerts a great deal of pressure on my account, forcing its own abolitionism to come to light. The divine economy envisions history eschatologically, which shares important similarities with the abolitionist posture Shange adopts from Afropessimism. Triangulating the three (my deep economy account related to Christianity’s eschatological abolitionism and Shange’s Afropessimist inclinations) highlights the productive tensions of trying to balance abandoning harmful structures and systems while also working within and around them, searching out corridors where fugitive futures avail themselves.⁴⁸ For Shange, this exists in the literal hallways of Robeson Academy. I’ll attempt to show how similar tensions and possibilities exist in Redeemer’s parallel existence at the byways of the racial capitalist nation-state. Each attempts to maintain a precarious balance, where the productive possibilities arise only inasmuch as the tensions are productively inhabited. In order to

⁴⁷ Jared Sexton, “The Veil of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign,” *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (2014): 583–597 (593).

⁴⁸ One thinks here of David Kyuman Kim’s “religious imagination: the faculty and ability to envision and to enact a new life” from *Melancholic Freedom: Agency and the Spirit of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 104.

get there, I first delineate Afropessimism's central concepts and then I relate them to William Jones's classic account of black theodicy. Jones, especially as read through Lewis Gordon's critique of Afropessimism, shows us what is helpful and unhelpful about the abolitionist posture, especially in regard to a vision of history sufficiently attentive to the singularity of antiblack suffering. I then return to Shange to show how she better holds the tension and accordingly minds the remaining possibilities. This will give us a framework to interpret Rise Prep as abolitionist according to Christianity's eschatological view of history.

I begin with religious scholar William David Hart who talks about being "skeptical of the traditional Marxist view of racism that reduces it to a capitalist ideology, a historically contingent strategy of labor management and social control. The nastiness of antiblackness exceeds the theoretical needs [of] capitalism. It works at a level much deeper than ideology."⁴⁹ Hart's critique of Marxism and attraction to Afropessimism proves accordingly relevant for the framing I have been developing in this book. I have been arguing that racism functions as ideological justification for dominative exploitation. While I thematize racial capitalism theologically by narrating its ideologically facilitated domination and exploitation as privation of a more fundamental political economy, the Θεία ουκονομία's deep economy, still the story largely follows the Marxist line Hart finds wanting. In Part I, I historically grounded my account of racial capitalism through historians of capitalism who trace the convergence of American capitalism and American chattel slavery. Recall, then, that I quoted historians Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman's harrowing observation that among capitalism's many innovations, "no technology was more important than the whip."⁵⁰ I traced racial capitalism from its co-emergence with chattel slavery and its continuation as aftermarket installations as an enterprise devoid of human regard. I described how racial capitalist technologies innovated—through language games revolving around instruments like the whip—a conceptual apparatus that hardened around metaphors mobile enough to be projected into ever new contexts, endlessly able to justify anything and everything. I spoke about the psychological effects rendered by chattel's ideological justifications of dehumanizing brutality and cruelty that can be experienced as cathartic

⁴⁹ William David Hart, "Constellations: Capitalism, Antiblackness, Afro-Pessimism, and Black Optimism," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (2018): 5–33 (15).

⁵⁰ Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

pleasures churned out through ritualized cycles whereby the morally impossible was made possible, the human soul bent to find sadistic pleasure. In other words, I attempted to describe how slavery's barbarism was not an accidental and otherwise regrettable feature of racial capitalism, but rather intrinsic to and characteristic of its ideological and practical operations. Later I presented the Delta Chinese business model as an extension of that political economy. As an aftermarket installation, the business model did not exact the same kinds of dehumanizing brutality and cruelty, but it did presume them, taking advantage, wittingly or not, of a situation where the ongoing history of those barbarisms facilitated conditions that the Delta Chinese exploited. Dominated and exploited in their own ways, the Delta Chinese had little power to challenge the political economy, but neither did they refuse its benefits and privileges. The Delta Chinese entered a world dominated by racial metaphors thickened through Delta life. For the Delta Chinese the color line demarking "whites" and "blacks" coded where they could live, open their stores, and educate their children. It was their genius to exploit this political economy inasmuch as it exploited them. I have argued throughout that racial capitalism did not begin with ontological designations of humanness, which the Delta Chinese may or may not have adopted, so much as devise operations monstrous for their inhumanity, operations in which the Chinese immigrants did in fact participate through their exploitations and sufferings. Again, the tragedy here comes not in certain flawed ontological premises and their unfortunate consequences, but in the casualness that comes in dehumanizing those one cannot fail to recognize as human.

But Hart is not so sure. The nastiness of antiblackness exceeds what Marxist explanations like mine attribute to labor/property schemes epitomized in my reading of Beckert and Rockman's account of the whip. He doubts not that racial capitalism is capable of chattel slavery's brutality and cruelty but rather that racial capitalism fully explains them.

Hart continues, "Antiblackness, in short, is not *merely* a historical contingency. It is about more than capital accumulation and class rule. Antiblackness is ontological: a structuring reality, part of Western metaphysics. Thus, traditional Marxist categories cannot comprehend the tenacity of this antblack nastiness. This constitutive lack makes a non-Marxist supplement necessary."⁵¹ By "a non-Marxist supplement" Hart means how

⁵¹ Hart, "Constellations," 15.

Afropessimism extends the racial capitalist analysis toward an ontological framework capable of explaining antiblackness.

The Afropessimist “supplement” Hart endorses and Shange implements surfaces through five nested concepts. First, antiblackness is best understood not in terms of a political economy (thereby functioning to justify domineering exploitation, as the present book argues) but rather in terms of *libidinal economy*.⁵² Extending Freudian and Lacanian concepts, “Afropessimism” as coined by critical theorist Frank Wilderson III in tandem with Sexton, imagines liberal modernity thematically emerging through structural self-differentiation (whiteness structured against blackness) which churns out cathartic pleasure.⁵³ It inverts the Fanonian diagnostic of what white racism *does to* the black psyche and asks what antiblack racism *does for* the collective (and individual) white psyche. The clinical problematic examined this way returns a diagnosis of blackness as whiteness’s ontological opposite and therefore condition of possibility.⁵⁴ Two implications follow. First, antiblackness and liberal modernity are mutually constitutive; there is not one without the other; antiblackness is not accidental to liberal modernity but necessary to it. In invoking the language of ontology (ontology as dealing in matters of essence and existence), Afropessimism posits the *essence* of liberal modernity as bound up in antiblackness as the condition of its *existence*.⁵⁵ Second, it is pleasure rather than necessity, a libidinal economy rather than political economy, that drives antiblackness, exhibited by gratuitous performances that exceed and nullify the requirements of necessity.⁵⁶ As Wilderson III writes, “the pageantries of naked and submissive Black flesh, pageantries

⁵² Afropessimists draw from Jean-François Lyotard’s so-titled *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁵³ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 41–42.

⁵⁴ Wilderson quotes Fanon: “I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.” Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 57. For a similar account, see Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Daniel Colucciello Barber, “The Creation of Non-Being,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016). Afropessimism uncovers what is for Barber an ontological framing differently uncovered by Deleuze’s “theorization of non-being.” One finds something similar going on in Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*. For Carter, the pair blackness and whiteness—or, more precisely, blackness and antiblackness—issues as particularity versus non-particularity, or particularity versus universality. However, unlike Afropessimism’s explicitly anti-analogical formulation, blackness and antiblackness in Carter is explicitly developed in terms of “the Jewish question,” hence the book’s theological account.

⁵⁵ See Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 38 and 40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13–19.

of bleeding backs and buttocks, whip marks, amputations, and faces closed by horse bits, provide evidence of the role sadism plays in the constitution of White subjectivity.”⁵⁷ Sadistic pleasure is not an unintended outcome of chattel slavery but the entire point.

Natal alienation serves as both a historical and figurative concept. Here the idea is that black life, literally and metaphorically, is snatched away at the point of conception. From this, nothing can be built, no life formed, no future projected; nothing that makes for life can be held or had in the way it needs to grow, mature, and produce its own possibilities.⁵⁸ The idea is drawn from the historical reality of treating black people like chattel and so imagining progeny as property without life of its own. The third concept, *social death*, follows. Once the basic bonds necessary for human community are torn apart, which is what happens when children are as a matter of course taken from their mothers, social life as such is put asunder. The damage is catastrophic, extending to every realm of black existence, including those political options available as modes of resistance. Wilderson’s analysis advances cultural sociologist Orlando Patterson’s account of slavery as social death, “the permanent, violent domination of naturally alienated and generally dis-honored persons.”⁵⁹ What Wilderson often calls “the black” has no relationships because she has no relational capacity, for the field of relationality, of relatability, includes her only for her suffering. Hence, her forms of resistance and struggle do not register; hers are not actions that can count as principled resistance or political struggle. She has no moral agency; she is no agent. She is only a thing. As socially dead, her existence is not capable of narration, much less liberation. She has no existence of her own. Black life is forfeit or—and this is the related fourth concept—*fungible*. Alienated from anything that might portend a future, black persons are rendered inert, bare bodies disposable to white pleasure and minstrel performativity.⁶⁰ Unless representation

⁵⁷ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 94.

⁵⁸ Sexton, “The Vel of Slavery,” 592–593, as well as his longer treatment, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁵⁹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 13. Quoted in Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 14.

⁶⁰ See Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 31–32; Jared Sexton, “Affirmation in the Dark: Racial Slavery and Philosophical Pessimism,” *The Comparatist* 43 (2019): 90–111 (102 and 104); Jared Sexton, “On Black Negativity, Or The Affirmation of Nothing: Jared Sexton, Interviewed by Daniel Barber,” *Society + Space*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/on-black-negativity-or-the-affirmation-of-nothing>. Performativity here is not to be mistaken for Judith Butler’s distinction between performance and performativity in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For treatment of Butler’s distinction applied

of black life goes beyond those antiracist schemes coming under the familiar banners (diversity, inclusion, representation, multiculturalism, and the like) to its ontological foundations then, according to Sexton, “it will remain wedded, like those decolonizing projects, within the terms of mastery, what Wilderson calls a ‘people-of-color-consciousness that polices our capacity to flower.’”⁶¹ The fifth concept goes with the others. Unlike other categories of human suffering, antiblackness’s structural necessity makes it constitutive of liberal modernity. Others (native peoples, Jews, Asian Americans, etc.) suffer but their suffering does not mean, insofar as that suffering is not thematically structured into liberal modernity’s libidinal economy, nearly as much.⁶² The singularity of black suffering, its exceptional status, renders dubious the attempt to relate it to other suffering. This dubiousness Afropessimism denotes as the *ruse of analogy* (recall, from Chapter 2, Sexton’s critique of Asian American solidarity).

Afropessimism reduces the utilitarian benefits of slavery to its non-utilitarian performance, the political economy to the libidinal economy, or, more precisely, the libidinal economy as the most important thing about racial capitalism’s political economy. So much so that should “all Blacks” be “wiped out” then “humanity would cease to exist because the conceptual coherence that it needs would be absent,” averring “that will never happen” because “the push/pull in the collective unconscious between negrophilia and negrophobia could not afford its absence.”⁶³ Sexton’s abolitionist vision then comes consistently if controversially from these nested concepts. If liberal modernity just is antiblackness, then liberation requires its abolition.

Interestingly, one finds Afropessimism’s functional equivalent on the wrong side of William Jones’s trenchant critique of Christian theodicy.⁶⁴

to Asian American femininity, see Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59.

⁶¹ See also Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions Journal* 5 (2011): 1–47 (8–9).

⁶² Sexton, “*The Vel of Slavery*,” 588–589. See also Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 102; Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 52, 58–59; Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* 103, no. 28.2 (2010): 31–56.

⁶³ “‘Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation,’ Frank B. Wilderson III, interviewed by C. S. Soong” in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: racked & dispatched, 2017), 15–30 (27).

⁶⁴ William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997). Further references will be noted in the text. For related, if less developed, notions of black theodicy, see James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 150; Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 7 and 8; Clarice J. Martin, “Biblical Theodicy and Black Women’s Spiritual Autobiography,” in Emilie M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 13–36 (14 and 32).

Jones's *Is God a White Racist?* argues that Christian orthodoxy's inability to answer the conceptual problem of black suffering leads to systematic formulations that cannot help but lend themselves to political quietism. This aspect of Jones's thought proves the lynchpin to his forward-looking and underappreciated liberation theology: "Quietism is avoided if we simply regard *all* suffering as something to be eliminated" (58, emphasis in the original). Driving Jones's anti-theodicy was what he thought orthodox Christianity precluded, that which philosopher Lewis Gordon describes as Jones's animating concern, "freedom, freedom, freedom."⁶⁵ Gordon's subsequent rejection of Afropessimism mirrors Jones's rejection of Christian theodicy. In both Christianity and Afropessimism, there is an ontological framework that undercuts liberative action. The Christian idea that God will liberate black people is equivalent to the Afropessimist idea that nothing will. In each case, little is to be done because little can be done. Each "has made the choice not to admit of certain uncomfortable truths about his group and chooses not to challenge certain comfortable falsehoods about other people." Christians are no more willing to admit how much black suffering undermines belief in Christianity than are Afropessimists willing to admit how much actual black agency undermines belief in an ontological libidinal economy premised on black social death and fungibility. They act, as Gordon famously put it, in bad faith: "It is not that he is unwilling to accept what ordinarily count as counter examples where questions of race are concerned. He has decided to resist persuasion."⁶⁶ Gordon observes a quietism built into Afropessimism's flawed historical premises, premises Gordon sees as revealingly similar to the Christian leap of faith. The practical result is the same in both cases, either from disappointment that God hasn't shown up or that black people have: conservatism and conformity. As Jones wrote, "Theodicy leads ultimately to quietism, to the acceptance of one's own suffering and that of others. . . . It is to choose to act in a way that preserves and conserves what is already present; quietism, in the final analysis, collapses into a posture of conformity." Notice how what Jones said next anticipates Afropessimism as Gordon interprets it: "I would also argue that one is pushed toward quietism

⁶⁵ Lewis R. Gordon, "Remembering William R. Jones (1933–2012): Philosopher and Freedom Fighter," *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 12–13 (13). In the same issue see also Stephen C. Ferguson II, "On the Occasion of William R. Jones's Death: Remembering the Feuerbachian Tradition in African-American Social Thought," 14–19 (17).

⁶⁶ Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (New York: Humanity Books, 1995), 75. The greatest indication of Jones's influence is *Bad Faith*'s chapter, "Is God a White Racist?"

if he is persuaded that remedial action is impossible; that is to say, it will not be successful. . . . An act is labeled impossible when man encounters an apparently invincible force or when rectification necessitates the modification of some ultimate structure of reality or human nature. Note, for instance, the quietist implications of the maxim ‘You can’t change human nature’” (43 and 44). If you are not free to choose, so neither are you responsible for making choices. If only God or whites can act, no one else need try.⁶⁷ We then miss the basic fact of human freedom, and operate in the bad faith of those persons and institutions who would seek to deny that freedom, connoting what Gordon characterizes as the “individual hiding from his own freedom.”⁶⁸

It is no wonder that years later Gordon, influenced so by Jones, would take a similar line against Afropessimism: “If Afropessimism appeals to transcendent intervention, it would collapse into faith. If, however, the argument rejects transcendent intervention and focuses on committed political action, of taking responsibility for a future that offers no guarantees, then the movement from infinite resignation becomes existential political action.”⁶⁹ The lesson to be drawn from relating Afropessimism to Jones and Gordon is how quietism and bad faith inform one another.⁷⁰ It is the combined judgment of Jones and Gordon that Afropessimism can be like bad-faith Christianity in vacillating between a mutually informing transhistorical ontology and political quietism, and in each case, not in the absence of black suffering but in the very face of it. Afropessimism turns out to be the antiracist equivalent of Christianity’s bad-faith optimism: “Optimists expect intervention from beyond. Pessimists declare that relief is not forthcoming. Neither takes responsibility for what is valued.”⁷¹ Instead, what must be maintained is the commitment of “*all* suffering as something to be eliminated” based on the

⁶⁷ See Clevis R. Headley, “Existential Phenomenology and the Problem of Race: A Critical Assessment of Lewis Gordon’s Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism,” *Philosophy Today* 41, no. 2 (1997): 334–345.

⁶⁸ Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 45.

⁶⁹ Lewis Gordon, “Thoughts on Afropessimism” in “Afro-Pessimism,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 17, no. 1 (2018): 105–112 (111). For accounts of Kierkegaardian faith that bear out Gordon’s suspicions, see both Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 170; and Andrew Santana Kaplan, “Notes Toward (Inhabiting) the Black Messianic in Afro-Pessimism’s Apocalyptic Thought,” *The Comparatist* 43 (2019): 68–89 (84–85).

⁷⁰ Sexton writes of Gordon’s critique, “I had hoped to address some of the more egregious errors in his ‘Critical Reflections on Afropessimism’ here, but the caricature at work is so thorough that it will require a separate article to address,” in “Affirmation in the Dark: Racial Slavery and Philosophical Pessimism,” 108.

⁷¹ Gordon, “Thoughts on Afropessimism,” 108. The reference to “value” harkens back to Gordon’s Sartrian “serious man” formulation of bad faith. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 23.

premise that “human history” is “the product of human actions, and more important, the product of human power relations” (59 and 60).⁷²

The Church’s Hallway Eschatology

Christianity need not be quietist in the way Jones rightly critiques. If, rather than abandoning history for an extrahistorical rescue from a transhistorical God, Christianity were to commit divine action to creaturely history—say, to its deep economy—then Jones’s worries would be redirected. The question would no longer be whether or not Christianity depended on God for rescue, but rather what form divine rescue takes and how it gets realized and belief in it warranted, liberation’s “how and when” as discussed in the previous section. Jones thinks that Christianity acts in bad faith by hanging everything about God in a way that keeps belief in God at a remove from human affairs. Any Christianity that works like that (we found an instance of it in the Southern Baptist religion adopted by the Delta Chinese) very well should be abandoned. But what about one that stakes (with what Gordon calls “an attitude toward evidence”) its truthfulness on the liberative processes and commitments of its adherents?⁷³ We would then have something closer to a good-faith liberative movement Jones thinks worthy of followers, one that properly responds to persistent injustice. Here would be a Christianity that goes only as far as the liberation it enables.

Eschatologically, between the present that already is and the future that has not yet been realized is a material reality that inhabits and expresses the productive tensions emanating between the already and the not yet. This materiality Christians call the church, and its role is to witness to the reality that in Christ God has already triumphed over evil. This triumph arrives in Christ’s capitulation to the powers, his humanity subsumed to what fourth-century theologian John Chrysostom called “the ancient slavery.”⁷⁴

⁷² Later in the book, Jones contrasts a “humancentric theism” with a “theocentric theism,” which argues “for God’s controlling and overruling sovereignty over the essential aspects of God’s human situation, especially human destiny. The essential difference between these rival forms of theism is how each defines the role, status, and value of human freedom relative to divine freedom. Humancentric theism does assign an exalted status to man, particularly to human freedom, but this status—and here we come to theistic ground—is the consequence of God’s will, and it conforms to His ultimate purpose and plan for mankind” (Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 187).

⁷³ Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 56.

⁷⁴ “For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us. . . .” Chrysostom’s “The Nativity Sermon,” available at <http://www.antiochian.org/node/21955>.

Christ's crucifixion recapitulates first Jewish capitulation to the imperial dominations Israel suffered and then creaturely capitulation to the powers that long dominated and exploited creation. God in Christ enters in, the Father handing the Son over to the powers and submitting Christ to the full reality of sin's political economy of domination and exploitation. Yet, the story does not end there. When the Father through the Spirit raises the Son, so does God recapitulate the story of Israel and creation, from dominated and exploited and from crucified and buried, to resurrected, redeemed, and reconciled.

In the same way that the resurrected Son materially expresses Israel's and creation's redemption and reconciliation, the church through the Spirit makes that resurrection, redemption, and reconciliation known. The church enlivens the world to God's deep economy. The church, which ingests Christ's resurrected, redeemed, and reconciled flesh and baptizes converts into enlivened flesh, offers the world a foretaste of what resurrected, redeemed, and reconciliation creation looks like. The church is not Christ, but offers an image of creation resurrected, redeemed, and reconciled in Christ. The church is not the only place the Spirit does the work of proleptically displaying the destiny of creation, but it is at least one place it does, and Christians use that occasion (recorded in scripture and interpreted through the traditions of Christian thought) to trace out where and how the Spirit is liberating creation. *Pace* Jones's quietest Christianity, Christ did not remain at the edge of history, preferring abstract principles to be theorized, nor was Christ an ideal to emulated when convenient. Rather, Christ entered into and submitted to history, the opposite of an abstract principle that does not suffer the realities of bodily life or the vicissitudes of time. Christ was not an ideal to be held up but rather is the God-creature who by submitting to a most creaturely death now avails himself to be consumed so as to free creation. Christ's sacramental availability in the liberative politics of the church checks every religious pretension toward abstraction and idealization and their quietist tendencies. The church presents Christ's life as a demand that the world should turn out a certain way. To get a sense of what this comes to, let me juxtapose it to Afropessimism's telling ahistoricism.

As one might expect, Afropessimism has faced a torrent of criticisms from African American theorists who have resisted its account of history and the quietist vision issuing from it. Against *libidinal economy*, critics cite the material history demonstrating that, as Barbara J. Fields notes, slavery aimed to satisfy not white desire for black suffering but straightforwardly the

production of cotton, rice, and tobacco.⁷⁵ While Afropessimists float metaphysical theories loosely connected to actual events (i.e., *libidinal economy*), historians like Fields hammer away at the racial capitalist processes and commitments that structure racism's material ordering (i.e., *political economy*). White cruelty and black suffering were the effects of this production, even necessary constituents of it, but not its motivation and meaning. Fields's approach does not require, as Afropessimism does, the difficult conceptual labor of correlating pleasure (and its accompanying mental states) with the suffering and cruelty associated with antiblack racism. It need only point to systems of production that have as consequences of their operations suffering and cruelty. Hart seeks some additional metaphysical supplement even as he draws on the same historians of capitalism I do to show how prosaic eventualities like toxic debt did indeed structure "the tenacity of antiblack nastiness" into society's conventionalized use-identity-justification moral psychology. That anti-doxology's catastrophic distortions of goodness, truth, and beauty (what otherwise goes by "sin" in the Christian account of disordered desire) should nowadays prove explanatorily unsatisfying reminds us that there are metaphysics and metaphysics, and "it may be said that [one has] simply fastened on the wrong one."⁷⁶

Against the idea that *natal alienation* snatched away black possibility, hope, and development critics point to the extraordinary forms of life that grew up in the face of chattel slavery's greatest violations.⁷⁷ Some point to how Afropessimism's "social death" assumes a hermeneutic *posture* toward history rather than an actual history: "Due to the social death formulation, however, a static view of slavery confines Africans and Afro-Mexicans in a structural chokehold. By characterizing this process as structural, I underscore how the narrative of the black experience assumes a uniform African, slave, and ultimately black subject rooted in a static history whose logic originated in and remains confined to slavery."⁷⁸ Critics are quick to point to those

⁷⁵ Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 1, no. 181 (1990): 95–118 (99). See Chapter 3 for a similar sentiment from Oliver Cromwell Cox.

⁷⁶ Quoting Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1971): 47–66 (64).

⁷⁷ See Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 737–780 (739); Annie Menzel's and George Shulman's respective references to Hortense Spillers in "Afro Pessimism," *Contemporary Political Theory* 17, no. 1 (2018): 105–137 (112–118 and 118–128).

⁷⁸ Herman L. Bennett, "Writing into a Void," *Social Text* 25, no. 4 (2007): 67–90 (70). See also Herman L. Bennett, "Genealogies to a Past: Africa, Ethnicity, and Marriage in Seventeenth-Century Mexico," in *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*, ed. Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 127–147; Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in*

modes of black life (from jazz and the blues to black religion) that demonstrate a resurgent sociality in the face of dehumanizing forces set upon black communities.⁷⁹ It then makes little sense to speak of African Americans as *fungible*.⁸⁰ Critics emphasize the constancy of black resistance, whether through large-scale plantation uprisings and national revolutions like Haiti or in everyday modes of struggle (against enslavers, against unjust laws, in the courts, at home, through relationships, rhetoric, dance, etc.).⁸¹ Black agency could be readily found across a multitude of forms at every front of antiblackness. These rejoinders testify to an entirely different approach to history, one that renders fallacious the premises enjoining Afropessimism's pessimism. This goes beyond the methodological point that getting the history wrong involves Afropessimism in a stretch of question-begging logic.⁸² Its pessimism is premised on its historiography. Wilderson says as much by frontloading his opening arguments with historical assertions.⁸³ But there is another issue with the history, one that implicates its quietism. Just as the ontology comes loose of the history, so it occludes clear passage to a liberative agenda.⁸⁴ In distracting from racial capitalism's material processes and commitments, the top-heavy ontological approach opens a lacuna in which nihilism sets in. Here is an historiography that defies both verification and

Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).

⁷⁹ See Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1231–1249.

⁸⁰ David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 74–75. Scott quotes from Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 13. Interestingly, see Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1991), xiii, as well as Patterson's involved interview with David Scott along these lines: "The Paradox of Freedom: An Interview with Orlando Patterson," *Small Axe* 17 (March 2013): 96–242.

⁸¹ Greg Thomas, "Afro-Blue Notes: The Death of Afro-Pessimism (2.0)?" *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 282–317 (304).

⁸² See Gloria Wekker, "Afropessimism," *European Journal of Women's Studies*, November 21, 2020, 1–20 (8–10).

⁸³ Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 13–18. Speaking of two "gross misconceptions" about American chattel slavery, Wilderson relies on David Eltis, "Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation," *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (1993): 1399–1423; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 22; Hortense Spillers, *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 210. See also "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation," Frank B. Wilderson III, Interviewed by C. S. Soong, in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: racked & dispatched, 2017), 15–30 (24).

⁸⁴ Removed from view, then, is Cornel West's "African-American liberation struggle" which the current book considers exemplary for its goals. Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 140–147. For his broader pragmatist liberationism, see *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

falsification, thereby eluding the responsibility of staking the present on the past, of letting the present illuminate future possibility.

Afropessimism is shot through with what literary theorist Kenneth Warren calls a “formal binarism” that belies how history functions: “The reality that social change, however profound, is never absolute and always contested (and that even partial victories can be turned into defeats) gets taken as a reason not only to acknowledge the ongoing need for struggle to realize the idea of true human freedom, but also to find within the very conceptualization of freedom the implacable logic of further domination.”⁸⁵ If history progresses toward freedom only insofar as some politically commit themselves to that freedom, then politics matters not only in history but also for how history gets read. In the absence of committed politics, prognostications that lend themselves to pessimism prove self-fulfilling. “If, however, the argument rejects transcendent intervention and focuses on committed political action, of taking responsibility for a future that offers no guarantees, then the movement from infinite resignation becomes political action,” returning to Gordon’s Jonesian formulation.⁸⁶ Those committed to the work of liberation will read history as confirming the possibilities committed politics pursues, and so will look in their daily work for reasons to go on. Entrenchment in the daily work of liberative politics—like a redistributive economy that educates neighborhood children—will provide its own reasons, just as will pessimism provide others. In continuing, one chooses to lend credence to reasons to continue (say, Warren’s “partial victories” and Shange’s progressive “wins”) and thereby lends confidence to one’s posture toward history that it is not determined by forces that produce reasons to give up (say, Warren’s “implacable logic of further domination”). This all gets to a basic truism that just as human history is not destined to antiblackness, neither is it destined to liberation. One will simply have to commit to the work and find reasons to continue.⁸⁷ Afropessimism, as demonstrated in its historiography, too often seems committed to finding reasons to quit the work of politics. Accordingly, while recognizing that the *ruse of analogy* as a concept logically follows the libidinal logic of the Freudian/Lacanian framing, critics find it an impossible

⁸⁵ Kenneth Warren, “‘Blackness’ and the Sclerosis of African American Cultural Criticism,” *Nonsite*, no. 28 (May 10, 2019), <https://nonsite.org/article/blackness-and-the-sclerosis-of-african-american-cultural-criticism>. Also see Gustavo Gutiérrez’s theodical reflections in *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 88.

⁸⁶ Gordon, “Thoughts on Afropessimism,” 110.

⁸⁷ Jesse McCarthy, “On Afropessimism,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 20, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-afropessimism/>.

supposition, a nonstarter insofar as solidarity gets coalitional politics off the ground. As Vinson Cunningham writes, “Any system of thought that has refined itself beyond the ability to imagine kinship with the stranded Guatemalan kid detained at the U.S. border, or with the functionally enslaved Uyghur in China, or, again—I can’t get over it—with the Native American on whose stolen ancestral ground you live and do your business, is lost in its own fog.”⁸⁸

One does not have to go all the way with Afropessimism’s ontological framing in order to recognize, as I have attempted to throughout this book, that the world we inhabit is violently structured against black life. The abolitionist question Afropessimism raises is whether such a world can be repaired, or whether it is so far gone that we are better off abolishing it and starting anew. Shange’s analysis shows how that is too simplistic a way of putting the question. She instead points to abolition as a posture *internal to committed politics*. Her non-Manichean position disavows what cannot be repaired but hangs on to what can and must—given the stakes—be salvaged. For Shange this begins by positioning black life and identity as themselves abolitionist against the Robesonian nation-state. She then reimagines the political project of modernity by highlighting what remains of nation-state organs that can be recapitulated for liberation. This is abolition from the inside. It acknowledges the deep sources of antiblackness and delineates their afterlife persistence, forcing us to sit with realities we might otherwise pass over. It then goes on to what can be done, likely because Shange’s many years with Robeson’s students necessitates that she stake in her own way Juliette’s question, “What to do with the kids right now?”⁸⁹ Rather than a total dismissal of the structures and systems that lead to black captivity, she finds within them something better. Thence does she point to the fugitive forms of life within Robeson’s very halls. She talks about Robeson’s hallways as sites provocatively situated beyond its confinements: “Twelve feet wide, fifty yards long—Robeson’s corridors are spatial containers for the encounter between the state and the body, and yet we must pay as much attention to the *when* as to the *where*. . . . Temporality is what transforms space into distance, line into boundary, stasis into movement. . . . The temporal is a zone of opportunity

⁸⁸ Vinson Cunningham, “The Argument of ‘Afropessimism,’” *New Yorker*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism>.

⁸⁹ Referring to her work as an “abolitionist anthropology,” Shange distinguishes herself from other “scholars of antiblackness” who “work largely in the fields of English, history, and film studies” and so “don’t know much about how their interventions map onto blackness as lived and loved on a daily basis across the diaspora” (Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 7; see also 70–71).

for subaltern subversion" (88 and 89, emphasis in the original). Robeson's hallways become a source of productive tension, unmanaged space between Robeson's ordered terrain, where students, and sometimes staff, linger. Here, institutional control gives way to loud reverberating voices, singing, dancing, celebrating, shouting for and of something better. What some see as lingering, Shange sees as life. She quotes Jesuit social theorist Michel de Certeau's notion of *la perruque*, a concept strikingly similar to Chapter 3's "place of shared time": "the worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit" (*ibid.*).⁹⁰ Precisely in their non-productivity do the halls become, in Shange's view, the school's most productive space for "plantation futures": "the hallways themselves, the kids in the hall occupy a liminal space between liberation and captivity—the peripatetic space of fugitivity. Tactics, in the Certeauian sense, *take* time and space. They are possessive, durative, and expansive practices that gesture toward, but do not instantiate, freedom" (91 and 90). These "maroon" spaces, like the apocalyptic future itself, become definitively black, "a snapshot of blackness in motion, in one moment traveling in syncopation with the 'ten, nine, eight!' booming down the hall, in another dancing away from the nonevent of 1863 toward the asymptote of abolition" (90).

As a student at Stanford, Chi-En Yu was told repeatedly that her mission was to change the world. That's why she was at Stanford, to prepare her for doing so. Years of mounting pressure to come through—simultaneously taking in the world's horrors and her call to save it—led to what she called a "depressive episode" where she became "nonfunctional." She withdrew for the quarter and lived with her brother, Chi-Ming, in nearby San Francisco. She spent the quarter letting Redeemer's scriptural litany "wash over" her, immersed in words about "what's true and what God has done, is doing." Presenting the horrors of the world as God's responsibility and her role as ancillary to the Spirit's saving action freed her. Most important were people, like Chi-Ming's spouse, Juliette, whose lives imbibed these lessons and radiated their peace. All the while living radically. The way they lived their radicalness made all the difference: "being with people who were living in the midst of the brokenness that I wanted to engage and doing so in a way where they weren't being broken, right? Like living faithfully and having some comfort

⁹⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 25–26.

level with knowing the limitations of how far they could or could not actually change the world, and yet still choose to be faithful. I think that was very significant. I'm not sure that I would have been able to get that at Stanford.”⁹¹ The ordinariness of Redeemer’s liberative politics lightened a calling that had previously paralyzed her, primarily by providing livable scripts into it: “Living faithfully in an urban setting among people and communities that are historically underserved or underrepresented—I think my picture as a student was that that is very radical. But living with folks in San Francisco made it much more ordinary.”⁹²

Robeson’s hallways save it from the school’s proclivities toward mastery, by both resisting such overtures and by inviting something better. Redeemer Community Church, which sits in the spaces between and within Rise Prep and Dayspring, similarly calls its companion entities to be better than they would on their own. Rise Prep extends spatially the church’s ministry in the neighborhood, to families and children it does not reach on Sunday, magnifying and multiplying its work. Rise Prep and Dayspring bring resources to bear that no church could have on its own. Likewise does Redeemer resource Rise Prep and Dayspring by expanding their temporal imaginations, the church’s liturgy enacting, as Chi-En experienced, what Shange delightfully calls “a ritual practice of internalizing the necessity to do the impossible” (21). The church’s ritualized incantation of “what’s true and what God has done, is doing” keeps in front of Rise Prep and Dayspring images of forgiven people whose propensity for sin, in their personal and systemic forms, has not suddenly disappeared because Christ has forgiven them. Practices of confession, forgiveness, repentance, and accountability ease pretensions and check presumptions. The church’s liturgical life, the Spirit’s place of shared time, offers space where wins are not only celebrated but also examined, freeing individuals from having to win, making clear which wins matter and why.

Singing, dancing, celebrating, and shouting reverberate through Redeemer’s hallway existence. Given the unrelenting pressures racial capitalism exerts, beginning the revolution, or least each new school week, with worship is simultaneously the most wasteful and productive thing Rise Prep’s leaders do. Given the promise and demands of liberation,

⁹¹ Author interview, May 5, 2020.

⁹² On these themes, see Romand Coles and Stanley Hauerwas, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008).

Sunday worship feels like what theologian Marva Dawn calls “a royal waste of time.”⁹³ Given the substance of Sunday worship (reverberating worship of the one who creates time for and as singing, dancing, celebrating, and shouting), hallway existence is just as it should be in the space between spaces during the time between times.⁹⁴

Between Alienation and Home

In a powerful retrospective about his former teacher, columnist Jay Caspian Kang describes how Noel Ignatiev, whom we encountered in Chapter 3, came to regret the ways his *How the Irish Became White* unwittingly contributed to a mode of identarianism that undermined the goals of liberation.⁹⁵ Ignatiev had tried to use the story of Irish Americans “becoming white” in order to expose how white identity was, rather than a biological fact, a ruse devised to pit oppressed people against each other. The Irish “becoming white” showed that whiteness was about, more than anything else, social stratification indexed to created fictions about race. Ignatiev thought that such a history would apprise white laborers of shared oppressions with African Americans in order to, first, join in solidarity, and second, rise up against oppressive elites. He targeted white supremacy as a Du Boisian psychological wage that ideologically covered over baseline exploitation. But things turned out differently from how Igantiev imagined. Kang reports that late in life, “he was bewildered by the rise of a style of identity politics that reified the fictions of race and, through its fixation on diversity in élite spaces, abandoned the working class.”⁹⁶ The problem was not simply the loss of a viable antiracist politics. It is also that the ensuing vacuum tempts the impression that racial identity offers more than a scripted performance, that there is, as a condition of one’s self-actualization, something there to be established, secured, and asserted. For much of America, including an extraordinary number of white evangelicals, this has resulted in deep-seated cultural grievance, the photo negative of the justificatory antiblack racism set in place at the origins

⁹³ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

⁹⁴ On these themes, see John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

⁹⁵ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁹⁶ Jay Caspian Kang, “Noel Ignatiev’s Long Fight against Whiteness,” *New Yorker*, November 15, 2019.

of American life. Befuddled by the sources and reality of their disenfranchisements, they rage over perceived losses of power they believe is theirs by right. Yet the allure of racial identity proves enticing in other ways. On a separate occasion, Kang authored a penetrating reflection on those fated to the emptiness of such endeavors: “Asians are the loneliest Americans. The collective political consciousness of the ’80s has been replaced by the quiet, unaddressed isolation that comes with knowing that you can be born in this country, excel in its schools and find a comfortable place in its economy and still feel no stake in the national conversation.”⁹⁷

If Chris has found a home at Redeemer with Juliette, Daniel, and the others, Danny Fong is still searching. After seventeen years leading Redeemer, he stepped away from his role as founding pastor. He knew it was time when one Sunday he literally could not remember his words. He felt burned out, leading a radical congregation doing radical things while himself running on empty. It was his ideas that first started Dayspring, his vision that launched Redeemer, and his calling that moved the church to BVHP. Despite it all he still hadn’t figured out what it meant for him to be Asian American. He knew he happily pastored Redeemer with Cindi and he knew he cherished his life with their children and their many church and neighborhood friends. He knew God in Christ had saved the world and knew he wanted to be part of that salvation. But the questions that vexed him as a poor immigrant growing up in Stockton, California, troubled him still. Who was he in America? How did he fit? Where did he belong amid its racisms and antiracisms? He remembers the nagging questions turning over in his mind during long walks back and forth to his off-campus apartment at Cal. He knew racism, and he knew the different forms it took. He experienced one form among people of color struggling to make lives in the city and another when serving white suburbanites at his parents’ Chinese restaurant. As a campus minister with Stanford’s IVCF chapter he encountered yet another when told that he and the Asian American students he mentored (including Juliette, Chi-Ming, Ann, and Daniel) weren’t quite what the chapter needed. He watched as his biracial children now faced similar challenges at Christian colleges presumably committed to antiracism. He kept up with the antiracism discourse but felt put off by how little it made sense of his experiences, speaking as if the entire world banked on a white/black binary. It lent little credence to what

⁹⁷ Jay Caspian Kang, “What a Fraternity Hazing Death Revealed about the Painful Search for an Asian-American Identity,” *New York Times*, August 9, 2017.

he and the church were doing, or the racism Asian Americans in his neighborhood suffered at the hands of other people of color. Mostly, he found that years of wrestling with his and his church's Asian American identity, during which time he helped others into theirs, hadn't gotten him closer to figuring who he was as an Asian American.⁹⁸

It is hard not to think of people like Danny as casualties of the identarian troubles Kang chronicles. And the promise of what lies beyond. We live in a time when what need to be wide-ranging conversations about the inhumanity of our political economic orders have been reduced to narrow questions about personal identity. In the wake of this, individuals are left searching for identity, unable to trust local communities to story their lives, and alienated from the kinds of politics that would accompany their searching. The loneliness and isolation Kang describes and Danny experiences show what happens when antiracist conversations marginalize people already marginalized by racism. When told through the witness of Redeemer Community Church, however, Danny's story betokens something more. As I have tried to argue in this book, infinitely more. The question then comes not to whether identity matters for finding a home but whether the current discourse is capable of a moral vocabulary that puts identity at home with liberation. Danny's life as standing in for so many of us Asian American Christians can feel like that, both the estrangement of feeling one's life unacknowledged and the embrace of having one's story recounted in the natural order of things, like identities making their way home in the deep economy of God.

⁹⁸ For a retrospective similar to Pastor Danny's, see Russell Jeung, *At Home in Exile: Finding Jesus among My Ancestors and Refugee Neighbors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

Postscript

Beyond Marxism

In the last analysis, the difference between a Marxist world and a Christian lies in the fact that in a fully Marxist world prayer would be impossible. The true Christian community will be one of poverty and of prayer. In one sense it will not be specifically Christian, for it will be concerned above all with the truly human.

—Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism*¹

Everybody realizes a necessity of doing something to put an end to what is going on. Because what is going on is not only not human. It is barbarous. It is self-destructive, it destroys all the principles by which humanity has lived for many centuries. Now who must do something about it?

—C. L. R. James, “World Politics Today”²

In a genuine community everyone is a “steward” to one another.

—Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*³

Early in this book I said that Marxism, like Christianity, calls for collective revolutionary action but, given its ambivalence about ethical life, and religion in particular, often lacks the determinate forms of life necessary to get revolution off the ground.⁴ I suggested that Christianity is different in that rather than waiting for revolution to get going, Christian liberationists lay

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism: An Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 121–122.

² C. L. R. James, “World Politics Today,” available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1967/world-politics.htm>.

³ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1990), 51.

⁴ Marx’s dismissal of religion is shown for the mistake it is in what should be seen as the definitive treatment, Denys Turner’s *Marxism and Christianity* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983).

claim to God's revolution in Christ. Christian life is doxologically ordered to the ethical life necessary for Marxist revolution but blocked by Marxist reticence.

I take from Marxism the idea that ideology covers over baseline exploitation, and from Black Marxism capitalist ideology's inextricably racial nature, the way racism smooths over baseline exploitation by gaslighting the oppressed, whose race is made to blame for their oppressions. I add to this a moral psychology where justification is built into intelligent action so as to explain away outrageous behavior. Altogether, Marxism amounts to the idea (argued *ad nauseum* in this book) that racism justifies dominative exploitation.

Two related implications follow. First, the most pernicious effects of racism have little to do with personal attitudes, bigoted ideas, prejudicial discrimination, implicit bias, interpersonal microaggressions, and so on. Rather, we should be talking about the structures and systems that grew up around racially justified exploitation at the origins of American life. These *baseline* realities set the stage for all that comes after. Thomas Piketty's $r > g$ formula presents a damning encapsulation of the long-term consequences of this baseline reality, the racist past swallowing up every antiracist effort to turn back its momentum. If there is a case for abolition, reparations and, as I have argued, justice as redistribution, it is the reality that American society is rotten to the core (given the reaches of capitalist predation) and needs to be reset. Americans who resist antiracist efforts do so not because they suffer fragile psyches (by dint of being white or what have you) but because at some level they know that they have the most to lose should society be reset toward more just orders.

Second, all those antiracist efforts aimed at changing minds without changing structures and systems are doomed to fail. Racism does not begin with bad ideas. Strategies focused on searching out bad ideas (say, the source material motivating racist behavior) confuse matters by separating an idea's motivational content from its justificatory structure. Everything becomes about the bad ideas, now floating free of material reality. Instead, we might ask ourselves a basic question: If everyone thinks racism is bad, then why does it persist? Once we turn things around and look at racism from this perspective (reversing the causal logic *from* material practices *to* the abstract ideas justifying them) other questions come online: What does racism accomplish? Whom does it benefit? How does it work? The cultural turn at the heart of identitarian antiracism (and its accompanying academic methods and

models) not only misses this but distracts from and thereby contributes to it.⁵ Those Americans worried that justice will take away their advantages like nothing more than talk about identity. They love diversity, inclusion, representation, multiculturalism, and the like because it leaves their stuff—what Jesus in Luke 12 called “barns and bigger barns” (recalling Chapter 5’s quote from Basil of Caesarea)—untouched.⁶

Marxism helps us see this. But then it stymies its own vision by artificially imposing boundaries between the oppression it identifies and the ethical life necessary for overcoming it. Marxism is excellent for helping us get at what is most destructive about racism, the material causes and consequences of injustice and inequality. But it is not as good about materially producing revolutionary community and action. Marxism, for all its materialist commitments, turns out to be not quite materialist enough.

Consider the case of noted philosopher, and longtime Marxist, Alasdair MacIntyre. In the 1950s communist journal *The New Reasoner*, the young socialist aired worries that Marxist moral judgment could not account for itself, nor could Marxism offer a picture of human action that hung revolution on anything other than voluntarist (individually heroic) grounds.⁷ MacIntyre would go on to a distinguished academic career largely centered on the question, “What makes for revolution?” Most people don’t remember Marxist revolution as the driving force behind MacIntyre’s turn to Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and finally Catholic Christianity. Instead we find in popular renditions a curmudgeonly MacIntyre bemoaning secular culture already doomed to life “after virtue,” where a pallid set of options leaves the morally serious clamoring after anything that goes by the name of community. MacIntyre’s most recent book, *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity*, returns revolution to the forefront of his concerns. There MacIntyre is after what drives us, and what sustains and feeds those drives, and so how desire rightly puts us into the world, and the worldly goods of freedom and agency and normative responsibility and accountability (those goods as bulwarks against the racial capitalism described in this book) and hence forms of life that can survive their frustration. For MacIntyre, the virtues become the rudiments of a characterized ethical life, and their possession conveys the human body properly

⁵ See Vivek Chibber, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

⁶ Luke 12:18, NIV.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness,” *The New Reasoner* 7 (Winter 1958): 90–100.

possessed of—rather than alienated from—itself and perfected to the natural intelligences of the world, what I have called “God’s deep economy.”

Those who read MacIntyre’s work along these lines will not be surprised to find at the end of *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity* the Trinidadian black Marxist C. L. R. James exemplifying its revolutionary spirit.⁸ In *Beyond a Boundary*, his extraordinary memoir on West Indies and British cricket, James harshly criticized societies that stalled revolution. He found an analogue in sports. About cricket fans who lack proper respect for the game, he said, “These young people had no loyalties to school because they had no loyalties to anything. They had a universal distrust of their elders and preceptors, which had begun with distrust of their teachers. Each had to work out his own individual code.”⁹ As in sports, so in life, he thought, especially given cricket’s obvious and significant role in the British colonial enterprise. It was James’s larger point that one needed a *communal* code in order to rise above the vulgarities that colonial exploitation and oppression tragically engender. This is a point James makes over and over, so much so that *Beyond a Boundary* can read like Victorian commentary on contemporary social etiquette and its internal relationship to athletic and revolutionary excellence. For James, ethical life, captured so well in sports, arrives as an expectation of the human, where relinquishing that expectation for oneself and others capitulates to racial capitalist ideology and commodification, what I described early on as self-dehumanization.

Accordingly, nothing Redeemer offers is more important than where its offerings begin, the ethical life of its “place of shared time,” that radical democratic practice of a “new and powerful ideal of community” given to the promise and demands of Luke 12.¹⁰ Chi-En Yu describes the church’s liturgy

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 273–296. MacIntyre asks, as he does throughout the book, “What kind of human being do I need to become, if in struggling for the replacement of capitalism and imperialism by a more humane order I am to achieve my own good?” (282). My account goes some way, though not all the way, in answering fellow philosopher Bernard Williams’s longstanding critique of Aristotelian virtue, a critique that MacIntyre obviously takes seriously, as demonstrated by his sustained engagement with it in *Ethics and the Conflicts of Morality*, a title which clearly means to invoke Williams’s *Philosophy and the Limits of Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 52.

⁹ C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983), 45.

¹⁰ Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 86. Regarding Luke 12, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:32–34, NRSV).

washing over her and moving her into “living faithfully and having some comfort level with knowing the limitations of how far [we] could or could not actually change the world, and yet still choose to be faithful.” Redeemer’s litany enjoins the gathered,

Let the stranger find his welcome as a brother;
And the outcast, in the church, a sister be.
Let the powers that see the Church’s witness tremble
As we display God’s new humanity.
Jesus, victor at the cross,
Holy Redeemer, we count all else as loss.
So that we may know you, Christ—
Bear your cross and share your life.
May your will be done.¹¹

Here is revolution, at least where it begins. Or, where it continues, with the church being the church.

¹¹ Luke 12’s “Parable of the Rich Fool” runs parallel to Mark 10’s “Parable of the Rich Man” so influential to Chapter 4’s Chi-Ming, who also wrote this song. “Jesus, Victor at the Cross” by Chi-Ming Chien, Copyright © 2007, Redeemer Community Church. Chi-Ming wrote this song on the occasion of Redeemer’s fifth anniversary.

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