

Article

‘Can’t Hide from God’: On Forgiveness and the Unarmed Black Man

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Abstract: The recent deaths of unarmed black people, especially at the hands of law enforcement, have generated a troubling new ritual, in which the media publically asks family members if they will forgive their loved ones’ killers. The first task of this paper is to cast these petitions for forgiveness as ritual. The second task is to show that black responses to the question of forgiveness challenge this ritual. Esaw Garner, Audrey DuBose, and Allison Jean disrupt the ritual and call white audiences to repentance.

Keywords: race; justice; forgiveness; Christianity; ritual; ethics

A disturbing conversation about forgiveness has developed surrounding recent police killings of innocent, unarmed black men. This conversation has been promoted by the media practice of raising, in a variety of ways, the question of whether family members of slain black men are willing to forgive the police officers who killed their loved ones. After Eric Garner was killed from a police officer’s illegal chokehold in 2014, a reporter asked his wife, Esaw Garner, if her family “will find it in their heart to accept” the officer’s “condolences” ([Eric Garner’s Widow on Accepting Officer’s Condolences: ‘Hell No’ 2014](#)). Tony Harris asked Lezley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown, “Have you forgiven him?” in reference to the police officer who shot and killed her son ([Harris 2015](#)). A reporter asked Samuel DuBose’s mother, Audrey, “can you see in your heart to forgive this police officer?” after her son was killed in a Cincinnati traffic stop in 2015 ([Samuel DuBose’s Mother on His Death: ‘I Can Forgive’ 2015](#)). Walter Scott was shot to death by a police officer in 2015, and Anderson Cooper later asked his mother, Judy Scott, what she felt “in her heart” and whether she feels “forgiveness” ([Cooper n.d.](#)). Each of these questions is directed at a family member of an innocent black man who has been killed by a police officer. Each of these questions asks about whether the family member will forgive. Each of these questions takes place within contexts of racial oppression and the social/moral expectations that accompany those contexts.¹

¹ Each of these examples involves the death of a black man at the hands of a police officer, and the problematic moral conversation that develops as a result. I have focused on the moral conversations surrounding these black men because I have found the pattern of ritualized questions of forgiveness to be consistent following their deaths. I have not focused in this paper on the deaths of innocent, unarmed black women simply because I have not found the same patterns of ritualized forgiveness in the aftermath of their deaths. Studies of public discourse within the discipline of religious ethics should be pursued, and should draw on the #sayhername movement in order to illuminate moral conversations around black women’s lives and their relationships to sacred whiteness. That worthy task, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this paper. In addition, I am using the moral concept of “innocence” in this paper because the innocence of the black men who have been killed by police officers is relevant. First, it is relevant because their innocence amplifies the offenses committed by the police officers in question. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that innocence is a precondition for dignity and the right to life. It is not. Nor do I mean to suggest that the officers would have been justified in killing these men if they had been guilty of some crime. They would not. Second, innocence is relevant because (as I will show in this paper), although the black men in question have been killed despite their innocence, the ritualized question of forgiveness seeks to reestablish the innocence of sacred whiteness, rather than emphasize the innocence of the black men who have been killed.

In this paper, I interpret these questions as a ritual performed by the news media. By “news media”, I mean the interviewers and reporters who ask the questions, the colleagues of those interviewers and reporters who create and maintain cultures of professional excellence, and the editors who help frame and publish the content produced by the interviewers and reporters. I identify these questions as a ritual because, as I will explain in this paper, they perform the ordering functions that rituals perform when societies face the possibility of disorder. In this case, the question of forgiveness reestablishes the sacred order of whiteness and its corollary, black inferiority. Nevertheless, black responses to the question of forgiveness disrupt the ritual by calling for repentance and justice and by keeping all of us in American society (news media, consumers of media, and all members of our demos who encounter messages of white supremacy and their effects) from moving too quickly from the offense of white guilt to the beneficent restoration of white innocence. In order to make these arguments, I will: (1) briefly analyze the concept of forgiveness in order to explore the social and moral functions of this question more thoroughly; (2) interpret the media question of forgiveness as a ritual, drawing on the work of Emile Durkheim and Catherine Bell, and; (3) show how family members of innocent black men disrupt the ritualized question of forgiveness by calling for repentance and justice in ways that are consistent with mainstream theological reflection on forgiveness.

Before moving on to the substance of this argument, it is worth asking whether this ritual is really unique to black experiences. Do interviewers, reporters, and editors of news media, in fact, treat black survivors of police violence differently than their white counterparts by introducing forgiveness as a salient theme of the coverage? I have two answers to this question.

The first is, in a word, yes. It is much more common for media coverage of police killings of black people to include the idea of forgiveness than it is for the same theme to emerge in media coverage of police killings of white people. It is difficult to find instances in which interviewers and reporters ask white families if they will forgive the police officers who have killed their loved ones. To try to find such instances, I used the database of police killings of civilians curated by *The Washington Post* ([Police Shootings 2016 Database n.d.](#)). The *Post* database has searchable records of all such killings from 2015 through 2019. Users can filter those who were killed into categories of gender, age, race, mental illness, possession of a weapon at the time of the shooting, and so forth. In order to address the question of whether or not white families are asked to forgive officers who kill their loved ones, I randomly selected the year 2016 and conducted some research into some of the cases. The database shows that 465 white people were killed by police officers in 2016. I took the first 70 names from that list of 465 white people and ran multiple internet searches for each name, including the name, the terms “police”, “killing”, the state in which the encounter took place, and variants of the word “forgive.” My searches of those 70 deaths revealed zero instances in which forgiveness was a salient feature in the media coverage. I also researched police killings of unarmed white people, because being unarmed is a morally relevant fact for the question of forgiving police officers in their use of deadly force. (Common sense suggests that the media and law enforcement will be more likely to raise the question of forgiveness if a victim was unarmed.) Filtering for “white”, “unarmed” people killed by police in 2016 yields 22 results. My searches revealed that forgiveness was a salient topic in press coverage in only one of those 22 cases. That one instance is the case of Ciara Meyer, a 12 year old girl who was killed in Pennsylvania on 11 January 2016. Although forgiving a killer is always difficult, Ciara’s case is one in which it seems particularly appropriate. In that case, the officer was serving Ciara’s father an eviction notice, and her father pointed a rifle at the officer. The officer then shot at Ciara’s father, and the bullet struck her in the chest. Apparently of their own volition, and not at the prompting of the media, the family has forgiven the officer. They hold the father responsible for her death ([No Charges for Pennsylvania Officer Who Fatally Shot 12-Year-Old Girl 2016](#); [Nichols 2016](#)). The fact that Ciara’s case is the only one out of the 89 instances I explored of white people being killed by police officers in 2016 confirms, for me, the suspicion that forgiveness is not a salient category in media stories about white death at the hands of law enforcement, whether the victims had weapons at

the time of their killing or not.² It is, however, a recurring motif in the deaths of unarmed black people at the hands of law enforcement. The *Washington Post* database shows that 19 unarmed black people were killed by police officers in 2016. Of those 19, forgiveness was a salient feature in media coverage of six: Terence Crutcher, Levonnia Riggins, Antwun Shumpert, Dyzhawn Perkins, David Joseph, and Antronie Scott. Forgiveness has also been an important theme in the stories of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Samuel DuBose, Walter Scott, Oscar Grant ([Oscar Grant Family and BART Issue Joint Statement on New Year's Tragedy](#)|[Bart.Gov](#) 2009), the nine people who were killed at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina ([Berman 2015](#)), and, most recently Botham Jean ([Botham Jean's Brother Forgives and Embraces Amber Guyger after Sentencing](#) n.d.). Some respondents have suggested that the 2006 shooting in the Amish school in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania challenges my argument, as victims' families forgave the killer and press coverage emphasized that forgiveness ([Shapiro 2007](#)). While that may be true, in that case forgiveness was not a theme proposed by members of the media on behalf of the killer, nor was the killer associated in any way with law enforcement. Therefore, that instance of white forgiveness does not undermine my interpretation of the media's ritualized approach to police killings of unarmed black people.

Thus, my first answer is that, yes, the interviewers, reporters, and editors in news media do, in fact, treat black family members differently than white families with regard to the question of forgiveness in the aftermath of deadly police violence. That different treatment matters a great deal for the ritual I describe here. But, in another sense, that different treatment is somewhat beside the point. My second response to the question of whether white families face this question is that it does not entirely matter if white families do or do not face the same question. That is because my argument interprets a specific media practice as a ritual, and the defining feature of ritual is not whether the practice happens within or to some other group. The defining feature of ritual is the unification of a community around sacred objects to reinforce moral norms ([Durkheim 2008](#)), or the reinforcement of power structures that are often veiled to the practitioners ([Bell 2009](#)). These defining functions are performed when black families face the question of forgiveness. They would not, and could not be if and when white families face the same question. That is because white families do not have the same history of oppression as black families do, and so the public inquiry about forgiveness could not perform the same ordering function as such questions do when posed to black families. The case of the 2006 shooting in the Amish school demonstrates this point. When the news media focuses on the family members' decision to forgive the shooter in that case, the history of white supremacy is not relevant to the question of forgiveness, as it most certainly is for black families. Thus, inquiring about and reflecting on forgiveness in that case (or any other case of white death) does not threaten my thesis, because such inquiry and reflection does not bear the promise of reordering a world according to racial categories of sacred and profane. None of this is to denigrate white acts of public forgiveness. Such acts can be morally praiseworthy and restorative, as I personally believe the extensions of forgiveness by Ciara Meyer's family and the families of the slain Amish girls of West Nickel Mines are. It is only to say that the public performance of forgiveness is not the same ritualized activity when white people do it, because the history of racial oppression is absent, and therefore so is the reordering function of ritual.

1. Forgiveness

What is forgiveness? Approaches from secular and theological sources emphasize similar features. For example, from the discipline of psychology, Robert D. Enright and Richard P. Fitzgibbons define it in this way:

People, upon rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right), and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion,

² In the 70 cases of white death and the 22 cases of unarmed white death I researched, three overlapped.

unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right). (Enright and Fitzgibbons 2000, p. 24).

This definition has a three-part structure: it highlights the offense committed by one party against another, the acknowledgment of that offense on the part of the wronged, and the movement away from condemnation of the offense/offender, toward beneficence that the offender does not merit. This is the definition of forgiveness that informs my interpretation of the media ritual at the heart of this paper, because it is widely accepted and because it is capacious enough to allow further reflection on the phenomenon of forgiveness. More specifically, this definition can accommodate different understandings of who benefits from forgiveness. In one sense, the offender is the one who benefits from the act of forgiveness, as the negative response to the offense is no longer emphasized, and benevolence is extended instead. The concept of “debt forgiveness” in a financial sense shows clearly how forgiveness can benefit the offender. I will refer to the benefit that forgiveness carries for the wrongdoer as the “objective benefit”. On the other hand, many theorists (Remnick 2015; Kaufman 1984; Hunter 1978) argue that the benefit of forgiveness is primarily for the person who has been wronged, rather than the wrongdoer. Enright (2001) argues that forgiveness alleviates a wide variety of undesirable conditions for the person who has been wronged, such as anxiety, depression, intense anger, and paranoia. This “subjective benefit” of forgiveness can be present when black families forgive their loved ones’ killers. There seems to have been subjective benefit in the act of forgiveness that Brandt Jean offered in 2019. Jean’s brother, Botham Jean, was murdered by an off-duty police officer named Amber Guyger on 6 September 2018. At Guyger’s sentencing, Brandt Jean extended a highly-publicized offer of forgiveness to Guyger without being prompted to do so by any third party. I cannot doubt the authenticity and subjective value of his act, or of the acts of forgiveness extended by family members of the murdered members of Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina. For this reason, I do not intend to critique all instances in which black people forgive their loved ones’ killers. There can be great subjective value in doing so. Forgiving someone can often be a liberative way of responding to an offense. But the phenomenon becomes particularly problematic when some outside party, such as a reporter, raises the question of forgiveness and does so with an emphasis on the objective benefit, as is the case in many examples I have found.

This definition of forgiveness resonates with Christian understandings of the idea, such as that offered by Miroslav Volf. He writes that forgiveness entails two stages. “To forgive is to name the wrongdoing and condemn it.” But at the same time, “[t]o forgive is to give wrongdoers the gift of not counting the wrongdoing against them”³. Volf’s conception of forgiveness is part of a larger theological framework according to which God’s love provides the normative example of forgiveness. The divine standard of forgiveness is distilled most clearly on the cross, where God acts lovingly toward sinful, guilty human beings by taking their punishment upon Godself. As Reinhold Niebuhr puts it, forgiveness is the highest form of love (Niebuhr 2013, chp. 8). Volf recognizes the subjective benefit of forgiveness, arguing that it has the power to heal damaged relationships, whether on a personal or social scale (Volf 2006). Volf’s account of forgiveness is helpful because it warns against several common misunderstandings of forgiveness that are relevant to the ritual I describe in this paper. For example, Volf cautions against the impulse to separate repentance from forgiveness completely. On the contrary, Volf insists that forgiveness must involve some movement such as repentance, contrition, or apology on the part of the wrongdoer. He writes that to receive forgiveness is to “receive *both* the accusation and the release from debt ... how do we receive the accusation? By confessing our offense and repenting of it” (Volf 2006, pp. 153–54). In other words, God and neighbor may freely and unconditionally offer humans forgiveness, but humans cannot receive it without repenting. The need for contrition on the part of the wrongdoer is important for the conversation about police officers killing unarmed black people. Contrition must be present, but often is not a meaningful feature of the

³ Both quotations are from (Volf 2006, pp. 129–30).

media ritual of raising the question of forgiveness. As I will show in the last section of the paper, black responses to this ritual disrupt it largely by reminding listeners about this basic aspect of forgiveness. In addition, Volf notes that forgiveness can often be confused with a simple declaration of innocence (Volf 2006, pp. 122, 130). But forgiveness is not a posture that assumes innocence by ignoring the offense. Prior to releasing an offender from debt, the person who forgives must name the debt and condemn it. The assumptions that forgiveness bears no relation to the offender's repentance and that forgiveness simply means innocence are, for Volf, two confused ways of thinking about forgiveness. In light of the media ritual of asking black families to forgive, it seems they are not merely theological problems—they are social ethical problems as well.

2. Ritual

Confused though they may be, members of the media have developed a ritual with forgiveness at its heart. For Durkheim, ritual was related to the sacred object and moral norms of a community, which is a group of individuals who overcome isolation by physically coming together around a sacred object. The status of the sacred object is evident in the prohibitions surrounding it. For many Durkheimian thinkers, "religion" is not something confined to churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places that conventional wisdom typically associates with the term. It is something that can be found in unexpected places throughout society. These unexpected eruptions of religious gathering around sacred objects reveal significant features of human identity. This is largely because, wherever religious rituals (including the ritualized media practice of raising the question of forgiveness) occur, they do so in order to reinforce the moral norms that society imparts to individuals. For Durkheim, ritualized gathering around sacred objects serves the purpose of celebrating and reinforcing the moral norms of the society in question. Durkheim's theory shares a "projectionist" quality with the theories of Marx, Freud, and others. Thus, in the work that religious people do, they are projecting social realities and ideals onto a supernatural screen, not recognizing that the things they say refer to natural, social processes instead of supernatural ones. Even if such people are mistaken in their understanding of the source of their morality, according to Durkheim, those moral norms are still crucial for the identity and functioning of the collective. Engaging in ritual brings individuals together out of isolation, in relation to each other and their sacred object, in order to affirm moral ideals. Durkheim's theory has illuminating power when used to think about the media practice of raising the question of forgiveness to families of black men who have recently been killed by police officers. All of these features can be seen in a white supremacist society that repeats this practice with grim regularity. Durkheim distinguishes between negative and positive rituals (Durkheim 2008, bk. III). Negative rites are those that separate the profane from the sacred by a series of prohibitions and abstentions. Positive rites are those that affirm the status of the sacred by paying it special reverence, as with offerings and sacrifices.

Durkheim's model of ritual—especially his distinctions between negative and positive rituals—offers resources for thinking about the public act of raising the question of forgiveness to black people whose innocent loved ones have recently been killed. If the scene I described earlier is a ritual, what is the sacred around which the practice revolves? In her book *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Kelly Brown Douglas argues that "whiteness" has been considered "sacred property" in America, from the colonial period through today (Douglas 2015). As sacred, whiteness is set apart, considered more valuable, protected, and endowed with special privileges, such as legitimizing the use of force and authorizing exemptions from moral norms. Imagining whiteness as sacred in America makes it clear that asking for forgiveness in the wake of an innocent, unarmed black person's killing is a meaningful public practice. Raising the question of forgiveness in this context functions in several ways to separate and reaffirm the ideal of whiteness as sacred. First, consider the ways in which this practice qualifies as a negative ritual. Raising this question operates according to a confused understanding of forgiveness, moving too quickly from the offense to beneficence, without adequate attention to justice and repentance, which Volf shows are essential for forgiveness to be given and received in a meaningful way. In so doing, it establishes certain prohibitions that black

people are expected to observe in these particular circumstances. Most obviously, the question suggests that, despite the tragic events that so obviously violate basic standards of justice, and despite the fact that the details of these events are often readily available for anyone to see on YouTube, black families are prohibited from seeking full justice because justice would result in public declarations of guilt. Durkheim might say that raising the question in these situations separates blackness as profane from whiteness as sacred by introducing into the discourse the possibility—and indeed, the expectation—that black families cannot hold whiteness accountable to the basic standards of justice (such as public declarations of guilt when obviously appropriate) according to which American society ostensibly operates. Listen to what Durkheim says about the sacred in his reflections on negative ritual, bearing in mind both Kelly Brown Douglas's theory of whiteness as sacred property and also the act of asking black families to forgive. "Everything that is sacred is an object of respect", Durkheim writes, "and every feeling of respect is translated into inhibitions by the person who feels it . . . [the representation of a respected being] is armed to stave off any other representation that contradicts it, whether wholly or in part. The sacred world exists in antagonistic relationship to the profane world. They correspond to two forms of life that are mutually exclusive, or at least that cannot be lived at the same moment with the same intensity . . . When we think of holy things, the idea of a profane object cannot come into mind without finding resistance—something in us opposes letting it in. It is the representation of the sacred that does not tolerate this nearness." (Durkheim 2008, p. 236).

In order to protect sacred whiteness, society separates it from the possibility that it could be found guilty in relation to profane blackness. Asking black family members to forgive their loved ones' killers draws a line between whiteness and blackness by introducing the possibility that blackness will not corrupt whiteness by emphasizing its guilt in public. Not only are white killers not declared guilty by the US criminal justice system (and the importance of this point cannot be overemphasized in the entire discussion of race, guilt, and innocence in America), but those killers are also put forward as candidates for guilt to be relieved and innocence to be approximated through this ritualized request for forgiveness.

Thus as a negative rite, asking black families to forgive their loved ones' killers prohibits sacred whiteness from bearing the burden of guilt in relation to profane blackness. But it establishes another important prohibition around sacred whiteness, as well. Not only does it suggest that black families are prohibited from seeking justice and declaring guilt, it also suggests that they should maintain their position in a public hierarchy on the basis of race. Demanding justice involves empowerment, whereas forgiveness is more commonly associated, rightly or wrongly, with postures of deference. To insist on justice and someone else's guilt gives the appearance of power over them. To forgive, on the other hand, often appears deferential because it does not necessarily move through the posture of standing up and insisting on justice in the face of guilt. The associations of justice with power and forgiveness with deference rely on a confused understanding of forgiveness. After all, as Volf shows, forgiveness includes the empowering act of condemning the offense. In addition, many thinkers have argued persuasively that forgiving another is, in fact, an act of defiance and self-empowerment. James Cone, for example, argued that the families of the slain members of Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina defied the hateful work of Dylann Storm Roof and declared their victory over him in granting forgiveness. "It's victory out of defeat", Cone claims, highlighting the subjective benefit of the act. "It is the weak overcoming the strong. It's 'You can't destroy my spirit. I have a forgiving spirit because that's what God created me to be. You are not going to destroy that.' When they forgive, it is a form of resistance, a kind of resilience. It is not bowing down. That is misunderstood by a lot of people, even black people, and even some black ministers. It's part of that tragic experience of trying to express your humanity in the face of death and not having any power." (Remnick 2015). Cone offered these words as a response to the unprompted act of forgiveness offered by the family members of the murdered parishioners of Mother Emmanuel Church. But his words could apply equally well to Brandt Jean's extension of forgiveness to Amber Guyger. Despite the work of writers like Cone and Volf, the empowering and defiant nature of black forgiveness is often lost on white audiences who,

as Malcolm X argued, approve of black Christian forgiveness because it appears, on the surface, less threatening to white supremacy than pursuits of justice and the use of force. (Cone 1992, chp. 9). When members of the media ask black families if they will forgive the killers of their innocent loved ones, the tenor of empowerment and defiance is absent. To raise the question of forgiveness in this context is to suggest that the appropriate response for a black family in this situation is not to seek empowerment, but rather to maintain a deferential posture.

The ritual has positive functions, as well. Saying that may be commonsensical, as the negative and positive functions of rites cannot ultimately be neatly distinguished from each other. In any case, it is helpful to consider the positive functions of this ritual, which affirm the sacred status of whiteness, along with the negative prohibitions that distance it from profane blackness. Durkheim writes about “sacred beings” and the need for religious ritual to affirm their status, especially during times when the gods, the crops, the animals, or the landscape are threatened. Durkheim’s reflection on the role of ritual in affirming the sacred to stave off these forms of vulnerability resonates with American society’s elevation of whiteness as sacred. “These periodic collapses of nature bear witness to the fact that in corresponding epochs, the sacred beings on which the animals, plants, rain, and so on depend pass through the same critical states; so they, too, have their periods of collapse. But man cannot watch these spectacles as a neutral witness. So that he may live, universal life must continue, and therefore the gods must not die.” (Durkheim 2008, p. 255) In an earlier passage, Durkheim notes that the “members of a totem can remain themselves . . . only if they periodically restore the totemic principle that is in them.” (Durkheim 2008, p. 250). The sacred status of whiteness is called into question any time publically-accessible videos depict white people killing innocent, unarmed black people. Thus, there is an intense need to affirm the sacred status of whiteness in the wake of these killings. The public question of forgiveness plays this positive function by performing the opposite functions for whiteness that it did for blackness. While it separated profane blackness by diminishing its ability to hold whiteness accountable for its guilt, this public ritual reassures America that the innocence of whiteness can and will be restored. And while it separated profane blackness by restricting it to more effacing and deferential postures, this ritual reassures America that positions of power—including the ability to stand up and seek justice—correspond primarily to whiteness. In a Durkheimian sense, the positive function of this ritual is to affirm white innocence and power.

Durkheim is not the only theorist whose work on ritual illuminates the meaning behind the practice of asking this question of forgiveness. Catherine Bell’s work can be helpful in this regard, as well. It might seem like a strange choice to draw on Bell, given that her work on ritual has called into question the entire scholarly enterprise of analyzing “religious people” on the basis of something called ritual. For Bell, scholarly invocations of ritual generally perpetuate the problematic prioritization of thought over action and assume a privileged “knower” (the scholar) in relation to a benighted “known” (the religious person under the scholar’s gaze). For these and other reasons, she prefers to use the terms “practice” and “ritualization” to describe the kinds of acts that scholars in religious studies, anthropology, and sociology have more commonly called “ritual.” Even though she issues profound challenges to academic uses of the category of ritual, her work still makes claims about this form of practice that are relevant to the question of forgiveness posed to black families following the killing of unarmed, innocent black people. For the purposes of this paper, I want to apply two of Bell’s insights to this question of forgiveness.

The first of Bell’s concepts that I want to look at is what she calls “redemptive hegemony.” For Bell, redemptive hegemony “recognizes the dominance and subordination that exist within people’s practical and un-self-conscious awareness of the world . . . This awareness is a lived system of meanings, a more or less unified moral order, which is confirmed and nuanced in experience to construct a person’s sense of reality and identity.” (Bell 2009, p. 83). Although Durkheim’s theory highlights the ways that sacred and profane are separated through certain acts, Bell’s speaks to the scene of public forgiveness more directly by noting that power relations and forms of identity are created through these practices. In the case of raising the question of forgiveness to black people grieving their killed

family members, the forms of power being strategically invoked shape identities along the lines of racial dominance and subordination. What Bell shows is that raising the question of forgiveness creates identities with certain expectations for guilt and innocence, empowerment and deference that correspond to race. Bell argues that “the redemptive hegemony of practice does not reflect reality more or less effectively; it creates it more or less effectively.” (Bell 2009, p. 85). If this is so, then the question of forgiveness has urgent implications for how all of us in American society see ourselves and each other.

The second relevant feature of Bell’s work is her reflection on “misrecognition”. People who engage in practices of ritualization offer explanations of the nature and function of their actions. But according to Bell, their actions also have functions that the actors often do not recognize. Channeling Foucault, Bell notes that “people know what they do and they know why they do what they do, but they do not know what what they are doing does.” (Bell 2009, p. 108). Agents participating in a ritualized practice can offer an explanation of their behavior, but they are often “blind” to the strategic ways in which this particular practice sets itself off from other actions. “For our purposes”, Bell writes, “it is a strategic ‘misrecognition’ of the relationship of one’s ends and means.” (Bell 2009, p. 108). What is it that journalists think they are doing when they raise this particular question? No doubt they would reply that they are getting the story, stimulating a worthwhile response, or pursuing other related goals. And yet, the question of forgiveness in the context of white supremacy and black oppression does so much more than that. It sets sacred apart from profane on questions of innocence and guilt, empowerment and deference. It recreates power dynamics that have deep roots in American history. And in practicing those “other”, misrecognized functions, the question of forgiveness performs two other tasks, as well. For one, it recalls a cherished but impoverished understanding of the Civil Rights Movement. Looking back on the Civil Rights Movement from the vantage point of the 2010s, white America remembers the period as one in which many black people—most notably Martin Luther King, Jr.—forgave white people and refused to respond to violence in kind. This sanitized story omits other strategies in the Civil Rights Movement. These other strategies included the willingness to use force to pursue justice, as recent studies by Charles Cobb, Jr. (Cobb 2015), Akinyele Omowale Umoja (2014), and Hill (2006) have emphasized. The sanitized story also elides the very real threat that King’s language, non-violent though it was, presented to white people. Asking the question of forgiveness in these contexts reassures white audiences that black victims of violence will continue to live up to a domesticated and selective understanding of the Civil Rights Era. The other misrecognized effect of this question is that, morally speaking, it shapes the discourse around white supremacy and black suffering in an asymmetrical way. In these public exchanges, black actors are expected to adhere to more exacting moral standards than their white counterparts are. Recall that Niebuhr calls forgiveness the highest form of love (Niebuhr 2013, chp. 8). And so in asking about forgiveness, interviewers, reporters, editors, and consumers of news media put the most demanding moral norm possible in front of black survivors of white supremacy. Justice is a less demanding moral norm, and a more natural one for all people, including the families of Eric Garner, Samuel DuBose, and others, to seek. Bell’s discussion of misrecognition shows that when members of the news media raise the question of forgiveness to black victims of police violence, they perform two acts that we (meaning members of the media who ask the question and those of us who consume it uncritically) in America don’t fully understand. We recall a distorted memory of the Civil Rights Era to comfort white fear, and we imply that black people must adhere to disproportionately demanding moral norms in the face of these public tragedies. Part of the reason why Bell’s concept of misrecognition is so illuminating in this context is that, because the function of the act is concealed from the agent, anyone can repeat the act, regardless of the particular features of their identity. Because the purpose is hidden, it would be just as easy for a black reporter to raise the question as it would be for a white reporter, and the concealed function would be the same in both cases. Durkheim’s comment on religious rituals is relevant: “the reasons people give to explain their actions to themselves have not yet been refined and rarified by informed reflection.” (Durkheim 2008, p. 9).

3. Disruptions

If the practice of raising the question of forgiving their loved ones' killers to black families amounts to a ritual, performing several functions of ritual that Durkheim and Bell identify, then black families have developed techniques to disrupt those rituals. In their responses to the questions of forgiveness, black family members remind the American public that forgiveness cannot be so easily asked or given. Three women's recent responses to the question of forgiveness have performed this disruption particularly clearly. They are Audrey DuBose, Esaw Garner, and Allison Jean.

Samuel DuBose was shot and killed in July, 2015 during a traffic stop in Cincinnati, and the encounter was captured on the body camera of the police officer who killed him. News outlets picked up on the story and showed the footage, and the DuBose family suddenly found itself in the public spotlight. When asked about her son's death, Audrey DuBose responded in this way:

For as long as I've been living on earth, I've been loving the Lord. And I know the Lord. And I know the wrath of God. I also know the love of God. So I just thank God that everything is being revealed. I knew that He loved my child. I knew that this was not going to be uncovered. And I pray that everybody out there, all the soldiers who was out there marching with me for justice for my son, I thank you and I hope that you continue to do this, not just for my son but for many others. And I'm ready to join the battlefield. Because my heart goes out for so many ... there's been unjust. But ya'll got to realize that ... God is God. We're just the soldiers. He fights the battle.

After this response, the exchange continued with a member of the media posing this question: "Can you see it in your heart to forgive this person, this officer, whether he is convicted or not?" DuBose replied by saying, "If he asks forgiveness, oh yeah. I can forgive him. I can forgive anybody. God forgave us. I didn't even think nothing about him not getting convicted. I was told that this man was released and no one could find him. But he can't hide from God. See God is almighty. So I wasn't worried about that, neither." ([Samuel DuBose's Mother on His Death: 'I Can Forgive' 2015](#)). The effects of the ritualized question of forgiveness are to reestablish the innocence of sacred whiteness and the deference of profane blackness, to confirm selective and sanitized association of black Christianity with the non-violence of the Civil Rights Era, and to assign a higher moral standard to African Americans than those to white Americans are held. But DuBose's words disrupt all the functions of this ritual. Consistent with Volf's theory, DuBose insists that sinners must first repent before receiving forgiveness. She calls for justice twice in these brief statements. She mentions battles twice and claims that those who fight for justice are soldiers. It is God, she says, who ultimately directs the battle for justice. Lastly, she says that her son's killer cannot hide from God. Despite all her insistence that forgiveness cannot be requested or understood apart from justice, ABC News published video of these comments online under the headline: "Samuel DuBose's Mother on His Death: 'I Can Forgive'". A more appropriate headline might have been: "Audrey DuBose on her Son's White Killer: 'He Can't Hide from God'". DuBose shows that the media operates under a confused concept of forgiveness. Whether or not the media can understand the message, Audrey DuBose is saying that one cannot simply ask for forgiveness in the face of such an egregious sin.

Consider also the response of Esaw Garner, whose husband Eric was killed during an encounter with police officers in Staten Island in July 2014. Eric Garner was approached by plainclothes police officers who suspected him of selling untaxed cigarettes. A bystander captured footage of the scene on his cell phone camera, which showed Eric Garner asking to be left alone before several police officers dragged him to the ground. One of the officers used an illegal chokehold which was ultimately found to be the direct cause of Garner's death. As they took him to the ground, Garner repeatedly cried out "I can't breathe." After the cell phone video went viral, the Garner family was thrust into the public spotlight and Esaw Garner answered the question of forgiveness in a public forum. A member of the media asked Garner the following question during a press conference: "Officer Pantaleo ... has offered his condolences. Will the family find it in their heart to accept it?" Garner responded:

Hell no. The time for remorse would have been when my husband was screaming to breathe. That would have been the time for him to show some type of remorse or some type of care for another

human being's life, when he was screaming 11 times that he can't breathe. So there's nothing that him or his prayers or anything else will make me feel any different . . . No, I don't accept his apology, no, I could care less about his condolences. No, I could care less. He's still working, he's still getting a paycheck, he's still feeding his kids, and my husband is six feet under, and I'm looking for a way to feed my kids now. Who's going to play Santa Claus for my grandkids this year? Cause he played Santa Claus for my grandkids—who's going to do that now? ([Eric Garner's Widow on Accepting Officer's Condolences: 'Hell No' 2014](#)).

Like DuBose, Garner subverts the media ritual of forgiveness, which reestablishes the innocence of sacred whiteness, the deference of profane blackness, the association of black Christianity with non-violence, and moral standards that are asymmetrically high for black Americans. Garner denounces the sin of white supremacy without any concessions to the possibility of reconciliation. Garner forces whiteness to encounter its sin and guilt. This is consistent with Volf's statement about the need to repent before forgiveness can be received. Garner's complete rejection of the question suggests that an encounter with guilt is the only choice, and it is not even offered as a means to receiving forgiveness. The sin of killing an innocent human being cannot be undone, and the guilt must be condemned. It cannot be washed away by asking for forgiveness in confusion and superficiality. Like DuBose, Garner refuses to let whiteness escape its guilt in a public ritual. In doing so, she challenges norms that declare whiteness innocent, coerce black effacement, generalize non-violence to all black Christians, and expect the highest form of love from someone who should be seeking justice.

Allison Jean's response to the question of forgiveness echoes these themes. After her son Botham was murdered, Jean listened as her son Brandt offered a sincere and moving gesture of forgiveness to Botham's murderer at the sentencing. At Botham's memorial service after the sentencing, Allison explained the context and acknowledged the subjective benefit of Brandt's gesture, but insisted that justice cannot be overlooked while the media and consumers fixate on forgiveness.

"Forgiveness for us as Christians is a healing for us, but as my husband said, there are consequences. It does not mean that everything else we have suffered has to go unnoticed. We're leaving Dallas this week, but you all must live in Dallas and you all must try to make Dallas a better place . . . What you saw and what you heard in the courtroom really showed what your system is and you must seek to do something about it . . . You saw a contaminated crime scene, you saw deletion of evidence by persons in high offices. You saw turning off of body cams and saw cameras in the vehicles. You saw investigations that were marred with corruption and throughout the trial what I kept saying to myself is, 'Botham was a child of God and we know he did not deserve what he got.' The most hurtful part is for me that even after he was shot, he was left to die. There are many Christians who asked me if I would forgive Amber. I will leave my forgiveness for Amber to myself. God knows my heart." ([Branigin 2019](#)).

Allison Jean's situation is somewhat different from those of Audrey DuBose and Esaw Garner, because her son Brandt raised the question of forgiveness of his own accord, while for the other two, the question was raised by members of the media. Nevertheless, Allison preemptively disrupts attempts on the part of white Americans to focus on forgiveness, and she does so by emphasizing the same themes that DuBose and Garner did. For Allison Jean, forgiveness cannot distract white people away from the reality of white supremacy and the desperate need for justice in the face of it. Her words insist that people who have not adequately moved through the difficult moment of condemnation cannot be ready to receive the highest form of love. Indeed, focusing on the objective status of white people and framing that status in terms more proximate to innocence than guilt allows us to avoid all the factors that led to Botham Jean's death, made Guyger's conviction uncertain, and resulted in a woefully short sentence. In a Durkheimian sense, restoring white innocence is a prohibition around sacred whiteness that sets it apart from profane blackness. If Guyger is found guilty and all the unjust factors of the case are exposed without any extension of love to mitigate the guilt and excuse the injustice, the sacred status of whiteness will be in serious jeopardy.

The responses offered by Audrey DuBose, Esaw Garner and Allison Jean defy the ritual of white forgiveness in many ways. These responses disrupt the process of reordering a society in crisis along the traditional lines of white supremacy and black inferiority. They subvert collective practices that reinforce black deference and stall black empowerment. They tell an alternative story that critiques a selective rendering of the Civil Rights Era. They force us to ask why we who produce and consume the racialized stories about death and forgiveness in America expect people who have just suffered tremendous tragedy to extend the highest form of love to those responsible for the tragedy. Not only do the responses of DuBose, Garner, and Jean illuminate these issues; they also resonate with Volf's mainstream Christian insistence that one must repent before forgiveness can be received. If the ritualized way in which this country maintains a terrible racial hierarchy was not enough, their resonance with such a mainstream Christian idea is another reason for white Christians to pay attention and repent.

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