

Creative Justice

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by
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The first two pieces of music you just heard are by two of America's greatest culture shapers. The first, "Black Beauty," is one of the early compositions—1928—of Duke Ellington, arguably America's greatest composer. The second, "Lazy River," was played by the incomparable Louis Armstrong and his orchestra, recorded in 1931. No other artist influenced trumpet playing and vocal performance more than he. The third and final piece, "Elijah Rock" was Mahalia Jackson's concluding song at her famed 1967 Easter Sunday concert in Philharmonic Hall at New York's Lincoln Center. Jackson was the leading gospel singer of her era and one of the greatest ever.

Ellington and Armstrong, whose careers extended from the end of the First World War through the Civil Rights era, helped to define 20th-century American culture to an extent that is not yet adequately comprehended. They are, moreover, two of the *world's* most influential 20th-century musicians. As early as the 1930s they were being cheered wildly across Europe. According to Ken Burns, who produced the award winning PBS series "Jazz," a Paris critic commented that Ellington's music "revealed the very secret of the cosmos." And yet, for almost all of their 50+ years of innovation, improvisation, recording, and historic performances, Ellington and Armstrong and countless other black musicians—like African Americans generally—could not appear publicly with integrated ensembles or stay in "white" hotels. They were

segregated, humiliated, and sometimes endangered, even while Americans of every color went wild over their music. Those were the segregation years—the second half of that long century between emancipation and civil rights. Burns quotes Ellington as saying that when he was welcomed by throngs of enthusiasts in Europe in March of 1939, “For the first time in my life I had the feeling of being accepted as an artist, a gentleman, and a member of the human race.”

In the three pieces just played, you could hear many of the elements—ragtime, blues, and spirituals, among them—that creative artists, beginning in New Orleans, absorbed and adapted as they invented a new, improvisational music that came to be called jazz. I especially want to emphasize the originating influence of the old Negro work songs, the sung psalms, and the spirituals, all shaped by “call and response,” and almost all of them overwhelmingly Christian. Long before the emergence of jazz—in fact, from colonial times and especially during and after the Second Great Awakening—African American Christian music and poetry were shaping our history and attracting the attention of people far beyond these shores. Most of us of European descent, whether Christian or not, do not grasp the extent of our indebtedness to African-American Christians especially,¹ and to the musical, literary, economic, and political influence—the *constitutive* influence—they have had on American society as a whole.

For this reason I want to confront straight away the ambiguous relation of

¹ Dutch art and music critic, Hans Rookmaaker, who became friends with Mahalia Jackson, wrote in 1966, for example, that “white audiences seem completely oblivious to this thriving gospel singing in black churches. They simply do not know the first thing about it.” “Spirituals and Gospel,” in *New Orleans Jazz, Mahalia Jackson and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaaker, *The Complete Works of Hans Rookmaaker*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, U.K.: Piquant, 2002), p. 355.

Christianity to chattel slavery—that is, the seeming contradiction in the fact that both defenders and opponents of slavery appealed to the Bible for divine authorization. On the one hand, as David Brion Davis explains, Christianity, along with most of the world’s religions,

had long given slavery its ultimate sanction. Catholic popes enthusiastically blessed and authorized the first Portuguese slave traders in West Africa. . . . In eighteenth-century Barbados the Church of England acquired possession of hundreds of slaves whose chests were branded with the letters “SOCIETY” to signify ownership by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. As late as the 1750s many devout British and American Quakers were actively involved in the slave trade.²

As Davis recounts the history, Lutherans, Huguenots, Calvinists, along with Muslims and Jews, all took up slavery as they gained access “to the immense profits generated from the world’s first system of multinational production for a mass market—production of sugar, tobacco, coffee, chocolate, rum, dye-stuffs, rice, spices, hemp, and cotton.”³

On the other hand, when late in the 18th century, sustained protest against slavery finally began to pick up steam, “the Anglo-American antislavery movements were,” as Davis and others show, “overwhelmingly religious in character, and drew on developments in sectarian and evangelical Protestantism.”⁴ In other words, the very religion on which slave owners and traders depended to justify slavery provided both fuel and criteria for the abolition movement. Slaves found in Jesus the hope and motivation for their

² David Brion Davis, *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 63-64.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*

release from bondage, while they and many who were not enslaved—like William Wilberforce—were gripped by the gospel to fight for the end of the wicked institution.

These contrary movements could not cohere within the same religion, though we know full well that church denominations divided along these very lines, sustaining the contradiction for generations. Frederick Douglass (1817-1895), perhaps the greatest abolitionist orator of the 19th century, a Maryland slave of considerable genius, saw clearly how to resolve the contradiction. At the end of his autobiography he added an appendix in which he explained,

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slave-holding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. . . . The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me. . . . The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families,—sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers,—leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate. We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer against adultery. We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the *poor heathen! all for the glory of God and the good of souls!*⁵

The Bible does indeed cut to the core of this scandal, and not only to the

⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2002), pp. 121-122.

scandal of slavery, but to hypocrisy and disobedience of every kind. Slaves heard the voice of the God who could not be kept by slave owners or domesticated to serve as the chaplain on their plantations. Slaves along with many white Americans heard God's condemnation of oppression and at the same time relished the good news of God's liberation of Israel from Egypt and of people everywhere from sin and hypocrisy through Jesus. This is the truth of Christianity, which even those who name the name of Jesus cannot bury by their sin or reduce to their purposes. The power of God in Christ is not a pillar of the slave institution, but the torch that exposes and undermines it.

This is the religion that spawned the spirituals. Listen to one stanza from "Dark Symphony" by Melvin B. Tolson (1898-1966) an English teacher at Wiley College in Texas and Langston University in Oklahoma:

The centuries-old pathos in our voices
Saddens the great white world,
And the wizardry of our dusky rhythms
Conjures up shadow-shapes of ante-bellum years:

Black slaves singing *One More River to Cross*
In the torture tombs of slave ships,
Black slaves singing *Steal Away to Jesus*
In jungle swamps,
Black slaves singing *The Crucifixion*
In slave pens at midnight,
Black slaves singing *Go Down, Moses*
In the canebrakes of the southern Pharaohs.⁶

The power of the biblical story, embraced by so many black and white

⁶ Melvin B. Tolson, "Dark Symphony" (II Lento Grave), in Arna Bontemps, *American Negro Poetry* (revised ed., New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 37-41.

opponents of slavery, demanded the end of oppression precisely because of who humans are—creatures made in the image of God and thus loved by God and commissioned for God’s purposes. Slavery had to end because the image of God is the bondservant of no one but God. For African American slaves every story and psalm in the Bible that told of God coming to the aid of the oppressed and overthrowing the oppressors rang out as living truth on which to build one’s life, however great the odds.

As one old man told interviewers in the 1930s, recalling his childhood in slavery and the day when he was “given” his freedom: “You can’t give me the right to be a human being. I was born with that right I was born with it just like you was.”⁷ The biblical creation story, though referred to less often than the exodus story, became an anchor of identity for African American believers both before and after slavery. Listen to the playful joy in this poem by James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), remarkable poet, musician, newspaper editor, writer, and one of the catalysts of the Harlem Renaissance of the early 20th century. I read only the conclusion of “The Creation: A Negro Sermon,” one of many African American sermons put to verse by Johnson in his 1927 volume, *God’s Trombones*.

Then God walked around,
 And God looked around
 On all that He had made.
 He looked at His sun,
 And He looked at His moon,
 And He looked at His little stars;
 He looked on His world,
 With all its living things,

⁷ Quoted in Edmund S. Morgan, “The Big American Crime,” *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 3, 1998), p. 17.

And God said, "*I'm lonely still.*"

Then God sat down
 On the side of a hill where He could think;
 By a deep, wide river He sat down;
 With His head in His hands,
 God thought and thought,
 Till He thought, "*I'll make me a man.*"

Up from the bed of a river
 God scooped the clay;
 And by the bank of the river
 He kneeled Him down;
 And there the great God Almighty
 Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
 Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
 Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;
 This Great God,
 Like a mammy bending over her baby,
 Kneeled down in the dust
 Toiling over a lump of clay
 Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,
 And man became a living soul.
 Amen, Amen.⁸

By our very nature, the image of God cannot be confined to one role, to one function, to one color group, or to one person's forced mandate of another. Humans—every son and daughter of Adam and Eve—have no other master than the Creator who enthroned them on the earth to fill it, to steward it in every way imaginable, with all the gifts and talents implanted in them, and to care for and

⁸ The full poem is included in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 286-288.

cooperate with one another in the development of all that is human. Commerce and industry, music and dance, language and learning, the love of children and the care of souls—all of these, which express the image of God, developed and matured against the greatest of odds among those pressed down by slavery and by subsequent segregation. Even while slave owners—with support from the wider society—treated them like animals or machines, slaves continued to shape the culture in which they were unjustly confined, knowing themselves to be something other than chattel.

Why and how, for example, could so many black colleges and universities be built so soon after the Civil War? Why was it that the first college established in Austin, Texas was Huston-Tilletson and not the University of Texas? These colleges were built, explains African American professor John Sibley Butler, “because people loved education and loved their children. They were not built simply because of segregation, because these schools pre-dated most of the white institutions.”⁹

At the height of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), wrote in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” of the vitality of a people who, without proper recognition or protection, helped build America from its colonial beginnings, nurturing a vitality that slavery could not deny or stamp out:

Before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries our foreparents labored in this country without wages; they

⁹ John Sibley Butler, “The History of Black Entrepreneurship,” in *Who Speaks for Black America? Voices of the Independent Black Majority* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, 2002), p. 8.

made cotton king; and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.¹⁰

At the outset, I turned the spotlight on three world-class 20th-century musicians. But how little most of us know about, or thank God for, those African-Americans who fought for American independence, in the Civil War, and in both world wars; or who, like Harriet Tubman, Richard Allen, and Sojourner Truth, led in the abolition movement; or who, like Phillis Wheatley, Paul Robeson, Alain Locke, and thousands today, have made manifest such intellectual riches; or who, like Benjamin Banneker, Booker T. Washington, Percy Julian, and thousands more today, have advanced science, inventive technology, business, and medicine; or who, like Ralph Bunch, A. Philip Randolph, Andrew Young, and many thousands more today, have made such important contributions to law, government, and politics? These are the shapers and leaders of *our* society. And there are few if any of them who were not given life and hope directly, or through their lineage, by those who preached, sang, or taught the love of Jesus and who knew they had been created in the image of God like every other human.

How many different ways and how many times must it be said, now that slavery has been abolished—thank God—and civil rights established for every citizen in the United States—thank God—that race and color are not the defining qualifications of the image of God? As Kiini Ibura Salaam, a

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter From a Birmingham Jail” (1963), in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986, 1992), p. 98.

contemporary writer who represents multiple cultures, explains: “After walking between varying racial identifications, I know that race is no bastion of truth. . . . The biggest truth that race keeps at bay is that all of us are human.”¹¹ Or expressed in its simplest, most intimate terms by writer Kimberly Springer—who grew up here in Grand Rapids— “The way that I communicate with my mother when we are having our ritual mother/daughter talk is certainly not ‘white.’ But, it’s not ‘black’ either. Instead, it is woman-to-woman, love-to-love.”¹²

The story of American slavery and its end is a story of fundamental economic, social, and political change that opened not onto the kingdom of God in its fullness, however, but onto the long history of forced segregation and constantly improvised modes of racial discrimination. And even with the end of legalized racial discrimination, achieved against great odds in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, God’s will has still not been done completely on earth as it is in heaven. For more than racism is at fault and more than legal reform is necessary to overcome evil and reconcile humans to one another. Racism is an expression of derailed humanity, and whether institutionalized or merely personalized, dishonors both God and the image of God. The vast contributions being made to human development in this country by people of every color and culture, in every sphere of life, certainly bear testimony to the glory of the image of God. But in every area and from every kind of human, we also witness the sinful distortion of life, often institutionalized, with consequences

¹¹ Kiini Ibura Salaam, “Race, A Discussion in Ten Parts, Plus a Few Moments of Unsubstantiated Theory and One Inarguable Fact,” in *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories*, ed. Bernestine Singley (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002), p. 259-260.

¹² Kimberly Springer, “Talking White,” in Singley, ed., *When Race Becomes Real*, p. 78.

that endure for generations. This too is our heritage, our American heritage.

For this reason, you can feel the weight of centuries-deep sorrow in a poem by Countee Cullen (1903-1946), who was raised in a Harlem church parsonage and became one of the primary voices of the Harlem Renaissance. The poem is “Yet Do I Marvel.”

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,
 And did He stoop to quibble could tell why
 The little buried mole continues blind,
 Why flesh that mirrors Him must someday die,
 Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
 Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
 If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
 to struggle up a never-ending stair.
 Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
 to catechism by a mind too strewn
 With petty cares to slightly understand
 What awful brain compels His awful hand
 Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
 To make a poet black, and bid him sing!¹³

And yet, nevertheless, in the mystery of God’s providence and mercy, *sing* is exactly what black poets and musicians have done for three and a half American centuries. In their singing, they have opened the way for anyone who has any empathy, for anyone who has ears to hear—the way to feeling the agony of oppression, the comfort of God’s care in the midst of suffering, and the joy of anticipating God’s sabbath promises, the coming jubilee, God’s day of rest. Listen to Mahalia Jackson sing “Come Sunday,” from Duke Ellington’s remarkable suite *Black, Brown, and Beige*.

¹³ Countee Cullen, “Yet Do I Marvel,” in Bontemps, *American Negro Poetry*, p. 88.

[PLAY TRACK OF MAHALIA JACKSON, “COME SUNDAY”]

We might wish that on the wings of that song we could simply rise above the continuing conflicts and sweaty work of our day. But that is not what God’s jubilee promises are all about. Instead, we must ask a profound, 21st-century question: Will people today—including you and me—face up to our racism and other degradations of one another, in response to God’s condemnation and promise of reconciliation, so we can be released into the fruitful and constructive shaping of our social, economic, political, and personal life together? Can we and our neighbors even hear any longer the promise of the coming Sunday? Is there any reason to expect that Christians, at least, of every color, will accept and embrace one another as equally the image of God and equally the disciples of Jesus? Or has the celebration of God’s power to abolish slavery fallen so far out of public memory that even those who name the name of Jesus treasure him only in the privacy of their hearts? Have we all become so publicly secularized that we think it necessary and perhaps even acceptable to approach economic and educational inequalities, crime, drugs, and family breakdown in terms of racial categories? Do black and red, yellow and white Christians have nothing to say, from out of our one life in Jesus, to fellow human beings who in growing numbers are trying to find security and even their primary identity in race, or gender, or profession, or possessions?

I do not ask these questions lightly or for rhetorical purposes. The end of racism cannot be achieved by economic, or political, or educational design alone in the narrow sense internal to each of those arenas of life, because the way we go about shaping our economic, political, and educational practices depends on what we believe ourselves to be. The shape of our organizations, and institutions, and personal relationships depends on whether we believe we

are the image of God or mere accidents of biology; it depends on whether we believe that our misuse and degradation of one another arises from sin against God, or from an unrelievable, fateful power struggle for the survival of the fittest. The shape of our outward lives depends on whether we believe that Jesus saves and can empower us for the reformation of society, or that the future will be a never-ending competition among those who have no choice but to exist in perpetual suspicion and fear of one another.

As Davis argues in his book, *In the Image of God*, it was largely due to the critical judgments arising from Christianity itself that the abolition movement took hold. Quite by contrast, a competing influence in early American life—an influence that may now be dominant—was that of Enlightenment opposition to old-time Christianity. According to George M. Fredrickson, insofar as enlightened rationalists maintained the biblical conviction that “all men are created equal,” they helped nurture opposition to slavery. But insofar as Enlightenment dogma began to reduce human identity to scientific categories, it provided the fuel for the development of a new and modern racist ideology. Kwame Anthony Appiah, commenting on Fredrickson’s argument, says, it is somewhat ironic that the tools used by slavery’s defenders against the idea that all humans have been created equal,

came from another side of the Enlightenment, the rationalizing, scientific side that was beginning to treat human beings not (or at least, not only) as God’s special creation but as natural creatures whose history could be studied along with that of other organisms. It is in the Enlightenment that the first modern attempts at racial classification, based not on religious ideas but on purportedly scientific ones, were developed. And these naturalistic accounts of the supposed inferiority of blacks and Jews eventually overtook the religious ones that

dominated the debates of the early 19th century about slavery.¹⁴

With or without a strong appeal to purportedly scientific criteria, the way so many of us now tell the American story, there is no place in it for the image of God, human sinfulness, and God's grace. Slavery and other problems are bumps along the road of perpetual progress, moving from religious bigotry to modern rationality. History progresses from one human achievement to another, led by the genius of European-American science, technology, and democracy. African Americans along with Jewish, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and other immigrants now participate in and benefit from these achievements insofar as they are willing to make them their own, even if, from time to time, they have to endure being treated as inferiors by some of their fellow citizens.¹⁵

But you see, this is a story fashioned from a racist, deformed-Christian, secular-Enlightenment point of view. The story has ignorance and forgetfulness running all through it, demonstrating the refusal to acknowledge that the American story has, since the 17th century, been an African American as well as a European-American and Native American story. Moreover, it is a story not of steady rational progress but of both human glory and human degradation, of both obedience and sinfulness before God. For this reason the Christian story of God's creation, judgment, forgiveness of sin, release from captivity, and call

¹⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "History of Hatred" (a review of George M. Fredrickson's *Racism: A Short History*), *The New York Times Book Review* (Aug. 4, 2002), p. 11.

¹⁵ Historian William H. McNeill, in a review of three books (the ones by Davis and Fredrickson already referred to, and by Glenn C. Loury—*Anatomy of Racial Inequality*) expresses the modernist mindset to which I refer here. On the one hand, he simply dismisses religion: "I distrust dogmatic, emotionally powerful religion," he says. "It is as likely to divide as to unite, just as Fredrickson says, and as the Black Muslims on Chicago's South Side convincingly demonstrated." On the other hand, after describing his own attitude toward black Americans, when he lived in Chicago, he congratulates himself with an approach that is almost empty of meaning: "In the meanwhile, my own morally flabby resort to distant politeness across class and racial boundaries can have no perceptibly soothing effect, but at least did not make things worse." McNeill, "The Big R," *The New York Review of Books* (May 23, 2002), p. 58.

to the reformation of all spheres of life unfolds in deep tension with other stories. Consequently, the future of this country and of the world depends in part on which story grips us and propels us into the future; it depends on which story unites and empowers our creativity in music and politics, family and church, sports and the marketplace. Far too many Americans today, black as well as white, new immigrants as well as old, have given up any hope of justice and reconciled harmony. They have rejected not only Jesus but also the Enlightenment's failed secular promises of a human-made heaven on earth. In the story they tell, there is no continuing mercy and patience of God, who sends rain and sunshine to the just and unjust alike; no divine role in the ending of slavery; no divine reproof that exposes our sins and calls us to repentance and new life in Christ; and no grace of God upholding the ongoing development of every God-given talent we have.

The cynicism if not the despair of one late modern story comes through bitingly in Langston Hughes' 1931 poem "Goodbye, Christ."

Listen, Christ,
 You did alright in your day, I reckon—
 But that day's gone now.
 They ghosted you up a swell story, too,
 Called it Bible—
 But it's dead now.
 The popes and the preachers've
 Made too much money from it.
 They've sold you to too many

Kings, generals, robbers, and killers—
 Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks,
 Even to Rockefeller's Church,
 Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.
 You ain't no good no more.

They've pawned you
Till you've done wore out.

Goodbye,
Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,

Beat it on away from here now,
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
A real guy named
Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—

I said, ME!

Go ahead on now,
You're getting in the way of things, Lord.
And please take Saint Ghandi with you when you go,
And Saint Pope Pius
And Saint Aimee McPherson,
And big black Saint Becton
Of the Consecrated Dime.
Move!

Don't be so slow about movin'!
The world is mine from now on—
And nobody's gonna sell ME
To a king, or a general,
Or a millionaire.¹⁶

Millions of Americans are creating their own gods, or trying to make themselves god, or merely cursing the darkness. Deceitful corporate executives rob workers of their investment savings. Political operatives go after opponents simply to destroy. Pastors abuse children. Is there anyone left to trust? God is

¹⁶ Langston Hughes, "Goodbye, Christ," in Lewis, *Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, p. 266-267.

down, the boss is next, and more and more neighbors are suspect. Instead of creating new music and art that plumb ever greater human depths in aesthetic abundance, exploiters and nihilists alike harden or deconstruct their inheritance, mock the system, praise drugs, and worship death in an exhibition of a tragic hollowness and even demonic mangling of spirit.¹⁷

These are not white or black sins. But if white and black Christians, as equal exhibitors of the image of God saved by grace, do not embrace one another in the common joy of their liberation in Jesus, then we deserve nothing less than the judgment of God. There was a time, King wrote from his jail cell in Birmingham,

when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” But they went on with the conviction that they were “a colony of heaven,” and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment.¹⁸

If the *biblical* story of God creating us in the divine image,

¹⁷ I am no music critic, but a comment by Samuel G. Freedman, commenting on the triumph of American Orthodox Judaism over more secularized varieties, may illuminate my point here: “As a jazz fan, I might offer an analogy. From the 1900s through the 1970s, jazz was revolutionized by waves of innovation. Swing replaced the New Orleans style, bebop replaced swing, modal jazz replaced bebop, free jazz replaced modal. In the process, every rule of melody, harmony, and rhythm was shattered. And then, looking up from the wreckage, musicians realized there was nothing else left to rebel against. They could turn only in one direction: to the past, to the tradition.” *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p. 339. For some interesting insights into contemporary conflicts among deconstructionist, traditionalist, and other musicological approaches, see Ivan Hewett, “The Great Divide,” *BBC Music Magazine* (January, 2003), pp. 28-30.

¹⁸ King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” op cit., p. 97.

commissioning us for a common human mission, and giving us hope with the forgiveness of our sins and the restoration of life—if this is the true story about the whole of public history, then all those who claim to live in that story must make and write public history together. These brothers and sisters must learn to tell the full story of the world, of the West, and of the United States. If a nationalist identity comes before our identity as the image of God, if white or black trumps the human, if the conceit of secular self-sufficiency or proud defiance dismisses the Creator and the Redeemer, then we do not know ourselves, nor do we know the full American story, and we have little left to say to our neighbors or even to ourselves.

There is today no call on our conscience more urgent nor opportunity greater than for those of all colors who acknowledge their identity as the image of God to lock arms together to flesh out that bond in practice for all to see.¹⁹ Blacks and whites circling one another without soul is a competition in suspicion, not a dance of love in blues and gospel. Christian whites and blacks *not* bound together in the creative quest for justice bear witness to sins unforgiven, to brokenness unreconciled, to Jesus denied. The story that is too big for all of us cannot be told by any one of us alone.

However, the big story, which God has been and is still writing calls us out of our offense, back to our true identity in community with one another, and ahead to the kingdom that knows no divisions and no end. This is not a matter of dreaming, but of living by faith. When Martin Luther King Jr. brilliantly and

¹⁹ The very hard work that has to go into this cooperative effort should not be underestimated. See, for example, the recent interchange by J.L.A. Garcia, John McWhorter, and Glenn C. Loury over Loury's book, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*. "Race & Inequality: An Exchange," *First Things* (May, 2002), pp. 22-40.

so memorably lifted up his dream on that historic day in Washington D.C. forty years ago, he was speaking from out of Christian faith, looking to the day when “we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”²⁰ And the true freedom of which King spoke is no mirage or product of mere wishful thinking, for his most profound quotation came from the biblical prophets and is grounded in God’s performance. You remember his vision of hope, don’t you—“that one day every valley will be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.”²¹

Those words still ring out as God’s marching orders. Go and join the march!

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Music accompanying “**Creative Justice**”
January Series lecture by James W. Skillen
Calvin College, January 20, 2003

Pre-lecture:

1. “**Black Beauty**,” by Duke Ellington (*Duke Ellington, The Essential Collection, 1927-1962*, disk #1, Columbia/Legacy, CK 46825)

²⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream” (1963), in Washington, ed., op. cit., p. 105.

²¹ Ibid.

2. “**Lazy River**,” by Louis Armstrong (*The Definitive Louis Armstrong: Ken Burns Jazz*, Columbia/Legacy, CK 61440)

3. “**Elijah Rock**,” by Mahalia Jackson (*Mahalia Jackson in Concert*, Columbia/Legacy/Sony Music, CK 85298)

Played during the lecture (first five minutes of the piece):

4. “**Come Sunday**,” Mahalia Jackson singing with Duke Ellington and his orchestra (Ellington’s *Black, Brown and Beige*, Columbia/Legacy, CK 65566)

Post lecture:

5. “**When the Saints Go Marching In**,” by Louis Armstrong (op. cit., CK 61440)

6. “**23rd Psalm**,” by Mahalia Jackson (*Black, Brown and Beige*, CK 65566)

7. “**What a Wonderful World**,” by Louis Armstrong (op. cit., CK 61440)

8. “**Battle Royal**,” by Duke Ellington and B. Strayhorn (*Duke Ellington, The Essential Collection*, disk #3, CK 46825)

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