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Hatred and Hell yet Hopefulness

Jacob L. Goodson

[EPI]I...found white people to be unutterably menacing, terrifying, mysterious—wicked: the unfathomable question being...this one: what, under heaven, or beneath the sea, or in the catacombs of hell, could cause any people to act as white people acted?¹[EPI]

[A]Introduction

Brad Elliott Stone seeks to replace the phrase ‘white privilege’ with the French philosophical notion of *jouissance*. His reasons against the phrase ‘white privilege’ are the following: (a) the phrase ‘white privilege’ automatically suggest that non-whites are ‘underprivileged’, but privilege is not what’s at issue in racism (hatred, violence, etc. represent the problems of racism); (b) talking about racism in terms of privilege makes racism a problem of chance, not choice (racism is “the direct result of white supremacy, not chance”²); and (c) “At the heart of the discussion of ‘privilege’ is a presupposition that there is something good or beneficial about being white, male, etc. I respond that there is no reason to hold that presupposition.”³

¹ Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 481.

² Stone, TBD

³ Stone, TBD

According to Stone, the French notion of *jouissance* captures how racism functions in American society. Referencing the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Stone offers readers an especially clear paragraph on what he means:

[EXT]When the Other is not speaking to me, I might “forget” that my existence is depending on the Other. Levinas describes this as “separation” or “enjoyment” (*Jouissance*). Levinas describes enjoyment as follows: ‘In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other.... Not against the Others...but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate.’ Since the Other “speaks” to me, enjoyment is a kind of deafness that need not hearken the Other or strain too hard to hear the call of the Other. Rather, one could innocently consider themselves alone in the world....⁴[/EXT]

Using this as a framework for understanding racism, white people in the US think of their lives in terms of the kind of autonomy critiqued by Levinas: an autonomy best understood as *jouissance*—a separation from others. This kind of autonomy is illusory as one’s existence does not take place in a vacuum, even in a vacuum that contains only other white people. What makes someone a racist is to think that one can enjoy their lives without encountering or engaging with those who look different from them, so one who is racist develops a kind of *deafness* to the existence of those who look different.

Stone argues that *jouissance* leads to three problems for someone who is racist. *Jouissance* makes a person who is racist anxious, indolent, and fatigued. Stone writes, “*Jouissance* results in anxiety, indolence, and fatigue. Since *jouissance* is actually a make-believe of autonomy, there is an anxiety concerning how long one has for play.”⁵ Stone’s use of the word indolent seems to mean both apathetic and lazy: apathetic in the sense that one does not want to know the history or stories of others, and lazy in the sense that one does not want to

⁴ Stone, TBD

⁵ Stone, TBD

know one's own real or true family history. Concerning fatigue, Stone writes: "Since autonomy presupposes that it is alone and the sole agent of action, *Jouissance* wears one out. Dare we say that too much enjoyment is exhausting."⁶ Although those who are racist think their lives are more enjoyable without encountering or engaging with those who look different from them, in the end "*Jouissance*...is no fun."⁷

In this chapter, I continue the conversation started by Stone in the previous chapter. First, I build from the previous paragraph on anxiety, indolence, and fatigue and connect Stone's use of past, present, and future for understanding racism to arguments I made in chapter 4 concerning how the past and future determine beloved community. Second, still following Stone, I argue that Baldwin's notion of white ignorance ought to replace the phrase white privilege when talking about and thinking through the problems of racism. This is when I introduce and work through the metaphor of hell for diagnosing racism in the US. Third, I address the problem of white resentment from the angle of Immanuel Kant's Enlightenment philosophy. I conclude with autobiographical reflections on the most intense manifestation of racism and white supremacy experienced and witnessed in my own life.

The thesis for this chapter involves multiple claims. Instead of building beloved community, racism does all that it can to prevent and tear down communities: I defend this claim by examining the role of past, present, and future for both beloved communities and racist communities. Racism creates a hellish society for all persons. According to Baldwin, the difference only concerns one of knowledge vs. ignorance: black people tend to know they inhabit hell whereas white people remain ignorant of the hell that they have created. Finally, white

⁶ Stone, TBD

⁷ Stone, TBD

ignorance and white resentment resemble what Immanuel Kant calls “immaturity” in his famous essay “What Is Enlightenment?”⁸

[A]Past, Present, and Future in Beloved Communities vs. Racist Communities

Josiah Royce connects what he means by beloved community with philosophical notions of past and future. As I argue in chapter 4,

[EXT]the beloved community is one in which has a truthful memory of the past and a hopeful expectation of the future. The beloved community is a community of truthful memory in the sense that it is, in the words of Royce, a “community constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts as part of his own individual life...the same past events that each of his fellow-members accepts, may be called a *community of memory*.” To be a community of memory means: (a) avoiding using history to justify our own self-interests, (b) being truthful about history even when doing so makes us feel uncomfortable about ourselves or our family, and (c) identifying the wounds of the past.

Beloved community is also a community of hopeful expectation. In Royce’s words, a “community constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts, as part of his own individual life..., the same expected future events that each of his fellows accepts, may be called a *community of expectation*, or...a *community of hope*.” To be a community of hope means: (a) being orientated toward the future—more specifically, toward actualizing the beloved community, (b) being truthful about the past because beloved community cannot be achieved if there is a refusal concerning truthfulness about the past, and (c) thinking of beloved community as the achievement and embodiment of faith, hope, and love.⁹**[/EXT]**

Now, let’s contrast this with Stone’s argument concerning how *jouissance* can be understood in terms of past, present, and future:

[EXT]If one is truly autonomous, it would be up to the autonomous one to make the future what it is going to be. Yet, since the future is unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable, autonomy faces *anxiety for the future*. Indolence, or laziness, is for Levinas about “the impossibility of beginning.” Just as *anxiety means that one does not how the future is going to be, jouissance never does history*. The past means nothing to the autonomous; there cannot be a “beginning.” The autonomous one never gets around to establishing the conditions of the present. Between past and future, between anxiety and indolence, is fatigue. Since autonomy presupposes that it is alone and the sole agent of action, *jouissance* wears one out. Dare we say that too much enjoyment is exhausting.

⁸ See Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” paragraph 2.

⁹ Goodson, TBD

Fleeing from a past and fearing a future, and too worn out in the present, jouissance is best understood...as an evasion. Autonomy is actually not the primary form of subjectivity; it is an effort to escape a world that is actually filled with other people.¹⁰[EXT]

A beloved community requires hard work, honesty, and truthfulness about rehearsing and understanding the past—even, perhaps especially, one’s own past in terms of one’s own family history; a racist community neither wants to know the history or stories of others (apathy) nor wants to do the hard work to tell the truth about their own family history (laziness). A beloved community seeks for the future to be determined by faith, hope, and love; a racist community displays only anxiety and fearfulness about the future because they are afraid the so-called gains of others automatically means a loss for themselves. Building beloved community requires truth-telling about the past and hopeful expectations about the future in regards to faith, hope, and love being the dominant characteristics of particular communities; racist communities attempt to prevent the building of such communities by whitewashing the past and making the future seem hopeless because of the loss of *jouissance*. Instead of building beloved community, racism and white supremacy do all it can to prevent and tear down communities—the communities of others and their own communities because they refuse to tell the truth about themselves and their history.

[A]The Metaphor of Hell and the Problems of White Ignorance and White Resentment

The transition between the former section and this section involves another insight from Stone’s previous chapter. Stone claims, “The other side of white supremacy includes the hope of an all-white future (even if one cannot return to an ‘all-white’ past).”¹¹ Still utilizing notions of

¹⁰ Stone, TBD; emphasis added.

¹¹ Stone, TBD

past and future, Stone turns to James Baldwin's literary corpus in order to articulate the wisdom found in Baldwin's racial antirealism and his description of white ignorance. In this section, I focus on the phrase white ignorance and connect it with the metaphor of hell.

According to Stone, Baldwin's description of white ignorance involves four levels. "First," according to Stone, "whites do not know enough about blacks in proportion to what blacks know about whites"—which means, "the first level of white ignorance has to do with simply not knowing enough about black people and their experiences."¹² The second level of white ignorance, what Stone calls a "greater level of ignorance," involves "the form of white parochialism which limits what and how whites can come to understand blacks."¹³ This second level of white ignorance helps make sense of "Baldwin's critique of integration":

[EXT]Integration simply moved blacks into white schools and provided blacks access to white institutions. The inverse did not happen, which strengthened the [false] idea that whites are at a higher level than blacks, and that blacks were fighting for the opportunity to "move up" to that level. Baldwin accuses whites of not seeing that integration might be an invitation for whites to "move up" to the level of blacks.¹⁴ [/EXT]

Baldwin is not a critic of integration per se but instead calls into question the assumption that integration means blacks joining whites rather than whites joining blacks.

Whereas the first two levels of white ignorance pertain to the ignorance of white people toward black people, the next two levels concern white self-ignorance. Stone claims that the "tragedy of such ignorance is that it produces a self-ignorance."¹⁵ In Baldwin's words, "white people are 'still trapped in a history which they do not understand'.¹⁶ This level of white

¹² Stone, TBD

¹³ Stone, TBD

¹⁴ Stone, TBD

¹⁵ Stone, TBD

ignorance links up with the discussion on the past in the previous section: there is a kind of laziness nurtured by racism in regards to understanding the past. Stone describes this problem as: “White ignorance becomes white not-wanting-to-know-to-tell-the-truth.”¹⁷ Stone concludes, “White ignorance involves not only a lack of knowing, but a decision, a decision not-to-know.”¹⁸ The apathy and laziness mentioned earlier really do go hand-in-hand because both involve a decision of indifference towards history, the past, and the truth.

And the fourth level of white ignorance concerns confusion over their own decisions. According to Stone, “White ignorance involves the belief that somehow the problems that face Black America have nothing to do with them [white citizens]; they are puzzled that blacks continue to be angry with the state of things.”¹⁹ Stone concludes, “[T]his innocence is...part of the ignorance, making white ignorance...morally questionable.”²⁰ For Stone, white ignorance is not only an epistemological problem but also a moral problem.

Putting these levels of white ignorance together result in an overarching ignorance not mentioned by Stone: the fact that racism and white supremacy create societal hells. Because of white ignorance, black people tend to know they inhabit hell whereas white people remain ignorant of the hell(s) that racism and white supremacy have created. I defend this claim in full by turning to Baldwin’s “Down at the Cross.”

[B]Baldwin’s “Down at the Cross” and the Metaphor of Hell

¹⁶ Stone, TBD; quoting Baldwin, *FNT*, 294.

¹⁷ Stone, TBD

¹⁸ Stone, TBD

¹⁹ Stone, TBD

²⁰ Stone, TBD

In order to defend my claim about the hell(s) created by racism and white supremacy, I shift focus and offer a reading of Baldwin's essay entitled "Down at the Cross"—which is published in *The Fire Next Time* (quoted heavily by Stone as well). My reading utilizes the metaphor of hell for understanding Baldwin's argument in "Down at the Cross." My interpretation of the metaphor of hell for reading Baldwin's "Down at the Cross" includes four points, and for the sake of clarity I offer headings for each of them: (1) Baldwin and a different type of religious reasoning, (2) from the question of morality to the reality of power, (3) how racism turns Christian virtues into vices, and (4) the relationship between equality, freedom, and power.

Baldwin and a Different Type of Religious Reasoning—Usually when we think of religious reasoning in the context of the US, we tend to think of the ways that American Evangelical Christians and traditionalist Roman Catholics weaponize the name of God in order to justify their own hatred, prejudices, and the systems of oppression that they rely upon. In other words, we tend to think that only conservatives or Republicans employ religious reasoning for defending their political and social views. In "Down at the Cross," however, Baldwin employs religious reasoning in order to help his readers better grasp what's at stake in a racist and white supremacist society.

James Baldwin rightly identifies racism and white supremacy as sin: "For the wages of sin were visible everywhere."²¹ Baldwin goes on to describe the personal and societal consequences of the sins of racism and white supremacy. What he describes sounds like hell: a place where love is absent, fear dominates, and madness prevails. What's more is that hatred is

²¹ Baldwin, *FNT*, 299.

called love; fear is justified in the name of safety and security; and madness is considered reasonable.

The police see themselves as guardians, perpetrators, and protectors of the hell that results from the sin of racism and white supremacy: “It was absolutely clear that the police would whip you and take you in as long as they could get away with it.”²² The police are not alone in perpetuating hell: “[E]veryone else—housewives, taxi-drivers, elevator boys, dishwashers, bartenders, lawyers, judges, doctors, and grocers—would never...cease to use you as an outlet for [their] frustrations and hostilities.”²³ The sin of racism and white supremacy creates a this-worldly hell for everyone: some people are aware of it while others remain unaware of it. The police, housewives, taxi-drivers, elevator boys, dishwashers, bartenders, lawyers, judges, doctors, and grocers might be the oppressors, but they too are imprisoned by their own fear, hatred, and ignorance. In a racist and white supremacist society, no one escapes hell.

From the Question of Morality to the Reality of Power—Part of what the metaphor of hell reveals is that no one has moral grounding. In Baldwin’s words: “white people, who had robbed black people of their liberty and who profited by this theft every hour that they lived, had no moral ground on which to stand.”²⁴ In hell, everyone gives up their moral code; in hell, morality shifts to a game of power: “They had the judges, the juries, the shotguns, [and] the law—in a word, power.”²⁵ Baldwin clarifies that this version of power ought not be celebrated: “But it was

²² Baldwin, *FNT*, 299.

²³ Baldwin, *FNT*, 299.

²⁴ Baldwin, *FNT*, 300.

²⁵ Baldwin, *FNT*, 300.

criminal power, to be feared but not respected.”²⁶ Living in hell on earth transforms human relationships from being determined by a sense of morality to being reduced to the reality of domination and power.

How Racism Turns Christian Virtues into Vices—Traditionally, the hope that Christians have in regards to their belief in hell involves Christian salvation. This hope gets expressed through the language of Christian virtue: faith, hope, and charity or love. In the hell created by racism and white supremacy, such language might be preached; what is preached, however, is not practiced.

According to Baldwin, Christians will not be saved from the hell that white Christians created because Christians do not practice their own virtues: “I would...love to believe that the principles were Faith, Hope, and Charity, but this is clearly not so for most Christians.”²⁷ What do Christians practice instead of faith, hope, and charity? Baldwin’s answer: the principles or vices practiced by Christians are “Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror.”²⁸

In the “lake of burning brimstone,”²⁹ American Christianity has sailed far away from the virtue of charity or love: “Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty.”³⁰ Traditional Christianity offers the possibility of salvation from societal hell, but American Christianity deepens the hell created by racism and white supremacy. Dante gets it right in the

²⁶ Baldwin, *FNT*, 300.

²⁷ Baldwin, *FNT*, 305.

²⁸ Baldwin, *FNT*, 305.

²⁹ For the phrase “lake of burning brimstone,” see Edwards’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

³⁰ Baldwin, *FNT*, 312.

Inferno: “those who enter here abandon all hope.”³¹ Racism and white supremacy lead to hell and hopelessness.³²

The Relationship between Equality, Freedom, and Power—All of the previous points lead to what might be taken as a surprising conclusion Baldwin draws in “Down at the Cross.” Given that we all live in hell, equality and freedom are not what’s being asked for by black Americans. Baldwin argues that black Americans do not need to be *given* equality and freedom; rather, “[t]he only thing that white people have that black people need, or should want, is power.”³³

Does anyone need to be *given* equality and freedom? Yes, white people do. White people need to be given equality and freedom because white people need to be saved from the hell(s) that they have created. In fact, white people need to be saved from racism and white supremacy: “The price of the liberation of . . . white people is [also] the liberation of the blacks—the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind.”³⁴ If racism and white supremacy result in a this-worldly hell, then all of us living in this hell require salvation.³⁵ In other words, there is no white privilege because no one has privilege in hell.

Stone is right to shift from white privilege to *jouissance* and white ignorance, and I take his thinking even further. There is white ignorance in the sense that white people do not see the hell(s) created by racism and white supremacy. The more white people deny that racism and white supremacy create hell for everyone the more they demonstrate their foolishness and

³¹ See Dante’s *Inferno*.

³² For a fictional and literary version of my argument, see Amiri Baraka’s novel about racism entitled *The System of Dante’s Hell*.

³³ Baldwin, *FNT*, 341.

³⁴ Baldwin, *FNT*, 342.

³⁵ In Stone’s words: “This end of white ignorance will not only free blacks, it will free white people from their own self-inflicted self-deception.”

ignorance about the hell(s) created by racism and white supremacy. In hell, no one has equality; in hell, no one has freedom. For there to be equality and freedom for anyone, racism and white supremacy must come to an end. We all need salvation from racism and white supremacy.

This reading of Baldwin’s “Down at the Cross” leads to what I explore further in the next section: the problem of white resentment. The problem of white resentment is that it pushes society deeper and further into the hell(s) created by racism and white supremacy. White resentment not only makes its case based upon white ignorance—denying that racism and white supremacy result in hell—but also moves us further and further away from the hope of salvation out of hell.

[B]Kantian Reflections on White Resentment

In chapter 4, I mentioned how much Martin Luther King, Jr. worried about white resentment. According to King, anti-racists must remain non-violent in order for anti-racism not to cause white resentment. To reiterate:

[EXT]King worried about white resentment, and he sought through non-violence to avoid white resentment. While I admire King’s conviction on this point, if we have learned anything since 2016—no matter how loving, non-violent, peaceful, and truthful Black Lives Matter protestors behave—white resentment seems unavoidable. I agree with King that the beloved community turns enemies into “brothers and sisters,” but we can no longer assume that the behavior of anti-racists will determine one way or another the resentment of racists and white supremacists.³⁶[/EXT]

On the terms Stone develops in chapter 5, King’s thinking that anti-racists can determine the behavior of white racists must be considered as ‘idealist’. Is there an alternative?

I explore and suggest a different take and tone on white resentment in this section. Rather than attempt to tie the actions and words of anti-racists with the behavior of white racists, I

³⁶ Goodson, TBD

believe that white resentment makes white people less free. White resentment deepens and furthers the hell(s) created by racism and white supremacy. If white people truly want to be free, white resentment must be dealt with on terms of Enlightenment philosophy: white resentment involves a version of intellectual immaturity whereas freedom and equality for all requires the achievement of intellectual maturity. In other words, I recommend the application of Immanuel Kant's argument from "What Is Enlightenment?" to the problem of white resentment.

In taking this Kantian approach, I remain close to the language and wisdom of Baldwin's "Down at the Cross." When he introduces the now famous phrase, "achieving our country," Baldwin writes: "In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other...if we are really to become a nation—if we are really...to achieve our identity, [to achieve] our maturity."³⁷ Achieving our country will happen only when we "achieve our identity" and achieve intellectual maturity: "If we...do not falter in our duty now, we may be able...to end the racial nightmare..., achieve our country, and change the history of the world."³⁸ With Baldwin and Kant, I wish to think in terms of achieving our country through achieving intellectual maturity. Intellectual maturity leaves behind the possibility for white resentment.

In "What Is Enlightenment?" Kant opens his essay with a distinction between immaturity and maturity. He says,

[EXT]Enlightenment is humanity's emergence from self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!³⁹**[/EXT]**

³⁷ Baldwin, *FNT*, 342.

³⁸ Baldwin, *FNT*, 346-347.

³⁹ Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" paragraph #1.

Racists and white supremacists embrace their immaturity in this Kantian sense. In addition to not having a proper understanding, racists and white supremacists lack courage and resolve in terms of telling the truth about the past and the present. Because of their immaturity, we will never “achieve the country” that can be achieved: a country based on actual equality and freedom for all citizens.

In taking this Kantian approach, I also remain close to the language and wisdom of Stone’s argument in the previous chapter: how racism nurtures a type of laziness. Stone claims that racism requires laziness about the past: “Indolence, or laziness, is...about ‘the impossibility of beginning’. Just as anxiety means that one does not know how the future is going to be, *jouissance* never does history.”⁴⁰ According to Kant, one of the vices that accompanies immaturity involves laziness: “Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large proportion of humanity, even when nature has long emancipated them from alien guidance (*naturaliter maiorennnes*), nevertheless gladly remain immature for life.... It is so convenient to be immature!”⁴¹ According to how I understand Stone’s use of *jouissance*, Kant’s last sentence in this passage resembles Levinasian *jouissance*: “It is so convenient [enjoyable or to separate oneself from others] to be immature!”⁴²

In the third paragraph of “What Is Enlightenment?” Kant writes:

[EXT] Thus it is difficult for each separate individual to work his way out of the immaturity which has become almost second nature to him. He has even grown fond of it and is really incapable for the time being of using his own understanding, because he was never allowed to make the attempt. Dogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural endowments, are the ball and chain of his permanent immaturity. And if anyone did throw them off, he would still be uncertain

⁴⁰ Stone, TBD

⁴¹ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” paragraph #2.

⁴² Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” paragraph #2.

about jumping over even the narrowest of trenches, for he would be unaccustomed to free movement of this kind. Thus only a few, by cultivating their own minds, have succeeded in freeing themselves from immaturity and in continuing boldly on their way.⁴³[/EXT]

Intellectual immaturity becomes second nature to racists and white supremacists. Racism and white supremacy ought to be considered an outdated and problematic dogma that serves as “the ball and chain of [the] permanent immaturity” of racists and white supremacists.⁴⁴ Racists and white supremacists claim that they enjoy (*jouissance*) full freedom, but in reality they are imprisoned by their own ideologies and prejudices.

If we follow Baldwin instead of Kant at this point, then we might conclude that what is needed is not Enlightenment but for white people to become more like black people. However, we do not have to force a dichotomy here: to become mature on the terms of Enlightenment philosophy means becoming black in the sense described by Stone:

[EXT]Baldwin’s solution to the agony that white people feel under a racist regime is to become black. By this Baldwin is not suggesting that one should change their skin color or give up one’s way of being. Baldwin is demanding that...white people face the realities of their situation and open themselves to...the ‘tragic sense of life’. In so doing, we will realize that we are all human, all facing the same problems, and able to live meaningful lives together.⁴⁵[/EXT]

With Baldwin’s help, Stone captures what maturity looks like for healing what is broken in a racist and white supremacist society; in other words, Stone describes the substance of our hope out of the hell(s) created by racism and white supremacy. This represents the Enlightenment white people desperately need to experience.

[A]Conclusion

⁴³ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” paragraph #3.

⁴⁴ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” paragraph #3.

⁴⁵ Stone, TBD

I conclude this chapter with autobiographical remarks concerning why I think racism and white supremacy creates a hellish society yet still remain hopeful about friendships, personal relationships, and race relations in the US. My junior high days depict both the hellishness and the hope that I have tried to bring out in the analysis and arguments of the current chapter.

I attended a junior high that had close to a 50/50 ratio of black and white students, perhaps closer to 60/40 with a majority of white students. Somehow, the local KKK developed a strong influence over a small minority of white students in my junior high. The students who had been impacted and influenced by adult members of the KKK in our community decided that the cafeteria should be segregated each day at lunch time. They used intimidation toward white students to discourage them from sitting with black students, and they used racial slurs toward the black students to ensure exclusivity and separation. My closest friend at the time (who is also white) and I were two of the biggest bodies in our grade, so we decided that we would stand up to the intimidation and continue to sit with our African-American friends at lunchtime. While we were both big bodies, he was actually the tough one whereas I was not (it has taken a lot of psycho-therapy sessions for me to be able to admit this about myself). I knew that if their intimidation toward me led to actual aggression and violence, I would not be able to stand up for myself. During one lunch period, this is exactly what happened: outside after eating lunch, I found myself being pushed face first into a metal trashcan while being taunted with the words that I was “eating with niggers” and deserved to be punished for it. Despite this incident, I remained determined to continue to sit with my friends.

I tell this story neither to ask for sympathy from readers nor to make myself out to be some kind of (white) hero. Rather, I tell the story to say that for a full academic year of my life a few junior high boys managed to make the experience of lunchtime in the cafeteria an absolute

hell for everyone. They served as the guardians of this hell, doing all that they could to make our junior high culture submit to the beliefs of the KKK; they put hateful and unreasonable restrictions on friendships and personal relationships. No one was free—neither black nor white students—for that year while eating together in the cafeteria. An attempt to sit where one wants was met with bullying, intimidation, and violence in my case.

I imagine at this point, a reader wonders: where is the hope? For me, the hope came after school—with football practice in the fall and basketball practice in the spring. What do I mean? (In answering this question, I stick to football because I actually played whereas I was a benchwarmer on the basketball team!) Almost every—if not all—of the white students that claimed to represent the KKK at my junior high also played football. After they started their racist and segregationist practices in the cafeteria, I remember thinking to myself: how is this going to play out on the football team? While I am not naïve enough to suggest that black players experienced no racism on the football team (I am certain that they did), I was surprised that the students who promoted the beliefs of the KKK outwardly treated the black players with the same enthusiasm and respect that they did the white players. For instance, the center on the team was one of the students who promoted the beliefs of the KKK; our quarterback identified as both black and latino. Anyone who has played football knows where the hands of the quarterback have to go in relation to the center for hiking the ball each and every play: right up in the butt and crotch area of the center. I was the starting left guard so I served as a firsthand witness of the relationship between the center and quarterback. The center never had any derogatory remarks toward the non-white quarterback having to touch him every single play. Additionally, our running back was an African-American (who went on to play running back at the University of Oklahoma, a collegiate team known for its stars at the running back position). The center never

blocked with less zeal although he was blocking primarily for two non-white players. Both black and white players, even the white players who promoted racism and segregation in the cafeteria, butt-slapped and high-fived each other. The segregation in the cafeteria at noon seemed nowhere present on the football practice field at 4:00.

I am not saying that racism was absent from the football team, but the ideology of the KKK seemed to disappear—at least outwardly—when those white players put on their uniforms. In relation to the hellishness of the cafeteria, the team dynamics of football became my hope for these racist white students. At the time, I thought to myself: if they can bounce their bodies around and into black players—and even put their own bodies on the line to guard or protect our non-white quarterback and non-white running back—then why can they not have a conversation or share a meal with non-white students? It caused so much dissonance in my fourteen-year-old brain.

In several of his writings, James Baldwin talks about how erotic love between black and white people ought to lend itself to possibly healing race relations at the societal level. In other words, for Baldwin, what happens in secret in the bathroom between black and white men or in the bedroom with black and white heterosexual couples should eventually have some impact at the societal level.⁴⁶ Unlike Martin Luther King, Jr., Baldwin defends *eros* instead of *agape* as the type of love needed between black and white people in the US. At fourteen years old, I remember having a similar thought to Baldwin's argument (although I certainly was not thinking about sex in such a hopeful and positive way as Baldwin does): can the constant interaction of bodies during football practice and the open visibility of bodies in the locker room before and

⁴⁶ For a similar argument about how sex also heals sexism, see de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

after practice lead to any reconciliation from the pain and suffering being caused by the forced segregation in the cafeteria at lunchtime?

I suppose what I am trying to communicate with this story is that I experienced a type of beloved community being part of the football team all the while I was daily intimidated by and black students were terrorized by the cultivation of a racist community in the cafeteria. The racism in the cafeteria at lunchtime was a type of hell for all of us, but four hours later the hellishness seemingly disappeared. I realize that this story is only anecdotal, and I recognize that other players might have had a totally different experience on the football team than I describe here. Despite those caveats, I tell the story because it captures a moment in time in my own life where both hellishness and hopefulness were present daily in regards to personal relationships and race relations.