

The Hero and the Whore

*Reclaiming Healing and Liberation through
Stories of Sexual Exploitation in the Bible*

CAMILLE HERNANDEZ

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“*The Hero and the Whore* is a liberation theology of resistance against the weighty systems of oppression that bear down on us in this new era of white Christian nationalism. Camille Hernandez lets us into the moments in her life when her keenly honed critical consciousness comes face-to-face with the supremacist ideologies of white evangelicalism in the United States. She graciously offers us the acts of resistance that have allowed her to engage with biblical texts that have so often been used to support patriarchy and white supremacy. Her readings of Scripture are intuitive and welcoming, inviting the reader to explore how their own story finds meaning within these texts. For anyone feeling pushed to the margins of Christianity, *The Hero and the Whore* is an excellent spiritual guide for determining what is worthwhile investment in our well-being and what needs to be left behind.”

—**Sara Moslener**, author of *Virgin Nation*

“In a time when many are at a crossroads and experiencing deep crises of faith, a necessary theological voice has emerged. What Hernandez has done in the pages of this book will heal us now, help heal the wounds of the past, and work to heal generations to come. We have needed her and this amazing offering, and I’m so glad they are both here!”

—**Candice Marie Benbow**, author of *Red Lip Theology*

“If you’re looking for a book that blends tender care, moving poetry, and careful biblical scholarship, you need to read *The Hero and the Whore*. Hernandez leads us through the realities of oppression and liberation, reminding us that we don’t have to stay in the toxic colonial spaces that many of us are born into and that we can bravely wrestle with questions we don’t always have answers for. As you enter deeper into the words and poetry found in these pages, you’ll experience the passion of an abolitionist and the hands of a caretaker as Hernandez leads us into stories of trauma, colonization, and oppression and through them to the other side. In the time in which we are living, we need books that help us tell the truth and help us dream, and this book is one of them.”

—**Kaitlin B. Curtice**, award-winning author
of *Native and Living Resistance*

“Those of us steeped in white, patriarchal ways of theology and biblical interpretation have been given an incomplete gospel; we swim on

the surface of a deep ocean of truth and beauty that we often do not know how to experience. Camille Hernandez helps us to see women in Scripture in ways our own social locations often make us blind to and, in the process, equips us to be partners in the liberation God desires for us all. This book will stretch your heart and mind in all the ways we need to be stretched.”

—**Chris Furr**, author of *Straight White Male*

“By centering the oft-silenced women of the Scriptures, Hernandez shows us that these living stories can lead to liberation. In *The Hero and the Whore*, the marginalized voices of the Bible beckon readers beyond the limiting expectations of broken societies to a more universal thriving where all are free to be whom they were created to be.”

—**Trey Ferguson**, pastor, writer, and podcaster

“Reading Hernandez is like sitting next to a well filled with the tears of every woman who has felt the pain of violence, silence, and invisibility. *The Hero and the Whore* offers liberatory stories that reclaim the voices of women in society and the Bible that have been stifled by patriarchy and power. If you’re ready to read stories from a perspective that brings awareness to violence, read this book and let it transform your understanding.”

—**Terence Lester**, founder of Love beyond Walls and author of *All God’s Children*, *I See You*, and *When We Stand*

“Hernandez’s words will infuse those in need of healing and liberation with the courage to seek and claim them as their rightful inheritance. She is the perfect person to have by our side as we birth new narratives of our inherent worth and beauty, no matter what our stories have been up to this point. This book oozes with brilliance and love.”

—**Marla Taviano**, author of *unbelieve* and *jaded*

“In a day that has popularized ‘deconstruction,’ Hernandez’s lovingly and thoughtfully crafted book is a dive into a spirituality that is full of questions, wonder, and bravery. The way that she explicitly names harmful ideologies *and* ways of repair has left me hopeful about what my faith can be.”

—**Robert Monson**, codirector of *Enfleshed.com*

Contents

Author's Note	vii
Land Back Statement	ix
Foreword by Chanequa Walker Barnes	xi
Prologue	1
1. Eve	15
2. Hagar	33
3. Leah and Dinah	53
4. Potiphar's Wife	67
5. Rahab	87
6. Jael	103
7. Bathsheba	115
8. Hegai and Vashti	133
9. Gomer	147
10. Salome	165

11. The Woman Caught in Adultery	183
Epilogue: An Open Letter to Survivors	195
Acknowledgments	197
Notes	201

Author's Note

These stories and topics are triggering. Please take whatever breaks you need as you read this book. I believe that for us to heal, it's important to name violence and acknowledge the harm it has caused. I also believe in taking breaks and having boundaries. I invite you to exercise both as you read.

This book is not a mental health guide or a step-by-step manual for healing from trauma. I highly recommend seeking out a culturally competent mental health specialist—therapist, counselor, or social worker—as well as a community of folks with whom to have gentle and honest conversations.

Land Back Statement

This book was written on occupied land of the Gabrielino-Tongva, Kizh, and Acjachemen nations, whose people stewarded the lands currently known as Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties. They are still alive today despite unfair laws, enslavement, pandemic, and genocide. They have known this land for 10,000 years.

Both nations were enslaved by Spanish conquistadors and forced into providing the physical labor necessary to build the California missions. The Gabrielino-Tongva and Kizh peoples were enslaved to build the San Gabriel Mission in the City of San Gabriel and the San Fernando Mission in the City of Los Angeles. The Acjachemen tribe was forced by enslavement to build the San Juan Capistrano Mission of Orange County.

Before the Spanish conquistadors came and violently forced their religion and unethical standards onto these peoples, the Gabrielino-Tongva, Kizh, and Acjachemen nations thrived as stewards of the land who worked in tandem with nature to cultivate equitable systems of care and provision for their peoples.

This book was written with the spirit of Toypurina in mind. She was a Kizh medicine woman who recruited other Indigenous peoples to revolt against the Spanish conquistadors at the San Gabriel Mission. She and her coconspirators were captured and imprisoned. During her trial, Toypurina famously said, “I hate the padres and

all of you, for living here on my native soil, . . . for trespassing on the land of my forefathers and despoiling our tribal domains.” After imprisonment she was forcibly baptized into Christianity and forced into exile from her people.

The Hero and the Whore is written to recognize the many ways Western Christianity has conducted sexual violence against marginalized peoples as a tool in perpetrating forms of oppression including, but not limited to, colonialism, enslavement, genocide, and ecoterrorism. First we acknowledge the land that was invaded, the Indigenous peoples who were attacked, and—most importantly—we recognize the generations of Indigenous resistance done to restore the peoples and the lands.

For true healing and reconciliation to occur, and in order to reverse the harmful effects of Christian colonialism’s violence against women, trans and gender-expansive people, and against the land, we must work to ensure that the land is restored to its original stewards and that Indigenous land sovereignty is centered within our movement for liberation. Give the land back.

Foreword

“I never wanted to be an ethicist.” Those were the words that Katie Geneva Cannon uttered to a shocked audience at the Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference in February 2018, just six months before her death from acute leukemia, as she accepted the Beautiful Are Their Feet award. Cannon went on to say that the Old Testament had always been her passion. But when she began her doctoral work at Union Theological Seminary, she was told that she could not concentrate in Old Testament because the school did not want to be the first institution to allow a Black woman to enroll in what was considered an elite field “traditionally reserved for the white men with the most powerful political connections.”¹ Cannon instead became the first Black woman to earn a PhD in ethics and, upon the publication of *Katie’s Canon* in 1988, one of the founders of womanist theology. Women like Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas, Clarice Martin, Renita Weems, and Emilie Townes created a space for Black women when the Christian theological academy proclaimed that there was “no room at the inn.”

With *The Hero and the Whore*, Camille Hernandez makes a space of her own as a kapwa womanist, standing in the legacy of four decades of Black women’s ministry and theological scholarship, as well as in her identity as a Filipina and an African American. Like the womanists and Asian American feminists upon whose shoulders she stands, Camille doesn’t just create space for herself. She fills a room with

comfy cushions and sofas and invites others to join her. She wrestles with what Phyllis Tribble deemed “texts of terror,” biblical passages in which women are victims of violence, rejection, and exclusion. These are the texts that make thinking Christians cringe. Where is the good news in a faith that repeatedly scapegoats women as evil temptresses or pits them against each other in a struggle for patriarchal attention? What liberation can women—especially women of color, same-gender-loving, nonbinary, and trans women—find in a religion whose sacred text exploits our pain as a divine object lesson? How can we see ourselves as created in the image of God when the biblical writers often render us nameless, faceless, and invisible? How can God be on the side of the poor and oppressed when the people of God use sacred text to justify our oppression and marginalization?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Fortunately, Camille does not try to offer any. Instead, she draws upon her experience and perspective as a trauma-informed caregiver to disrupt the narrative that salvation is to be found in Western imperialist Christianities that extol violence, conquest, genocide, and rape. She helps us to confront and resist the lies and silences that keep us bound to heterosexist White supremacist Christian nationalism. Where mainstream Christianity (including evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and the historical Black church traditions) offers weak apologetics for these stories or simply turns its head away, Camille approaches them much like Jacob did the angel at the Jabbok River in Genesis 32, wrestling a blessing (or something like it) out of them. She reframes the stories of the “bad girls of the Bible” using an explicitly womanist lens. She is not content to simply accept these stories at face value. She exercises a prophetic imagination to frame each of these women against the harshly patriarchal contexts that constrained their choices for survival.

Camille likely does not identify as either a biblical scholar or a theologian, but here she is both, and in the best sense. This is deconstructivism, to be sure, but it is also constructive, practical, and deeply personal. Through her eyes we get to see each of these women as people we know, perhaps even people we are, have been, or could be. We see the direct connection between the struggles of their lives and those of our own time, including purity and rape culture, assimilation

and cultural erasure, conquest and genocide, racism, sexuality, and gender identity. And prayerfully, as we see each of their narratives remade, we find ways to remake our relationship with Scripture. We learn some new wrestling techniques.

When Katie Cannon realized that the church and the academy lacked the liberating lens that she needed, she decided to make it herself. And she repeatedly enjoined Black women to “do the work your soul must have.” Camille has done the work that many a soul needs.

Chanequa Walker-Barnes, PhD

Prologue

Please don't quote John 3:16. . . . Oh no, no no nooooo. . . . Please don't cry.

I was shifting in my seat and mentally pleading with this middle-aged white man to stop crying and to stop quoting Scripture. It was the fifth hour of a daylong missionary training led by a conservative white evangelical organization headed by a bunch of white men. I was tired of sitting in this conference room, tired of the uncomfortable chairs surrounding circular tables, and *definitely* tired of small talk.

The CEO was giving his final thoughts. They were meager, uninspired, and filled with that not-so-subtle cadence that is commonly demonstrated by white evangelical males who want you to *feel* the urgency of God's movement. Just as he finished his final word, another organization leader echoed the sentiment with *the* key Scripture: "For God [sniffle] so loved [sniffle] the world that he [tears, voice cracking] gave his only Son [more tears, and incoherent blubbering that I assume ended the verse]."

Here I was—a Black and Filipina woman sitting next to my Chicano husband—drowning in a sea of whiteness. It was the end of 2016, Philando Castile and Alton Sterling had been murdered by the police, Donald J. Trump had been elected president of the United States, and there were talks of a nationwide women's march that would be happening to protest his election. During this white evangelical training, people openly shared their opinions,

and every opinion was anti-Black, misogynist, pro-police brutality, Christian nationalist, and was curated by the ever-inflamed politically conservative white Christian nationalist media. Exacerbating their awful opinions was their inability to act right. One of the men sitting at our table felt moved to convince me that Black liberation theology was demonic. Another person at the table must have been playing microaggression bingo, given how he commented on my hair and skin tone, told me that I don't "look" Asian, and talked of how he was so surprised that I could know so much. As I gave my opinions and retorts, their heads conveniently turned away. It was unfathomable to them that I—a Black and Filipina person—could have a critical thought worth contributing to their dehydrated conversations.

To say that this was the Sunken Place would have been a compliment.

At that time, I was a baby Christian, desperate to give my life to Jesus. I thrust myself into the world of evangelicalism, which used its covert respectability politics to comment on how I was too Black, too Asian, too female, too liberal, and—frankly—too *much* to be anything more than the token outlier needing to constantly be made anew. I thoroughly believed that if I wanted to serve Christ, I had to accept their standards. I convinced myself that the place of violence was the only flourishing place available to me.

In their world, I contained too many demonic identities. To be Black was bad, but to be a Black woman was damaging. To be an Asian woman who spoke freely and interrupted conversation was simply the work of the devil. In order to know the gospel, I had to be loyal to white evangelicalism and Christian nationalism. I did that for nearly a decade. I learned to deny myself, my parentage, my cultures, my ancestry, my intelligence, and my sexuality, and I severed my nonevangelical relationships.

In those years, I learned that violence was holiness.

Violence and Oppression

Before I get to the heart of this book on violence, it's important that I establish a framework for understanding violence and oppression.

We do not live in a world that has concrete definitions of either, and thus these words are thrown around and misappropriated at will and used to create inflammatory accusations. Oppression and violence are synchronous but not synonymous. This means that we cannot switch one term for the other. We need to understand them individually in order to develop our own language and expand our understanding.

Oppression is used to maintain hierarchies among social groups in order to perpetuate a culture that normalizes dominance and subjugation. When speaking of oppression, I refer to Iris Marion Young's article that divides oppression into five categories: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.¹

Exploitation is a system of domination that occurs when a person's labor, skill, and body are forcibly used, without payment, to benefit the entity in power. The benefit includes (but is not specific to) gaining wealth, sexual satisfaction, and higher social standing, and establishing social hierarchies. *Marginalization* occurs when people are categorized according to markers of identity (gender, race, class, age, ability, etc.) in order to expel people, exploit their labor, or exalt the justifications for maintaining systems of power. *Powerlessness*, as Young explains, "describes the lives of people who have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, express themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings, and do not command respect."² *Cultural imperialism* is a strategy that seeks to belittle the voices and experiences of marginalized peoples seeking liberation through use of stereotypes, cultural appropriation, and erasure. The goal of cultural imperialism is to normalize the culture of those in power and deem the other groups as inferior.

The final category, *violence*, extends beyond the definitions that are normative in our cultures. A common misconception of violence is that it is only defined by a physical attack. When I speak of violence, I use the definition that comes from the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (also known as UN Women). It lays out a detailed list of the types of violence that impact women and girls. Because this book focuses on the experiences of sexual violence within the Bible, I'm going to explain the

differences between domestic violence and sexual violence per UN Women's definitions.

Domestic violence is a form of relational abuse in which one partner seeks to establish dominance over another. Domestic violence includes economic, psychological, emotional, physical, and sexual violence. *Economic violence* includes the ways someone will force financial dependence upon a relationship partner. This includes, but is not limited to, withholding money, controlling financial resources, and forcing or forbidding attendance at work and/or school. *Psychological violence* involves manipulative actions taken to intimidate or coerce others into thinking they must be dependent on their abusers in order to survive. *Emotional violence* is done through making people believe they have little to no self-worth through verbal abuse, gaslighting, damaging outside relationships, and denying opportunities to see friends and family. *Physical violence* includes physical attacks (hitting, punching, pinching, shoving, kicking, etc.), refusal of medical treatment, physical force, and property damage.

Sexual violence is another form of domestic violence, but it has its own subcategories that include sexual harassment, rape, corrective rape, and rape culture.

Sexual harassment is when sexual contact (be it physical or verbal) is done without consent or by way of manipulation. Physical sexual harassment can look like touching, rubbing, grabbing, pinching, and slapping. Verbal sexual harassment includes catcalls, comments on body appearance, demands for sexual favors, and exposing sexual organs. *Rape* is forced sexual penetration (vaginal, anal, oral) with a body part or an object. Rape happens when consent is forcibly revoked and can happen in intimate partner relationships, or from family members, friends, or complete strangers. *Corrective rape* is a form of rape meant to force a heteronormative sexual lifestyle on a person who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, or agender. *Rape culture* is a patriarchy-rooted form of control in which sexual violence is normalized, justified, and upheld in order to further perpetuate gender inequality. While rape culture is a universal experience, it is particularly violent in how it upholds systems of racism, homophobia, and transphobia.³

Frictionless Gospel

My experience in the daylong ministry training hit several nodes on the list of violence and oppression. At that point in my life, I truly believed this was the only way to be a Christian. I dangled on their words and wholeheartedly pursued their white, suburban, individualist, status quo Christ. I told myself that the middle-aged white man who wept as he quoted John 3:16 did so because he could *feel* the urgency of this movement to colonize—ahem, “minister to”—these “unreached peoples.” The grandeur of eternal salvation for these low-income communities of color depended solely on the actions of the white evangelical middle-class church and their white Christian nationalist standards.

I fell for Christian urgency, which is used as the blueprint for spreading the gospel. The leader appeals to the collective ethos with a “poor them” narrative, then presents his solution (firmly planted in the white male delusion of grandeur) as the only way for goodness to be done. The message is then neatly wrapped in the pretty bow that is the eschatological promise of eternal life and Instagrammable moments: “These people are poor, but they can have *eternal salvation* through Jesus! Those people could die any moment, but if they receive *our Christ* they’ll live forever.” Christian urgency is more about controlling the masses than it is about extending care; the only cure to the hellscape was the irony of “freedom in Christ” under their control.

I was trained to give the ultimatum: disciple people in this “very effective” mission strategy, or fail at effectively communicating an understanding of God’s love. But according to this logic, God’s love was tempered and always in short supply. Godliness, to the leaders of the ministry training, was about upholding the standards of whiteness and maleness. I had no chance of achieving those standards, so God’s vast and unending love became a constant critique that paved the way for deep self-loathing.

They spoke of love but were mute about injustice. It was as if words like *genocide*, *slavery*, and *assault* didn’t exist in their vocabulary. Bringing them up rendered a Jesus juke and a threat to no longer belong in their little Christian club.

What do you do when leaders can express deep and heartfelt emotions about God but are unable to recognize or acknowledge their own complicity in systems that continually harm people? The God they speak of becomes just as abusive as the ambassadors. When people are unable to publicly acknowledge their role in perpetuating harm, the God they represent is no longer the figure of forgiveness and compassion. They'll spend all that time in the pulpit shouting the name of the Lord and letting the devil live in their actions.

There's a second problem with Christian urgency: it makes salvation a spiritual transaction with only one way to purchase Christ. Say the magic words, or write them on your stuff, and your destiny is secure.

The "cool Christians" in my high school loved to point out how John 3:16 appeared in not-so-secret places: In-N-Out cups, Forever 21 bags, Jesus fish bumper stickers, and Not of This World products. When we saw this verse we'd say, "Isn't it so cool that they're Christian? Look at how they're spreading the gospel." The John 3:16 stamp was meant to set companies apart. Instead, it made this so-called defining verse of Jesus' ministry just as transactional as the purchased items they carried. The gospel—the story of the embodied God who chose to befriend and live among the poor, oppressed, and marginalized—was mass-manufactured and used as advertising content. The vast wonder of the gospel is narrowed down to the transaction. All the other inflections, subtleties, actions, and affections of Jesus are lost. Salvation is purchased through a Bible verse much like the tap of instant pay from a smart watch. There is no longer room for the expanse of humanity; there is only room to revel in the transaction and ensure that it is done correctly.

Frictionless spending garners an exponentially higher profit because it allows the shopper to have a seamless shopping experience with just a swipe, tap, or insert of the card. It's driven on data and minimized human interaction. In return, the seller's profit is maximized with less effort and less need for human connection. Western Christianity assumes the same strategy works in our discipleship. All violence is justified, and our ability to humanize victims is disregarded. The goal is to move the gospel forward by any means necessary.

This is the frictionless gospel: buy salvation, sell Jesus, silence the harm done.

Sexual assault, rape, incest, pedophilia, enslavement, colonization, homophobia—all are tools used to circulate the gospel. Accountability stops being a spiritual practice and becomes a barrier that needs to be destroyed.

In case you were wondering, my husband and I did not end up working for that organization. Maybe it was God navigating our steps. That’s a sweet way to put it. I’m pretty sure it was because I told one of the directors that their proposed ministry model sounded like colonization.

Oopsies.

Prophetic Disruption

From 2016 to 2021 my husband and I “worked” in pastoral ministry with people who have experienced high levels of trauma. I use quotes around the word *worked* because that term implies that we clocked in and out. We used some of the transactional strategies we gained from that awful training; at the same time we were being trained in the model of trauma-informed care by a separate organization. As ministers we came across constant challenges where we had to question which model worked in each specific situation. Sometimes we chose well, and other times we unknowingly sowed discord. Who would trust the ministry of a person who has been trained to hate themselves and unknowingly spread that hate to others?

During those years we lived our lives according to Eugene Peterson’s poetic translation: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14 MSG). Instead, we *lived*. We lived with people accustomed to violence because we too were people who grew up accustomed to violence. There was not much difference between us and our neighbors. We raised our children together. We laughed, cried, and found ourselves exposed and lacking. Our paper-thin walls knew the words that a parent would scream at their child and the hushed sobs of an abused spouse. Our senses became attuned to the signs of domestic violence, and our bodies knew stillness when confronted with unbridled rage. Our home was the prayer closet,

and our windows became the portal of evidence of why the hope of Christ was needed. We realized that all the training we received on being an “effective missionary” was like Great-Grandma’s lace: beautiful, thin, frail, and easily unraveled. The frictionless gospel that evangelicalism taught us to recite was nothing more than words and misplaced intentions.

The picture I have painted may be bleak and dreary, but there was tremendous vibrancy, joy, and connection during those years. I released my ignorant understandings of the world. I guess we’d call this dying to myself. Just as violence was prevalent, so too were movements of restoration. I learned something that no Sunday service or message from the pulpit could teach me: the gospel is not a fairytale of individual salvation. It is a liberation story that is still being written. Like many other liberation texts, it is riddled with cautionary tales meant to teach us what we shouldn’t do in order for us to pursue a better future. From the garden of Eden to the exodus, from the promised land to the exile, from the Palestinian colonization by Rome to the freedom cries heard in the new heaven and the new earth—every stage of the Bible speaks to our resistance, our weaknesses, and the many ways we have failed each other in our collective liberation from interpersonal sin and institutional oppression.

Through those years God set me up for a life of prophetic disruption. While that’s a very fancy term, I think prophetic disruption is the ability to plainly say, “This is problematic.” It stems from an innate desire to see past the facade, find the violence, and expose it for the purposes of restoration. Prophetic disruption does not focus on the actions of traumatized individuals. Instead, it looks at why people are reacting and what they are responding to. Violence can be relational, or the atmosphere can be violent. Prophetic disruption is having the ability to understand how both are intertwined in their own proverbial dance of death.

An added layer of prophetic disruption is understanding abuse and trauma in an intimate manner. It begins with asking the right questions. Trauma-informed specialists (whether therapists, caregivers, teachers, or ministers) don’t ask, “What’s wrong with you?” Instead, we ask, “What happened to you?” Prophetic disruption means that one must exist within that key question, sleuthing and piecing together the stories of violence in order to find the pathway

to restoration. Our question—“What happened?”—asks for many things: the personal account, history, identities, community, quantitative data, governance, money trail, and lore held within the situation. It is the intricate braid of critical thought, cultural analysis, and theology.

I wish I could tell you that God magically called me out of that role and into incarnational ministry. It didn't happen that way. When George Floyd was murdered by a bloodthirsty police officer and the system of institutional violence toward Black bodies that supported it, I stopped believing that Christianity was salvific. I listened as people justified his death. I was silenced or shamed for speaking out. I watched people—specifically white people—engage in a range of responses, from willful ignorance to vainly “checking in on me” to appease their consciences. I was beyond exhausted. I was enraged to have given my all to a faith system that justified the death of a Black man and therefore my own death and the death of my children. I felt betrayed by the people who told me they loved me. I received their frictionless gospel in these moments and faced the heart-wrenching truth that the entire foundation given to me was made of sand.

Something just as important happened: no one spoke of Breonna Taylor. I would go to a service at a white evangelical church and hear lies and foolish arguments about George Floyd's life. But no one spoke of Breonna. I was asked to lead “racial reconciliation” trainings in churches and to participate in community racial justice programs. But no one spoke of Breonna. No one knew the names of Sandra Bland, Yvette Henderson, or Oluwatoyin Salau. And there was no evidence that they wanted to know these women. Then on March 16, 2021, my hope in Christianity fell apart when eight people, including six Asian women, were murdered by a Christian terrorist emboldened by the abusive teachings of purity culture. We were already steeped in the escalated levels of anti-Asian hate as we watched our Asian elders brutalized in public. It was devastating. What made it more exhausting was experiencing Christians center the victims' sex work over their lives and how we in the Asian American community were so desperate to humanize the victims. Though it felt like continuous punches in the gut, it somehow made sense to me. Christianity celebrates converting the biblical prostitutes, not protecting them. The theologies that we embrace become our lived realities.

There will always be danger in the spaces where silence and ignorance are favored. I was trying to get people to see the injustice done to the bodies of Black and non-Black people of color. But the theology limited any hopes of safety or liberation because the theology centered cisgender men. I realized that I existed to theologize and minister myself into silence. I was a pawn for a Christianity that did not want to see me in anything other than a supporting role. Being Black and Asian made me important enough to be invited to sit at their wobbly tables, but being a woman meant that listening to my opinion was a last resort. I was stuck in the intersection of gender and race; my presence was requested but my voice was not necessary. I learned how to boost Christianity by standing still and looking pretty in the name of racial reconciliation. My body was used for marketing; my voice was never heard. I was being groomed into becoming a concubine for the Western church's flaccid attempts at pursuing racial reconciliation. I was exhausted.

As I processed my feelings with a friend, she said something I'll never forget: "Church folk told us about the Rock of Salvation, but it has been broken down into so many pieces that it's completely useless." Deeply entrenched in my trauma and rage, I realized that my image of Christ was rooted in a patriarchal, white supremacist Jesus that needed to be exposed and burned in the trenches of the hell that it had clawed its way out of. I had to know myself and all the ways I exist as a human being worthy of protection and care. I also had to know the ways that I—a Black and Asian woman—am groomed and targeted to experience violence and erasure. I had to create a theology for myself that stopped centering Christ's triumphant victory and proclaimed survival in the face of constant and unending violence done to my body and the bodies of siblings who are marginalized in a society created for cisgender heteronormative imperialist middle- to upper-class white men.

Approaching Scripture

I believe holy texts do not provide us with answers; instead, they provide an invitation to find our own narratives and ask deeper questions. To believe in the infallibility of leaders and trust in their interpretation without questioning will only lead to destruction. Discernment,

curiosity, and accountability are necessary parts of any relationship, so why do we leave it out of our relationship with our holy texts and spiritual leaders? Scripture is the space where questions, callouts, and clapbacks are welcomed.

I am free from the time in my life when blind allegiance, nationalism, and gaslighting dominated my spirituality. I'm glad to see many others on their emancipation journey from oppressive and repressive forms of Christianity. Now we are seeking truth, telling our truth, and letting the truth transform this corrupted institution known as the church. It requires us to silence the dominant voice and understand Bible stories in contexts that aren't rooted in a frictionless gospel. We're taught to cling to biblical stories of triumphant victory and let them guide our way. But these narratives favor the privileged, the racist, the patriarchal, the sexist, the supremacist, and the one who assimilates to their systems of violence. What if the narrative of the gospel is not about the urgency to achieve grandiose victory? What if it's about finding ourselves and each other in trauma's abyss and finding our path to a liberation that heals all wounds and constructs God's kingdom? We've had a couple millennia of irresponsible interpretations and countless exposés of church leaders. It's about time we start believing victims and understanding their path toward healing. Let's start with reclaiming biblical narratives.

If you're looking for a book that dives deep into complex theologies or does contortion performances with biblical translation, know that this book won't do that. My hope is that as we deconstruct our relationship with Scripture and our proximity to Christianity, we give ourselves permission to see our stories within the verses. It is so often taught that the Bible transcends or is triumphant over culture. I don't believe that. I believe the Bible is a book of truth, but truth isn't about having the right answers; it's about finding ourselves in the journey and knowing that we do not struggle alone. This book isn't the pursuit of a holy answer. Rather, it's the reclamation of the way a story can heal us.

A Note on Frameworks

It is important to note that this journey through reclaiming narrative is informed by the intersections of my identity and my own

experience of healing from trauma and journeying alongside people who have experienced high levels of trauma. I am a cishet female in a patriarchal society. I am mixed race in a culture that prefers monolithic models of identity. I am Black and Filipina in a society built by whiteness. I am a queer-affirming, poor, second-generation American, first-generation college student, and survivor of violence. I am a minister, educator, and storyteller. These parts of my identity help guide the way these stories are interpreted.

Since I do not seek to give whiteness or patriarchy a footing in this book, I want to take this opportunity to explain the cultural frameworks in which I interpret Scripture. As a Black woman I am rooted in the social theory and praxis of womanism. As a Filipina I am rooted in the Filipinx* psychological pursuit of *kapwa*. I identify as a kapwa womanist. Lastly, I am an abolitionist. Allow me to geek out about these frameworks with you.

Womanism is a social theory and theological framework rooted in the lived experiences of Black women. It's important to know that Blackness and womanness are not monolithic. Both encompass a wide range. Womanism speaks for cisgender Black women, transgender Black women, and those who are Black and identify as nonbinary or gender expansive. Womanism expands beyond social theory into theological framework in how it centers Black women and, as social psychologist Christena Cleveland says, "The womanists don't give a shit about the consensus or the Church's beliefs or what the sacred texts *supposedly* say."⁴ I've heard it said that womanism isn't "regular theology" because it deviates from the white male gaze. That thinking is an example of the oppressive force of cultural imperialism. It's also a load of crap. To assume that the white male gaze is "regular theology" is to align oneself with the ethics of colonizers, enslavers, and rapists. It's also important to understand how womanism is separate from the whiteness of feminism. The focal point of feminism is equity based on gender and class. This pursuit focuses on gaining

*There is controversy surrounding the term *Filipinx*. I use the word *Filipinx* to describe people who are from the Philippines. It is a gender-inclusive word. Because my mom's first language, Tagalog, is a genderless language I believe the term *Filipinx* aligns closest with the structure of Tagalog. I will use *Filipina* when referring to a woman or a group of women.

equal power, but since feminism originates from white bourgeois women, it specifically centers their pursuit of power. From this vantage point, feminism isn't a liberative pursuit because it centers women who are white, cisgender, and upper class. Womanism, however, analyzes the intersections of gender, race, and class to understand how to dismantle systems of power to create a care-oriented community-based society.

Kapwa is a study born of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipinx psychology) that beckons Filipinx peoples in and out of the diaspora to return to the consciousness of our indigenous ancestry.⁵ The pursuit of *kapwa* is an active stance against coloniality, Western rugged individualism, and American militarization happening within the Filipinx consciousness both in and out of the diaspora. *Kapwa* psychology promotes the interconnection and shared dignity among land and people. As educator Maharaj Desai explains, *kapwa* stands firmly on three pillars: humanization, our *diwata* (spirituality), and giving voice to muted and marginalized peoples. *Kapwa* asserts how deep connection between our inner selves and others will develop commitment to community. Critical *kapwa* pedagogy is the praxis of individuals and communities coming together to pursue collective healing.

Abolition is the work of dismantling and rebuilding. In abolition we dismantle systemic oppression that leads to the trafficking of human beings by way of indentured servitude, domestic labor, colonization, sexual violence, and incarceration. However, abolition is just as much a daily interpersonal endeavor as it is an institutional revolution. Abolitionists question and challenge carceral logics, which are the many ways we perpetuate ideas and practices of policing and imprisonment. To police people is to use force and intimidation to maintain an unequitable status quo that perpetuates harmful power dynamics. I pursue what Sarah Lambelle calls “everyday abolition.” As she explains, “Everyday abolition means undoing the cultural norms and mindsets that trap us within punitive [punishment-based] habits and logics.”⁶ Abolitionists are people actively building a new society that centers restoration, repair, accountability, equity, and human flourishing.

This book is a wrestling and reclaiming. It is a space that honors survivors and seeks to help us see our stories in overlooked biblical

narratives. This book is about believing victims, understanding harm, and being present in pain to know what healing can look like. The Bible is a liberation text, but to know it and love it as such we must see the narratives from the eyes of those who experienced the most harm. I invite you to join me here.

Unclench your jaw.

Drop your shoulders.

Take a deep breath.

Let's begin.

Chapter One

Eve

“Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” . . . To the woman [the LORD God] said,

“I will make your pangs in childbirth exceedingly great;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.”

—Gen. 3:11–13, 16

Banished Woman Blues

no glass out there in Eden
no lies for us to feed in
don't need it when you're transparent

I was made from that man's ribs
a bone-scraped blessing been my dibs
I stopped hiding in *ezer kenegdo*

wretched ol' snake got me good
got me good cuz he knew he could
bit me right in the curiosity

no glass out there in Eden
no lies for us to feed in
don't need it when you're transparent

never seen God's face filled with tears
held each other and named our fears
watched skies coagulate under a curse

gave us food, clothes, and all our sorrow
God readied us for a new tomorrow
exile'll teach you to trust yourself

no glass out there in Eden
no lies for us to feed in
don't need it when you're transparent

Blame

I have few memories of my childhood before I turned six. Some of the remaining memories come from spending my weekends in a rundown apartment building on Linden Avenue in the city of Long Beach, California. That was where I spent my days with my mom, her siblings, and my many cousins. My mom immigrated from the Philippines in 1978, two years after her older siblings immigrated by way of American imperialism. My two oldest uncles left the family home in rural Batangas and were recruited into the US Navy.

My mother's side of the family had the good misfortune of being from an island archipelago that the United States strategically used as its oldest military ally in Asia. The Philippines became a US colony after the United States defeated Spain in the Spanish-American War in 1898. Without any say in our own governance, our country of more than 7,000 islands was delivered to the US military. It was then that the United States began recruiting Filipinx nationals into its Navy.

Filipinx peoples looking to escape the crushing poverty imposed by colonialism could escape their impoverished conditions by joining the military power partially responsible for those conditions. Since the 1900s, Filipinx sailors in the US Navy have fought in every US conflict. By 1947 the United States and the Philippines signed a military bases agreement allowing the United States military to occupy the Philippines and create a pathway of recruitment that could eventually lead to citizenship and sponsorship for the Filipinx people seeking the American dream. My mother's two oldest brothers were among the 34,620 Filipinx sailors who were recruited into the US Navy between 1952 and 1990.¹ Upon gaining citizenship, my two uncles sponsored my grandmother and their two additional brothers and their wives for US citizenship. Once my grandmother gained her citizenship, she sponsored her three daughters and three other sons, allowing them to have a pathway to US citizenship. Together they were twelve in total. My family, in pursuit of the American dream, understood that it wouldn't satisfy the soul if it was done alone. They created a pathway that centered on their staying together.

They were a tight-knit immigrant family from a coconut and sugarcane farm in rural Batangas living in one of the busiest industrialized

port cities in a global superpower. Together they navigated through this new country, built careers, started relationships, ended relationships, and raised families. Of course, they had the all-too-trusted underground network of Filipinx immigrants who imbued wisdom and resources to them. I was born ten years after my mom immigrated to the United States. By that time on her immigrant journey she had gained decades' worth of lessons, losses, and achievements. One thing was certain: they stayed together.

My mom dropped me off at my lola's apartment on Linden Avenue, and I would spend my day with her. I would pray with my lola, watch her clean the house, and watch *The Price Is Right* and daytime soap operas with her. She'd give me some *pan de sal* to dip into my coffee (that was purposely saturated with too much creamer), for snack I'd have rice with sugar, and for dinner we'd have saimin or rice with canned Vienna sausages. The highlight was unfiltered time with Lola. The apartment on Linden Avenue housed my mom's four brothers. Her sisters lived within a short five-mile drive to this family headquarters. We weren't too far away from each other. At any given moment I could walk upstairs into my Uncle Ninoy's apartment, ask Tito Rollie and Tita Tess if I could play with my cousin, walk downstairs to pay a visit to my Uncle Uping and Auntie Sonia, or be really annoying to my *ates* and *kuyas*. When related and nonrelated family members visited, we'd spend our time together talking exuberantly in Lola's apartment, singing karaoke, and eating. We were together all the time. Within that group were the children of the sisters; our aunties and uncles affectionately called us "the original six." Most weekends our other cousins from San Jose would visit and turn us six into eight.

I am the youngest of our cousin group. I tended to bumble behind my *ates*, annoy my *kuyas* as they played their Nintendo games, get into useless arguments, be the butt of most pranks, or wander off in my imagination. These were the few things I learned from those years: no one can make *tapa* as perfectly crispy as Lola, I can accidentally render parties silent when I scream all the bad words in Tagalog at the top of my lungs, and our family stays together. Who I am—my creation myth—begins with those weekends on Linden Avenue.

Our creation myths are love stories allowing us to choose who we are.

When I think of the story of Adam and Eve, I don't think too much

of Eden or the curse. Instead, I think of an immigrant family learning to survive in exile, existing in a land that is east of their Eden. The Philippines has a unique ecosystem. It holds two-thirds of the world's biodiversity and maintains 5 percent of the world's flora. There is no place in the world like our archipelago, and yet the islands are heavily exploited for their natural resources; dictatorships take advantage of our economy; and our *kababayan* struggle to earn a livable wage. Over 6,000 Filipinx people emigrate daily in search of the possibility of a better life.² I think of my mom's side of the family making a new way when the comforts of the homeland were not easily attainable. I think of what it means to make a home while referring to another land as Home. There are two homes in a Filipinx family. The first is the home with a lowercase *h*: the place where we leave our shoes at the door, lay our heads, and sit at the table to eat. The second, home with a capital *H*, is the country we had to leave and also the country we long to return to. I learned how to tune my ears to know which word was being used. *Is your dad at home? We're going Home in December. Anak, don't forget to bring these home. Nieneh, I just came back from Home.* In this way of covert language, we remembered that our hearts belong to the soil of the Philippines.

Being the American-born child of an immigrant family gives me a different reality from that of my mom and her siblings. My Black father from the Mississippi Delta gifted me with an entirely different knowledge of this country. My own American experience was hard for my mom and her siblings to understand. How can a child explain what it means to see the world from two continents? What remained true in our cross-cultural and multigenerational experience is the same: no matter the circumstances, we belonged together. Conflicts may have been many and multilayered, but that didn't change the truth of those early years. I belonged to this family of Filipinx immigrants who learned how to belong to this new country.

The United States has much to offer, but it is not Home. I often think of Adam—formed of the swirling dust and soil—longing to return to the land that knows him.

There was a time when I believed Adam and Eve were our first ancestors. People would proclaim that we all come from the same bloodline. They'd spout beliefs that racism or sexism or any -ism

couldn't exist because we're all related. I was told that it was ungodly and demonic to operate outside of colorblindness because that would disrespect the first man and woman and, in doing so, would blaspheme God.

"We are all the same," said the liars and gaslighters, "because we are all children of Adam and Eve."

I stopped clinging to that belief the moment those people demanded that I assimilate to a theology that requires me to erase my identity to melt into an oppressive norm. It's a pity how those people talked of blood and bone but said nothing of their own punishment-based systems, their bloodlust, and the ways they demand a pound of flesh every time they felt their way of life was threatened. It upsets me when people try to trace our ancestry back to Adam and Eve while completely disregarding the violence done throughout these generations. People want the beauty of the myth, but they can't handle the harsh reality that comes with accountability and reconciliation. I love and struggle with creation myths; people will cling to the parts that serve their intentions and proclaim them as evidence for their justifications. But I do it as well; I use my myth to hide the pain of a childhood laden with violence. Our myths are not fact; they are convenience. Many times they are the fuel that keeps us alive. The problem is that when a myth becomes fact we lose the part of our humanity that allows us to be connected and find restoration through a beautiful story.

I think the creation myth of the Hebrew Bible is a story that is both beautiful and ugly, but I don't think it's true. Instead, it is a tapestry made for survival, because this is what a good story can do: it can keep us alive as death pursues us. In her book *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, the late Rachel Held Evans wrote that the stories of Genesis are not factual historical accounts but a collective remembering of a people—exiled, lost, and frantically searching for freedom—gathering together and bearing witness to the multifaceted character of God. Evans writes of how the origin story of Adam and Eve provides us with questions that help us cling to hope when all that surrounds us is devastation. This understanding changed my relationship with Scripture. I used to be in Christian communities that proclaimed the Bible to be a factual text that could not be questioned or challenged. White men would put their hands

on their Bibles and say that it was God's holy text. Black men would hold it up in the air and say that it is the only truth of life. White women would claim the Bible stands for "*basic instructions before leaving Earth.*" Those same people would use these texts to justify, blame, bind, and shame me. They called this love and expected me to be obedient to their sorry excuse for love. It's sad how a survival story becomes a control narrative in the hands of manipulative people.

Allowing myself to break free from a rigid view of the Hebrew Bible gave me permission to take ownership of myself. Knowing these stories were passed down from person to person, I see the ways in which hope is kept alive and lessons are shared. My immigrant family members will tell stories of Home and leave behind breadcrumbs of warnings to help me understand why colonization, militarization, and corrupt government officials are the reason why we stay in the United States. What I see in this story of exile is a sequence of "beware's" meant to keep us alive and together in the face of the violence we are facing:

Beware of the cunning serpent who asks many questions and leads you to distrust the family; the serpent will change your mind and leave you standing naked and alone (Gen. 3:1).

Beware of the knowledge that tastes sweet but will lead us to destruction (Gen. 3:4).

Beware of the ways you want to blame others instead of seeking accountability for your own wrongdoings (Gen. 3:12).

Beware of the consequences to your actions, for your harmful actions will curse both the people and the earth (Gen. 3:17–19).

Beware of the many ways a heart can be broken and a people can be exiled (Gen. 3:22).

Beware, because when one person does harm, the whole community will suffer.

The story of Adam and Eve breaks my heart. They are the first immigrant family—two people crafted and nurtured by the hands of a God who revels in creating harmony-based communities that cross species, sexes, and divinity, a God so devoted to community as

to prefer the plural pronoun *us*. “Let us make humans in our image” (Gen. 1:26). Adam and Eve have everything they need in this place of wonder. Eve listens to a serpent who tells her that she can gain more and live better, to chase a dream that can only exist outside of God’s ecosystem. She puts her trust in the serpent’s words and does as he said, eating the fruit of knowledge. Eve savors possibility and shares its deliciousness with Adam. Realization injects itself into the place of possibility, and they find their nakedness—their ways of existing within their home—to be shameful.

God finds them hiding and realizes that they’ve eaten the fruit and that they no longer love their ways of existing in his world. God asks Adam what happened, and Adam blames Eve. “The woman whom you gave to be with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (3:12). God watches the children They created turn away from the love that formed them. I imagine God’s shoulders slumped and eyes filled with tears as They expressed Their disappointment and feelings of betrayal. Unable to trust Adam and Eve, God curses the humans and exiles the pair from the place of nourishment—but first God sews clothes and gives provision. Adam and Eve are banished but not evicted. They are forcibly removed from their unique ecosystem and become immigrants in a land that is east of all they know.

Woven throughout is blood and bone, mucus and orgasms, exile and loneliness, devastation and survival. At its center is the way the first humans betray God, the blame Adam places on Eve, and the blame God places on Adam. We read this story and see the destruction of community. Once community is destroyed, the *imago Dei* is damaged, becoming more and more fractured until all that’s left are the shrapnel shells of destruction an ego-driven humanity leaves behind. I have been taught to read their story and use it to sow division and blame. I rebuke that teaching. Instead, I wish we could learn to use these lessons to create a pathway for restoration. With a broken heart, I ask myself, *What does it mean for us to return to Eden? What does it mean to collectively come back Home?*

It’s ironic that the Bible says all humankind is made in the image of God, yet our practices suggest anything but that. Generations of preachers have spewed hatred and contempt toward Eve and every other body that is not a cisgender male. In their eyes, women are the initiators of original sin—made solely to be blamed so that the

patriarchy can remain the standard. Isn't it ironic that the stories told to keep us bound in belonging to Christ are used to divide and conquer our very souls? What's more disappointing are the responses created in the circles of so-called Christian feminism, born in the minds of conservative white bourgeois women who subscribe to the violent powermongering that defines patriarchy. There is no liberation in their interpretations. They are dedicated to upholding standards of patriarchy and complementarianism. They believe proclaiming the worthiness of womanhood is the only way to combat the violence of blame. I've heard their disappointing statements, and there was a time when I believed in them:

“Women are the crowning jewel of creation.”

“You are the life-giving *ezer kenegdo*.”

“Daughter of God, you were bought with a price.”

There's no liberation in objectification. It's taken me too long to learn that. I'm exhausted of women's ministries that are driven by proclaiming purpose instead of advocating for our humanity. If I must prove that I and my kin are useful, then our community lacks the *imago Dei*. God gave me very high standards for what community means; I want no less than the *imago Dei*.

Is it too much to demand something else besides a Christian blame narrative? Ours is a spirituality that sings of the spilled blood and water of Christ, but relegates the blood and water pouring out of the bodies of menstruating people as nothing more than a curse. There's something uniquely holy and agonizing within the bodies of people with periods. It's too bad these revelations are muted and denied. We watch sermons that center the cishet male experiences, read scientific tests done on cishet men, or listen to podcasts that favor the cishet man. Those of us holding other identities are expected to follow along. But what about the people who have periods? What of our blood theology speaks toward our humanity and rebukes the ways patriarchal women are convinced to prove our usefulness?

I was told the first blood spilled on the earth was Abel's, as he was killed by his brother Cain. But when I reread this story, I think of the bloody show that signifies the beginning of labor. It's what happens

at the end of pregnancy to prepare the womb for labor. What if the first blood that the earth knew of was from birth and not murder? Eve's body releasing its womb blood was a necessary sacrifice to welcome new life into their exiled world—but there is more to birth than blood. It is blood, water, mucus, pain, and heaving breathless joy.

I love to spend my time thinking about how the theology of blood can pen our resistance narratives. Eve's blood being spilled in birth is in direct opposition to the militaristic rule of the Babylonian Empire. The essence of the first birth—blood, water, mucus, pain—exists generations later in the torture and death of the Christ. Like Eve, the spilling of Jesus' blood is a form of resistance to a militaristic empire. Ancient Western Asian literary art used blood as a tool to express militaristic might. The tribes and empires of ancient Western Asia celebrated the ways their enemies were injured, bloodied, and extinguished. Blood imagery was a tool to uphold the values of violence and conquest in patriarchal empires. Depictions of men and war needed to show spilled blood and severed body parts to establish the rule of power: the transformation of the Nile waters to blood (Exod. 7:14–25), Samson slaying a thousand men with a donkey's jawbone (Judg. 15:16), and David delivering 200 foreskins (1 Sam. 18:27). Associating blood with death and victory meant female blood must stay hidden. To bleed and live is to challenge patriarchy, and clearly we can't have that in our ancient texts. Blood being used to establish power objectifies the victim. Eve is a victim of Adam's blame, but her blood defies victimhood because she does not die from his accusations. Instead, her blood brings new life into the world. Her blood is resistance to patriarchy.

Jesus being the embodied word of God takes this blood theology from the creation myth further when he offers his metaphorical blood at the Last Supper. Jesus uses the metaphorical language of spilled blood, drawing from the male-centered images of torturous murder and the feminine imagery of giving life through food and feast. In using imagery associated with femininity, Jesus gives us a multilayered understanding of blood: it proclaims his divinity, foretells his traumatic crucifixion, and asserts the humanity of period-having people. Jesus transgressed gender through his blood by favoring the life-giving imagery associated with Eve, the first human to give

life. The blood of the communion is about fertility—the essence of life—instead of the traditionally patriarchal pursuit of conquest.³ For menstruating people, ours is a blood flow that cannot be controlled or contained.

In Scripture, our blood flow is used as a metaphor of impurity; touching menstrual blood merits punishment. But there are two types of impurity in Scripture: sacral impurity is the consequence of a natural phenomenon, like menstruating; moral impurity results from acts of violence. Cleansing ourselves from sacral impurity doesn't serve to remove shame but to wash away excess blood, sweat, and stink. Bathing isn't bad. Patriarchy, however, doesn't give us time to disentangle the two forms of impurity. Instead, it consolidates the two, allowing our bodies to be objectified and our identities to be dehumanized: the menstruating body is impure, as are all the things it touches (Lev. 15:19–24); the punishment for sex during menstruation is isolation (Lev. 20:18); and idolatry in Israel is described as being as impure as menstrual blood (Ezek. 36:17).

Jesus disentangles what was consolidated. He restores sacral purity rituals through Communion. It's important to recognize how Jesus uses images of offering and suffering to establish our intimacy with divinity. When I was a little girl growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, I would admire the adults who were allowed to drink the sacrificial wine during mass. I thought it was a big honor to be able to drink that Jesus juice and know Christ in that way. (Like many kids, I later learned that it tastes awful.) Tired of waiting for my First Communion to happen, I simply asked my mom why it was so important to drink from that cup of (metaphorical) blood. Her answer was simple: “It helps us remember God.”

Blood holds life and memory. I am even more delighted to contemplate how the metaphorical blood of the Communion is transgendered blood made to affirm the humanity of women as well as trans and gender-expansive peoples.

Beyond the pain and inconvenience of our periods, menstruating people have a different relationship with how our blood holds life and memory. There's a correlation between our cycles of blood and the way our bodies hold trauma. Unfortunately, most research on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is done with male war veterans.

It details trauma as an experience associated with the violence of battle, taking attention away from the ways that women's bodies can experience violence and hold it in. A 2011 study of estradiol, a major female sex hormone involved in the regulation of the menstrual cycle, revealed that when the menstruating body approaches ovulation, it will experience more symptoms related to PTSD. The follicular phase (which starts on the first day of blood until ovulation) elevates estradiol levels and signals different events that prepare the body for ovulation. Once ovulation begins, the estradiol level lowers and activates the limbic system. The limbic system of the brain supports the functions that include our emotions, behavior, and long-term memory. As the limbic system activates and moves us into a fear response (fight, flight, freeze, or faint), the prefrontal cortex—which is responsible for functioning control, attention, impulse, and cognitive flexibility—lowers cognitive control. In other words, as the emotional center of our brains rises, our bodies loosen their capacity to control how we process that emotional content. Stress and anxiety heighten, and we experience greater fear responses.⁴

A 2021 women-led study took these findings to understand how it can pertain specifically to people who have experienced PTSD. Researchers studied forty women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-three who had experienced a traumatic event. They conducted the study in two parts: The first was to measure the women's estradiol levels, interview them about their traumatic experiences, and ask them to explain how their PTSD symptoms showed up in the past month. In the second part, the researchers asked the women to spend a ten-day span of time answering five daily questionnaires and completing a PTSD checklist in the evenings. The researchers found that during the low-estradiol days of their cycle, the women had more severe PTSD symptoms.⁵

The sexual violence that lives in our bodies peaks and plunges along with our blood flow. In pouring out his blood, Christ restores the *imago Dei*—the divine model of relational mutuality. Christ reclaimed the imagery of blood willingly spilled, not slayed or sacrificed. Christ needed to transgress gender through his blood because those of us with bodies that pour out blood are intimately connected with remembering suffering. We use this genius to build restorative

relationships. The blood is neither shame nor curse but an embodied prayer for renewal, connection, and belonging, begging for our human community to be restored to the *imago Dei*.

I dedicated a portion of my life to being a trauma-informed practitioner who leaned on science to explain how PTSD and complex PTSD (C-PTSD) can show up in people. I've used trauma science to advocate for people and disprove limiting beliefs that marginalize the vulnerable. But I am also leery of science because of the harm done in its name to the bodies of Black and non-Black women of color. Too much of our blood has been violently spilled in the name of science. It is truly demonic how scientists have forcefully experimented on the bodies of Black and non-Black women of color. It feels counterintuitive for me to use science as an instrument of worship knowing that it's been a torture device for us. I believe that the journey of ending sexual violence in Christian contexts also involves understanding how problematic theologies normalized medical oppression on our bodies. In order to reclaim our theological understandings in liberative ways, we must be aware of what evils arose and how we can stop them from perpetuating.

In her book *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, Harriet A. Washington gives the first written account detailing 400 years of medical experimentation done on enslaved and oppressed Black peoples. With historical evidence, she explains how medical practitioners believed the lie that Black people were subhuman objects that didn't feel pain, and so science experiments were conducted on them.⁶ But what are the origins of this lie that turned into belief?

In the 1787 manual *Treatise on Tropical Diseases*, Dr. Benjamin Mosely asserted that Black people could bear surgical operations more easily than white people and, therefore, didn't need to have the same accommodations that white people did. Furthermore, he claimed that Black bodies had weaker lungs and needed to remain subject to "intensive labor" for their organs to strengthen.⁷

These racist beliefs and practices persisted into the nineteenth century, exemplified in the heinously violent works of Dr. James Marion Sims, who is known as "the father of modern gynecology"

but was truly nothing more than a sadistic misogynoir. He achieved his medical breakthroughs by conducting dehumanizing procedures on enslaved Black women without anesthesia. One detailed account described the sheer evil of his works: “Each naked anaesthetized slave woman had to be forcibly restrained by the other physicians through her shrieks of agony as Sims determinedly sliced, then sutured her genitalia. The other doctors fled when they could bear the scene no longer. It then fell on the [Black] women to restrain one another.”⁸ Sims’s work of torturing Black female bodies earned him accolades in the medical field, eventually leading to his becoming president of the American Medical Association.

Black women’s bodies became the site of multiple curses: the curse of blame perpetuated by the story of Adam and Eve’s exile, the curse of dehumanization through the lens of white supremacy, and the curse of muting our pain through medical apartheid. There has yet to be a reckoning in the medical field to demand that Black women’s bodies be respected. To this day, Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause than white women.⁹ Black women have shorter life expectancies and are disproportionately at risk for chronic illnesses such as anemia, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes.¹⁰ Black women are blamed for health disparities that have been caused by generational trauma, medical biases, and enforced powerlessness from the socioeconomic climate of this country built on misogynoir. The lie persists to this day. In 2017 a medical student shared photos of a textbook from London-based publisher Pearson Education. The photos were of a section entitled “Cultural Differences in Response to Pain,” which circulated the same old racist and sexist lie that nonwhite bodies are more resistant to pain.¹¹

Theologies built on dehumanizing lies result in cultures built on a foundation of hatred. Entire empires were erected and established on a theology of curse and blame. It was the double dose of hatred of the female body and the Black body that developed systems of medical knowledge supporting the subjugation and torture of Black women’s bodies. Non-Black women of color also bear the impact of medical racism. Indigenous women and Latinas have been victims of forced sterilizations to ensure the flourishing of white Christian nationalism within the United States.¹² Violence against Asian American and

Pacific Islander (AAPI) women—fueled by white Christian nationalism’s xenophobic ideologies and the cultural oversexualization of AAPI women—is a factor that directly explains why AAPI women are the least likely to get a cervical cancer screening.¹³ We are the givers of life and receivers of brutality. Hidden deep within our bodies are the lies of an empire so fragile that it needs us to internalize blame and accept torture in order for it to flourish.

I was raised in a Christianity that built whole theologies on lies, blame, and dehumanization. I was told to look at the story of Adam and Eve to know the downfall of humanity and to focus my attention on Adam blaming Eve in front of God. But what of Eve? The curse God gave was done to her body, and therefore her journey through exile was to rebuke shame and find goodness in her body as the pathway back to God. It is not lost on me that Eve is the first one to speak of God after being exiled from Eden. After birthing Cain she glorifies God, saying, “I have produced a man with the help of the Lord” (Gen. 4:1). Here she proclaims that God remains with her though she does not live in Eden, their Home. This acknowledgment is a statement of defiance against the narrative of blame that was given to her by Adam and perpetuated through patriarchy. Advocacy is Eve’s chosen song of worship given to the Lord.

To participate in advocacy is to practice belonging. Eve had to learn how to belong to herself as she pursued a restorative relationship with Adam. When God gave the terms of the curse, They changed the land and altered her body. Adam’s curse was a difficult task: he is held accountable, then rendered powerless. God revokes Adam’s dominion over the land, humbling him so that he learns how to cooperate with it and to develop a relationship that restores the dignity of the woman he blamed. I believe God’s curse was meant to restore us to safety, but we’ve been so busy blaming each other that we don’t even know what it means.

I learned how to worship through self-advocacy when I was pregnant with my third child. I ended up in the emergency room after the births of my first two children. Both times, my birth workers blamed me for my hospitalization. The message was clear: The pain, infection, and illness happened because of me. I was at fault.

I decided to pursue a different avenue for birthing my third child and sought care with a team of nursing midwives at a local birth center that worked in tandem with obstetricians from the local hospital. This pregnancy was mired with the stress from two traumatic birth experiences, the constant exposure to violence and police brutality that led to the 2020 racial protests, and the isolation of living in those early months of the pandemic. I was trying to survive each day and ensure that my baby would make it to term. I worked diligently to ensure that I was surrounded by a birth team who would empathize with my pain and wouldn't blame me as my previous midwife did. Creating this birth team of empathetic and engaged professionals was my first step toward self-advocacy, because I knew my pregnancy journey would lead me to places where I had no language to express what was happening with my body. My team was primarily made of Black women: my doula, who spoke with me once a week to help me set my mindset for birth; the nursing-midwife at the birth center whom I entrusted myself to; my gynecologist; and our pediatrician. It was empowering to have women who believed my pain because they knew the disparities within the system and heard stories like mine.

When I developed cholestasis and my pregnancy turned high risk, the team of nursing-midwives at my birth center laid out all the information and helped me make a plan that was centered on informed consent. When I expressed worries about solidifying boundaries to protect my mental health, my doula helped me create affirmations that I could use to remind myself that my boundaries were sacred. When our newborn son had abnormally high bilirubin levels and had to be taken to the ER for jaundice treatment, his pediatrician called me regularly to check on his health and to soothe me. I am usually unafraid to advocate for myself and others—but those natural skills and abilities are nullified when I have to navigate through the medical field as a Black woman traumatized by horrendous postpartum experiences in this time in history when the death of Black birthing mothers is three times higher than that of white birthing mothers.¹⁴ For me, self-advocacy looked like having a team of people who would not allow blame and misogynoir to ruin my birth or endanger my baby's health. In creating my birth team, I learned how to belong to my body after blame nearly stole my life. In the most frightening

parts of my pregnancy, it was Eve's story that anchored me in the knowledge that advocacy and trust will lead us Home.

Eden was the place of safety, our first Home. It could not handle the conflict of betrayal. Betrayal and blame set fire to the goodness of advocacy and belonging. Safety cannot exist when betrayal and blame loom in the atmosphere. Our return to Home is not the return to a magical place; it is the return to felt safety that gives us belonging in this violent world. This great journey toward belonging is multi-layered; we are learning how to belong to ourselves, to each other, and to the earth. Belonging can only exist in the places where blame is suffocated.