

ANTI-BLACKNESS AND MORAL REPAIR: The Curse of Ham, Biblical Kinship, and the Limits of Liberalism

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When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.” He also said, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant.”

—Genesis 9:24–27

If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

—1 John 4:20

Francis and I are almost the same age: at the time I met him he was twenty-nine and I was thirty. We came to know each other through a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Christian congregation that, for lack of a physical church building, met every Saturday in the shade of a large acacia tree amid the small, irrigated fields of rural Mugoda District, in southern Zambia. The acacia tree under which the congregation met was located a half hour’s walk from Summers Mine,

a Chinese-owned and -operated coal mine where I was conducting ethnographic research on relations between Chinese migrants and local Zambians. Though he was young, Francis's employment as a general worker at Summers Mine meant he was counted as one of the congregation's leading elders. Indeed, Francis's regular cash income from the mine, about \$100 USD per month, made him one of the congregation's wealthiest members. At the time I met Francis, he also served as the secretary in the miners' union at Summers, and was thus part of a group of workers attempting to negotiate, albeit unsuccessfully, with the Chinese owners for pay increases. Within the SDA congregation, Francis was the leader of the Pathfinders, the church youth organization. I first came to know Francis when I joined him and the Pathfinder youth on an all-day hike through the hills surrounding Mugoda Village (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The SDA Pathfinder youth take a day hike through the hills. Outskirts of Mugoda Village, Southern Province, Zambia. Photo by Justin Lee Haruyama.

Over the following months and years of my fieldwork at Summers Mine, Francis and I would often spend time together, at church and elsewhere. Sometimes Francis would invite me to his home on the outskirts of the nearby town to share a meal together, an expression of hospitality and generosity I always felt grateful for. On these occasions, I would often spend the better part of an

afternoon with Francis, reclining on small chairs in his brick-walled, two-room home, talking and laughing together.

On one such long afternoon, after Francis had generously shared with me a meal of *nsima* (Zambian polenta) and a relish of sauteed green vegetables and *impwa* (bitter baby eggplant), we started discussing religious questions. At one point, Francis motioned toward an illustration of Adam and Eve hanging on his wall and told me: “I think you must know, Justin, that God didn’t create a Black person. Our ancestors, Adam and Eve, they were white.” I asked Francis how he knew this, since to my knowledge the Bible did not describe the race or skin tone of the first humans. By way of evidence Francis motioned to the illustration again. He pointed out, and I agreed, that the physical features of the man and woman in the painting clearly resembled those of people of European ancestry. But, I asked, perhaps Adam and Eve were depicted as white because the illustrator was himself white? Francis rejected this and instead began to tell me a story, which he explained was the historical account of how Black people came to be in the world. In the generations succeeding Adam and Eve there eventually came Noah, and after the Flood that drowned all other humans, it was Noah’s three sons and their wives who repopulated the Earth. The eldest two sons, Francis told me, were named Japheth and Seth, but Francis did not name the youngest son.¹ Noah’s wife had died by this time, so it was up to his sons to take care of him. One day Noah got obscenely drunk and passed out unconscious while naked. Francis described:

So, he was drunk up to an extent whereby the third-born child, when he saw that the father was naked due to drunkenness, he started laughing at him. He went back, on his way laughing he had gone to those two brothers, and said: “Come, let’s go see what our father has done.” Then the brothers asked: “Why? What have you seen?” The younger brother said: “At his nakedness, he’s so drunk, he can’t even control himself.” So, what Japheth did, he took a *chitenge* [a kind of Zambian garment, usually worn by women] with that other one Seth. Then, Seth that side, Japheth, instead of looking directly first this direction [at this point Francis stood up and physically demonstrated how the two older brothers walked backwards with their faces averted to lay the *chitenge* on the body of their sleeping father without looking at his naked body]. They wrapped the father. Then the father, he realized that the firstborn was the one with those intentions of doing that, not wanting to see the nakedness of the father. That is where the blessings come from. He said: “Japheth, as the firstborn, you are so much blessed, and your clan will never,

ever suffer. And you, Seth, you shall not suffer. But Japheth will be your boss. Why? I have seen your *moyo* [heart], and I know you only did that out of the example of Japheth, your elder. Then you, you have laughed at me instead of helping me. From your third grandchild, by the name of Canaan, all your clan will be servants to Seth and Japheth, and their skin color will change. That is where the affliction has started from.

Fearing where the story was going, I asked how this story related to people in the present day. Francis explained, “We Africans, we are from the youngest brother. According to the Bible, Japheth, that is where you fall Justin, the first-born: the real white mens fall to this clan.² Seth: the Chinese and Indians fall to him. We are all cousins, all from Noah.” And I asked Francis, since he had told me before that Noah was a godly man, was the curse that Noah laid on his sons a perversion of God’s will, or was it the way God had intended things to be? Francis averred that this was a manifestation of God’s will, switching nimbly from the second to the first person: “Yes, He [God/Noah] said: ‘You, you will be servants.’ Us [here Francis pointed to himself], we will be servants.”

I tried to raise objections. What about rich Black people who might hire whites or Asians in their companies? Francis replied:

No matter what, they’ll be servants. Why? Black people, when they become so rich, they are proud of themselves. And that is the proudness that God doesn’t want. Have you seen? Even though a Black person becomes so rich, the riches are nothing to Blacks, because they can’t help poor people. Have you ever heard of a Zambian who is very rich and starts sponsoring someone who is in America? Nothing, there’s nothing like that. But you, with you whites, you do help each other.³

But what about Africans helping each other, I asked. Wasn’t it, for example, extremely generous of Francis himself to invite me into his home and share his food with me? Francis replied:

Very generous. But what I am trying to put across is that the whites, they don’t just help tangible things like clothes, like eating, these minor things, no. You, when you help, I can’t even say the way you help, because you help with the future. The help of God. Do you know what God has done? In the

first place, our Adam and Eve had sinned. But God helped them. He helped them.

Francis's close association in these comments between the help of white people and the help of God reminded me, uncomfortably, of a semi-serious wordplay joke I sometimes heard Nyanja-speakers tell in my presence (Nyanja is the second-most widely spoken language in Zambia): that when white people first came to Zambia, locals named them *mzungu* because the whites reminded them so much of God (in Nyanja, the word for God is *mulungu*).⁴

Francis and I continued conversing for several hours after this point, and I continued raising questions about the ostensibly good character of whites that Francis felt made them so appropriate as masters: for example, the history of brutal racial segregation and economic exploitation in Zambia under British imperialism. Francis did not deny the accuracy of these examples, but rather explained them as aberrations that worked against the general pattern of whites coming to Zambia for the purpose of helping Zambians.

The more we conversed, the more disconcerted I became by Francis's comments. This disconcertment, however, differed significantly from that experienced by [Helen Verran \(2001\)](#) in her epistemic encounter with Yoruba mathematics. Verran describes her disconcertment as a tightrope between clear delight and confused misery, which for her manifested bodily as a belly laugh that could have easily turned into a visceral groan. In my own disconcertment at Francis's words there was no tightrope, no temptation to delight or belly-laugh. Instead, Francis's telling of history and his assertion that I was born to be a master and him my servant provoked in me a profound sorrow and bodily manifestations—quickened heart rate, difficulty breathing—of panic rather than delight. Verran and those who have taken up her example (e.g., [Law and Lin 2010](#)) have suggested that slowing down and dwelling in this kind of ethnographic disconcertment is an important starting place for doing difference together. On the other hand, [Audra Simpson \(2020\)](#) warns that sympathy and sorrowful sentiment alone can constitute a powerful move toward colonialist apologetics and erasure. In this article I move beyond the deep sorrow Francis's words provoked in me to fulfill one of the many obligations I feel I owe him. This obligation is to engage his views not as those of a tragically benighted, hapless subject, but as compelling theorizations of racism, coloniality, and capitalism born from his direct experience of these global processes that should not leave my own views as a liberal anthropologist unscathed.

Of course, Francis's defense of racialized master-servant hierarchy and his sympathetic portrayal of British colonialism in Zambia appear quite jarring next to persistent calls for a decolonizing (Allen and Jobson 2016; Gupta and Stoolman 2022; Harrison 1997) or abolitionist (Jobson 2020; Shange 2019) practice of anthropology. Without dismissing the white supremacist framing of his account, I argue that Francis's theorizations point, from a transnational Zambian perspective, to important additional dimensions of what a decolonizing, abolitionist anthropology could be.

A rich anthropological literature in recent years has demonstrated the great value people in diverse locales throughout the Global South place on relations of hierarchy, inequality, paternalism, and dependence (Bolt 2015; Ferguson 2015; Haynes 2017; Hickel and Haynes 2018; Piliavsky 2021; Scherz 2014). Work has emerged as well on the discursive valorizations of European colonialism (Bissell 2005) and whiteness (Bashkow 2006) and denigrations of (liberal accounts of) freedom (Englund 2006). Again, these are all values that sit uneasily beside current articulations of decolonizing and abolitionist anthropology. Francis's critiques represent an especially direct challenge to decolonizing approaches in anthropology for two reasons. First, because the story Francis retold lies at the very root of the violently raced and classed inequalities that have come to dominate the world today (Mignolo 2005; Robinson 2020; Wynter 2003). Second, because Francis's call for master-servant relations was explicitly not confined to local interactions between Zambians, but rather "caught" (Favret-Saada 1980) me as an ethnographer and anthropology more generally (at least in its Global North instantiations) with the implication that *we should act as masters*. Point by careful point, Francis refuted my attachments as a liberal anthropologist to formal principles of equality, which, he pointed out, did nothing to ameliorate, much less abolish, the extreme material inequalities that divided us. In place of liberal platitudes, Francis called for a recognition of shared, biblically chronicled kinship and thus of kinship-inflected care and provision.

Francis's critiques call attention to a farce of liberal accountings of justice that give lip service to egalitarianism while reinforcing nationally patrolled divides that keep the common descendants of Noah separate rather than ethically connected, as they should be. Francis's critiques suggest that, in the context of shared kinship among all people, there is something fundamentally wrong with the nation-state form that keeps us apart across territorialized boundaries, as if the great material production that takes place in the Global South (including, for example,

the extensive extractive mining industry in Zambia) and great material consumption that take place in the Global North are not intimately related.

Working toward what I call moral repair, I conclude by enlisting the resources of Christian liberation theology to diagnose the disfigurement at the heart of both Francis's and my ethical imaginations. Grappling with the theoretically informed critiques of Francis and others in Zambia who tell the story of Noah while attempting to move past the white supremacist language in which these critiques are framed, I argue that their account of shared kinship demands the abolition of facile articulations of liberal egalitarianism which fail to address massive inequalities in the world. This ethical vision instead calls for the coming together from seemingly separate continents of all the descendants of Noah in relations of mutual provision, connection, and care.

Of course, there are possible outs: various methods, semantic and otherwise, of understanding Francis's words in a way that neuters their challenge to liberal egalitarianism. I do not discount these methods, but I do not think they are sufficient, either. I consider some of these methods first, each as a partial connection across our ethical difference, before turning to what I see as the full force of Francis's critique.

FIRST ESCAPE: A Wink or a Blink?

One comforting way to evade the force of Francis's ethical account is to call on [Jean-François Bayart's \(2000\)](#) theorization of extraversion to view Francis's words as a kind of "declaration of dependence" ([Ferguson 2015](#)). Following this logic, it would be possible to posit that Francis's ostensible critiques were more about convincing me to lend him greater assistance than they were sincere representations of his views on the world. Even a passing consideration of linguistic pragmatics would remind us that all speech acts are made in a given social context and for a specific purpose. In Francis's and my conversation, this context included an extreme disparity of wealth and professional, travel, and educational opportunities. It also involved a give-and-take relationship in which Francis would sometimes extend generosity to me, such as inviting me to his home to share a meal he had prepared, and would at other times make requests of me for things that lay beyond his financial means, such as for a new bicycle or even, one day after I had completed my PhD, paying for his own university education in the United States.

Undoubtedly, this context of our relationship played a great role in why Francis shared the views he did with me in that time and at that place, and in the particular tenor by which he conveyed his critiques of my egalitarian sensibilities.

But it is also possible to go a step further than this and posit that not only did Francis's comments obviously have a pragmatic element to them, but that they perhaps were *purely* pragmatic or functional: that they were not genuine reflections on his part but rather exclusively constituted a strategic attempt to flatter and "butter me up." On this accounting, to repurpose Clifford Geertz's (2000) famous metaphor, perhaps I had failed to discern the difference between a blink and a wink. Perhaps Francis was winking at me the entire time.

Aware of this possible interpretation of Francis's comments, in the months and years following our conversation, I tried to confirm the historical account he had told me with other Zambians. I deliberately shared Francis's account with more financially secure Zambian friends and acquaintances who never made requests of financial assistance of me. Some of those I spoke with confirmed the broad outlines of Francis's account as literally true and divinely justified history, though they often differed on the precise details. Other Zambian friends with whom I shared this account expressed more skepticism, often saying that they did not really know what had occurred and that Francis's story of Noah and his sons might or might not be true. No one I spoke with in Zambia expressed the degree of shock, ethical dismay, or even outrage that I had at first expected on hearing Francis's account. Indeed, some other Zambian friends expanded on the implications Francis had described. Here, for example is one typical exchange I had on the subject, with my friend Daniel. Unlike Francis, Daniel is university-educated, middle-class, and hails from the more urbanized and economically developed Cop-perbelt region of northwest Zambia.

Daniel: Africa is the only continent which has got mostly Black people, compared to these two, Europe and Asia. Then Africa we can say is the one who was told to be a slave to these two, Europe and Asia, and for sure these things me myself I've seen them. All the NGOs, the groups, I haven't seen an NGO funded by a Black person or an African.

Justin: What about Oprah Winfrey? She has all those NGOs.

Daniel: Yeah, she's Black, but find out where she came from. You'll find that, amongst the forefathers, she must have a white person in front there. She can't be 100 percent Black. Let's talk of Obama. One of the parents of Obama was a white person also. So, Obama can have an NGO supporting Africa, because of that color in him. Because of that blood in him.

Of course even here a consideration of linguistic pragmatics is important. Even if Daniel did not wish to gain financial assistance from me, perhaps he was simply too polite to tell me that my description of Francis's history was ridiculous, or patently false, or obviously bigoted. But spread across so many conversations, I do not think that is the case. Though far from universal, the history of Noah and his sons that Francis explained, and its implications for relations between differently racialized subjects today, was commonly enough recounted in southern Zambia that I do not think it merely a particularity of Francis's and my relationship. This particular escape from ethical disconcertment turns out to be a dead end; though obviously the ongoing context of our friendship influenced Francis's account, it seems unlikely that he was making up a history he did not believe to hold true.

SECOND ESCAPE: False Consciousness and Mental Colonialism

Another way to discount any political cogency in Francis's critiques is, recognizing the thorough absorption of global ideologies of white supremacy throughout Africa (Pierre 2013), to posit that Francis expressed the views he did because he was trapped under the mystifying spell of internalized racism, false consciousness, or mental colonialism. Such a way of understanding Francis's comments would follow a long line of thinkers from Frantz Fanon (2008) and Bernard Magubane (1971) to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1994), who all forcefully demonstrated the damaging effects colonial and racist encounters have for their victims, not only physically but also psychologically. Pierre Bourdieu (1991), similarly, argued that it is the greatest trick of the powerful to convince the powerless that their oppression is in fact normal, natural, legitimate, and justified. The toxic dynamics of white supremacist ideologies these thinkers point to, and of course the history of white colonial missionaries and the diseased, racist interpretation of Christianity most of them promoted (but see Englund 2022), no doubt played a significant role in shaping the framing Francis gave to his critiques of contemporary global sociopolitical structures.

Yet to see Francis's comments as only the false consciousness of a mentally colonized subject also reinstates a colonialist relationship of power between him and me, one in which all the pathology and inability to comprehend the true workings of the world is placed on him, with none accruing to me or my liberal, humanist, ostensibly antiracist and anticolonial worldview. It would cast Francis and other Zambians such as Daniel as hapless, passive victims of toxic ideologies over which they have no control, denying them the agency, or seemingly even

the intelligence and self-awareness, to come to well-considered and thought-out conclusions of their own. It would also constitute the ultimate example of what [Verran \(2013\)](#) criticizes as a “meta-framing device,” as it would engage seriously with the content of Francis’s account (unlike seeing it as just a functionally oriented wink described above)—but only to dismiss his understandings as lesser and therefore non-threatening to my own as a liberal anthropologist.

Moreover, despite his location in rural Zambia, Francis was not trapped in some kind of information vacuum beyond which he could not think. Like the Christians [Thomas Kirsch \(2011\)](#) conducted research with decades ago in a similar rural community in southern Zambia, Francis read voraciously and consumed a huge range of texts, both secular and nonsecular, often in disagreement with each other, on a wide array of theological and political points. Moreover, Francis often participated in secular discourses as well as religious ones. He would articulate anticolonial, nationalist discourses vis-a-vis his Chinese employers, for example, and the festivities of Zambian Independence Day each October gave us an opportunity to reflect on the history of Zambian national liberation together.

Thus, not unlike the American fundamentalists described by [Susan Harding \(1991\)](#), whose worldview seems so retrograde and repugnant by the standards of the secular liberalism popular in the academy, Francis is not a backward relic, a person whose dated beliefs will be swept away by a rising tide of knowledge and enlightenment. Instead, Francis’s critiques represent such a challenge because they do not belong to the time of the other ([Fabian 2014](#)). They offer a careful and forceful response to the contemporary now Francis and I share: a call for a different kind of relations in our current moment.

THIRD ESCAPE: Cultural Repertoires

The history Francis explained to me of Noah and his sons closely resembles a similar narrative told in Genesis chapter 9, though Francis’s account differed in some of its details from the Bible telling. But the book of Genesis was written almost three millennia ago and describes a social context of the ancient Israelites, which differs profoundly from the lives Francis and I lead in the twenty-first century. The actions of Noah toward his sons no doubt fit within a schematic of cultural sense for the ancient Israelites, but by necessity, Francis and I had to draw on our own cultural repertoires to make sense of this history. There is also the issue of language. The original words of this account were written in ancient Hebrew. Since neither Francis nor I were versed in ancient Hebrew, we could only understand this story through the medium of its various English translations (in my

case) or its ciTonga and English translations (in Francis's). Another avenue of escape from the ethical difference expressed in my conversation with Francis, then, considers the ways in which—refracted through our different languages, personal experiences, and cultural prisms—we simply understood the story differently.

Consider, for example, Francis's careful choice of words. In our conversation, he emphasized that Noah had cursed the descendants of Canaan to be the *servants* of the descendants of Japheth and Seth. But in Genesis chapter 9, the words that Noah uses to pronounce his curse are considerably more extreme: in the original Hebrew, 'eved 'avadim (Goldenberg 2017), usually rendered in English as *lowest of servants*, *servants of servants*, or most commonly, *slaves*. Even as Francis gave me this historical account, then, our understandings of its significance started to diverge. Even before my conversation with Francis I was broadly aware that for centuries Europeans had used such a story to justify their enslavement of Africans. As Francis related the history of Noah and his sons, then, the associations that came to my mind were of the transatlantic slave trade, the Middle Passage, and plantation-style chattel slavery in the Americas. These associations vastly magnified the disconcertment I experienced as I listened to Francis's account. But insofar as I was associating the story with chattel slavery, it is also clear that I was not listening carefully to Francis's words. Because in his own historical account, Francis did not suggest that Blacks should be the slaves of whites, much less that they should be treated like chattel: he suggested merely that they should be servants, and that even this master-servant relationship should be understood within the context of direct kinship.

Moreover, Francis described a highly specific form of master-servant relationship. When I asked Francis what it meant that Blacks should be servants to whites, Francis spent little time describing the labor of service. He did note that it was appropriate that first the British and now the Chinese owned and operated Summers Mine, since the British and Chinese were both groups of white people descended from the brothers (Japheth and Seth, respectively) to whom the Black descendants of Canaan owed their service. Francis also noted the appropriateness of similar kinds of labor that Zambians were compelled to perform for whites during the colonial period, which in his estimation were frequently unduly harsh but nevertheless taught Zambians how to farm properly and how to “stand on their own” (his words). Far more prominent in Francis's description of the relationship that ought to pertain between whites and Blacks, however, was a dynamic of discipline and education. When I asked Francis why Noah would pronounce such an extreme curse on Canaan and Canaan's descendants, Francis gave me a reply that

nimbly moved through different pronouns, sometimes speaking in the third person about God, Noah, his sons, even the Zambian government, and sometimes in the first and second person in ways that seemed to draw Francis and me ourselves into the narrative:

Noah didn't just curse them. He gave them instructions. Of course, when you start sponsoring me to school, for me to do the right thing you have to put certain regulations, which will guide me. Because when I go outside of your conditions, then it means I've started doing the other business. So, I have to be within limits. And that is God direct. That is the work of God. For those people not to do it again, he cursed them. By the cursings, all people now, even you, know that if I kill, the government will arrest me. If I covet the wife of a friend, I'll be punished. Have you seen the guidelines of God? God doesn't want to see people sinning. Why? He is love. He wants people always to be together.

On the obverse side of this discipline, Francis described how in his view education stood as the most important element of the colonial dynamic between Blacks and whites:

Africans found that there was nothing they knew at that particular time. The Africans were relying much on the whites, because they did not know anything. Knowledge, they had no knowledge of anything. The whites had teachings There were three kings. The Bemba, the Tonga, and the Lozis. After the colonization, the white man brought some examples of things. He brought a cob of maize; he brought a spear. He brought a spear and these other things. He said each one has to choose. Our chief chose what? A cob of maize. That is the reason we are farmers in Zambia, particularly Tongas. So, the white man has to teach each one according to his selection.

Though certainly not the relationship of equality I attempted to defend in this conversation, the model of relationality that Francis expressed also remained very distant from that of chattel slavery. In fact, it bears more resemblance to the patron-client and hierarchical kinship relations that have long featured in many African societies than it does to the typical American imagination of a master-servant, much less master-slave, relationship. The Tonga, the ethnic group with which Francis identified, had historically practiced slavery, for example. But people taken

captive or purchased as slaves by the Tonga became absorbed into the *mazubo* (clans) of their captors and owners, thus over the course of only a generation or two becoming fully integrated into the kinship networks of their original masters. Over time, in fact, the descendants of adopted slaves frequently became the headmen or even chiefs of their *luzubo* (Colson 2006).⁵ In this sense, my explicit refusal to acknowledge Francis's claim to being my servant also constituted an explicit refusal to recognize him as my kin or grant him any hope of being absorbed into my own, much wealthier and more privileged clan and lineage in the United States.

But in other ways, Francis's account sharply clashes with cultural idioms and practices long prevalent in Tonga society. Francis's biblically inspired account of how descent groups from several men in the Bible are and forever will be radically stratified in terms of wealth and privilege bears little resemblance to historical Tonga cultural patterns, which were matrilineal, extremely egalitarian, and neither ranked clans and other descent groups nor recognized any intergenerational disparities in their status (Colson 2006; Robinson 1980). Francis's history, then, is a reflection not just on typically African practices of generating wealth in people through extraversion and composition, nor is it even totally a reflection on the cultural presuppositions of the biblical story itself. His history also provides a forceful commentary on *global* patterns of inequality in the twenty-first century.

THE REPUGNANCY OF A FACILE EGALITARIANISM

Regarding Francis's words as a disingenuous ploy to extract financial assistance, as a manifestation of false consciousness and internalized racism, or as cultural idiom more relevant to traditional and localized Tonga cultural patterns than to the global political-economic system of the twenty-first century all constitute different kinds of abdications (or what Verran terms meta-framing devices) that remove the necessity to take seriously Francis's call for whites (both European and Asian) to take up their responsibilities as masters and for Africans to take up their responsibilities as servants. Each of these abdications also reinscribes a certain kind of colonialist epistemic hierarchy in which it is ultimately my thoughts and words, as a scholar working out of the Global North, that speak substantively to global social dynamics, while the ideas of my interlocutors in Zambia remain, in one way or another, fundamentally limited or marginal in scope.

In the latter part of this article, I try to step away from this colonialist orientation while, at the same time, attempting to avoid the problematic turn of simply accepting the white supremacist framing articulated by Francis, Daniel, and other Zambian interlocutors without critique. Instead, I regard Francis and Daniel

as cogent theorists of contemporary global dynamics of coloniality, racism, and capitalism, and I engage their words as I would those of any other co-thinker: as compelling challenges to my own views but also as not above critique. To think through their provocations, I turn to the resources of Christian liberation theology and political philosophy to grapple with the ways in which both Francis's account of racialized master-servant hierarchy and my counter-account of liberal, humanist egalitarianism are both in their own ways diseased caricatures left to us by the violent legacy of 1492 (Oliphant 2021).

In my conversation with Francis, for example, I protested strongly that in my view all humans, from all races, really are equal in some fundamental sense. If nothing else, I asked Francis, current global inequalities notwithstanding, was it at least conceptually possible that we could all be equal? Francis scoffed at me. He reminded me that though he and I were almost the same age, I had completed secondary (high) school fifteen years earlier, while he had only completed it a year ago, and that I had in the intervening time already obtained bachelor's and master's degrees and was well on my way to completing my doctorate. By contrast, he pointed out:

But I haven't yet gone to college. Why? Because my parents can't afford to take me to one of the colleges in the country. But look at you. You have passed the college, you have passed the university, you are done with the diploma, you are done with the degree, you have a master's, soon you will be a professor. Now tell me, how are we going to be equal, me and you? How?

At the time, caught in my building disconcertment, I had no good answer for Francis. Because of course he was right. My pleadings of the inherent equality of all humans had little relevance to the lives Francis and I both led: a stratified global economic order drawn largely along color lines (Mbembe 2017; Robinson 2020; Trouillot 2003) ensured that I was likely to continue my life of comfortable, middle-class prosperity and Francis his of hardscrabble precarity in a dangerous underground mine.

One thing that Francis's and my inability to come to agreement in this conversation exposed was the different kinds of inequality we both found ethically tolerable. Francis, in his moral account, espoused a divinely sanctioned master-servant hierarchy that I found utterly repugnant (cf. Harding 1991). But what I failed to appreciate at the time was that the reverse also held true. I may not have liked the brutal structural inequalities of the global economic system that left such

disparities in Francis's and my material welfare and life prospects. But however much I may not have liked them, I nevertheless accepted such realities as the way things are, for the present at least. I accepted and assumed that I would remain on precisely the life track that Francis had pointed out for me: a life track with plenty of its own stresses and anxieties, perhaps, but also one of simple material comfort and security unimaginable to almost anyone I knew in southern Zambia. When Francis broached the subject of my financial sponsorship of his university education in the United States after I had completed my PhD, in effect tying our life chances more closely together through a significant transfer of some of my financial security to him, I was far from thrilled. In that conversation I also was articulating an ethical worldview mired in its own repugnancy.

COLONIALIST RELATIONS OF CONNECTION

Though Francis felt that the history of Noah and his sons did demonstrate a fundamental inequality between white and Black people, he had no tolerance for European enslavement of Africans and was sharply critical of racial segregation under British colonialism. On the whole, however, he was sympathetic to the colonialist project as a means of bringing people together.

Francis: The first time white men came into Africa, even you, you just discovered there's a continent called Africa that has Black people. Now, you had those intentions to say, "We should see one of the Blacks. Not just hearing that there are Black people. We must see them." You had that intention to come. Through your forefathers you are here, now in Zambia, the same thing. And you want to help me on the things that I don't know. That is the reason today why you are in my home: you are learning something, you know? Even if you did not know a lot about us Blacks, by so doing, you get to know a lot of things. You know what we need, you know what we don't need.

Justin: Do you think, when the white people came into Africa, did they do anything bad?

Francis: You know everything has its two parts. The bad part and the good part. The only bad thing the whites used to do: they were segregative.⁶ The segregation that was there was like the white mans; they came to know that, OK, the Blacks could not provide for the whites. The Blacks had nothing to provide for them. Always, as it was stated, we shall be servants of you people. Just like the way we are: we are workers to the Chinese, and our

fathers were workers to the whites in Kalomo. When it comes to farming, we learned about farming through you guys.

Francis described, ideally, the colonialist relationship as one of mutual learning grounded not in a blind egalitarianism but in the recognition of pre-existing inequalities of material resources and technical capacity. Thus, whites should learn “what we [Africans] need . . . what we don’t need.” Meanwhile Africans, who “could not provide for the whites,” should learn things, such as “farming,” that increase their own capacities. Here, the critique Francis articulated of European colonialism was exactly the reverse of my own. I saw European colonialism as about altogether too much connection, since I understood colonialist forms of connection as fundamentally grounded in racism, exploitation, and domination. From my perspective, it would have been better if the British had left Zambian societies alone. But for Francis, the reverse held true: for him, the problem was not too much connection, but too little. Francis criticized “segregasive” behaviors by whites which worked to keep Africans and Europeans separate and apart. Where I saw racial segregation as an essential part of the colonial project, Francis saw that same segregation as a moral flaw that marred an otherwise benign system and perversely counteracted that system’s main purpose: the bringing together of Europeans and Africans in relations of social connectedness and mutual learning. Francis continued:

Francis: You know Queen Elizabeth is the one who has been organizing Africa. Teaching us various things.

Justin: And also exploiting Africa?

Francis: No, as the Queen, she did not do that. Of course, maybe she was doing it by instructions, but no, with her, we say “thank you,” because we have seen a lot of things that we haven’t, that we couldn’t even maybe see. Things like English. Where would I get English, if not for Britain? Nothing. Talk of Bantu-speaking people. Bantu-speaking people, they were like the Chinese. The thing which they were speaking amongst themselves, no one else can get it. But the whites could teach those people up to the extent of other people getting them, the whites got those people from their languages to English. And English led to the spread of almost the whole world together. How are we going to be friends if I don’t get what you are talking about?

Here, Francis pointed to the potential of colonialism to foster relations of social connection, to bring “almost the whole world together,” that would have been impossible otherwise. One way to interpret Francis’s call for colonially grounded, racialized hierarchies, then, is to recognize that master and servant describes not only a relation of inequality. It is a relation that is by necessity also a relationship: a relation that requires and perpetuates social connection. Of course, that relationship excludes meritocratic platitudes of a level playing field on which all are free to compete equally. But the kind of idealized colonialist relationship Francis described also excludes a liberal ordering of nation-states that connects people in the Global North and South through the sinews of global capitalism while obfuscating (or, in Marx’s terms, mystifying) their actual social relatedness to one another (Melamed 2015).

MUTUALLY DISEASED IMAGINATIONS

Our divergent theorizations of colonialism and inequality point to ways in which both Francis and I labored under diseased ethical imaginations. The Curse of Ham narrative that Francis re-articulated, after all, was the originary discursive pillar employed for centuries both to legitimate feudal distinctions (Hertz 1928) and to justify the enslavement and colonization of Africans (Wynter 2003).⁷ This diseased imagination grew further, cancer-like, in the wake of the colonial encounters of 1492 (Oliphant 2021). Tracing this cancerous growth, the Baptist minister and theologian Willie James Jennings (2010, 292) analyzes how “Christian hubris gave life to a destructive form of joining” between peoples on diverse continents, mired in “racialized boundaries and racial kinship” and a Christian “vision informed by colonialist logic of new life in Jesus Christ being wholly consumed in the social imagination of nations.” Political independence in the twentieth century failed to dislodge the pervasiveness of such white supremacist ideologies throughout many postcolonial African states (Pierre 2013), even though, as in Zambia, few local white actors remain to perpetuate them.

But Francis’s critiques also point to the more subtle, though no less violent disease at the heart of my own views, grounded in secular, supposedly scientific understandings of human origins and a conventionally liberal, meritocratic ethical imagination. Tracing the development of modern, scientific accounts of human evolution, Terence Keel (2018) demonstrates the continuities between this thinking and older forms of explicitly racist Christian thought, as contemporary geneticists continue to employ, unacknowledged, the racialized conceptual framework originally derived from the story of Noah and his sons. In her charting of

the historical progression of European justifications of colonialism, [Sylvia Wynter \(2003\)](#) similarly reconstructs how the Curse of Ham, the originary anti-Black myth of the Abrahamic faiths, was successively overlaid with new forms of racial legitimation that nevertheless never displaced the violent anti-Blackness at the heart of the discursive system. According to the genealogy Wynter traces, the anti-Blackness of the Ham myth was first overlaid with the ideology of Man1, the humanistic European subject endowed with rational faculties that made him fit overlord for the supposedly animalistic, non-rational “natives” Europeans were increasingly encountering across the globe. Later this ideology would itself be overlaid with that of Man2, which employed Malthusian and social Darwinian conceptions of social ordering to justify racialized hierarchies as the result of the greater biological fitness and meritocratic ability of those who had violently expropriated the land, labor, and wealth of other peoples. Wynter identifies this ideology of Man2 with contemporary liberal imaginaries of meritocracy and “level-playing-field” articulations of justice, which serve to implicitly condone the hoarding of power, privilege, and prosperity in the Global North as the just deserts of a more capable, implicitly racialized “ethnaclass,” rather than the ill-gotten gains of imperialist plunder. [Cedric Robinson \(2020\)](#), too, notes the centrality of the Curse of Ham myth in justifying both the race and class hierarchies inherent in the development of the contemporary system of global capitalism.

Of course, as the ethnaclass Man has been progressively articulated by succeeding generations of Europeans and their descendants, it no longer explicitly references the Curse of Ham; we might say that the memory of this original ideological justification for secular European humanism and liberal capitalism has been repressed. But the story endures through its racialized afterlives that serve to legitimate a growing system of global apartheid ([Besteman 2020](#); [Boesak 2015](#); [Mullings 2009](#)), or apart-ness, in which divisions of material welfare between former colonizer and colonized populations pervade global capitalism ([Mbembe 2017](#); [Trouillot 2003](#)). Thus, my experience of disconcertment (in Verran’s sense) at Francis’s words was also an experience of the uncanny (in [Sigmund Freud’s \[2003\]](#) sense): a profoundly disturbing encounter with the foundational trope of anti-Blackness that was historically constitutive of contemporary social realities, but which has since been repressed.

TOWARD MORAL REPAIR

If a shared rotten core lies at the heart of both conventional secular accounts of political ordering and historically dominant forms of Christianity, then turning

to the work of Christian liberation theologians who have directly worked to excise this rotten core is an apt starting place from which to explore routes toward moral repair and alternative political futures. Employing liberation theology as a form of “ethnographic theory” (Robbins 2020) allows for a fuller examination of this diseased heart without requiring specifically Christian theistic commitments (Haynes 2022). Liberation theologians have noted forcefully that despite the all-too-frequent (and, to use Oliphant’s terminology, heretical) alignment of Christian churches with hegemonic structures of oppression, the Christian God is necessarily on the side of the oppressed (Cone 1997; Douglas 2019). Thus, though the argument that Black people are inferior by nature because of Noah’s curse is indeed blasphemy (King 1998), nevertheless thinking with Francis’s nonsecular theorizations of racism, coloniality, and global capitalism might show, as the South African cleric and veteran anti-apartheid activist Allan Boesak (2015, 4) suggests, how “a theological tradition, used as a tool of abuse and oppression by powerful interests, can be reclaimed as inspiration for struggles for freedom by the powerless and oppressed.”

A place to start is to consider the Botswanan feminist theologian Musa Dube’s (2000) analysis of the central Christian text of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13) and its necessary call for authentic forms of hospitable community (Oduoye 2001, Stewart 2001). Dube (2000, 613, 616) argues, as Francis also did in his conversation with me, that there is already a misleading shell game at work in liberal reactions of affront to master-servant hierarchy, since the contemporary global political-economic system is already one of masters and servants, and the ostensibly free markets that transform the world into a small, interconnected village do not, in fact, facilitate genuine human freedom. In a similar manner, Francis described his bitter feeling of betrayal that whites of the Global North (both Europe and Asia) indeed expected Africans to serve, both historically through enslavement and colonialism and currently through neocolonial control of the Zambian economy (Haruyama 2022). Yet despite their very real expectations of service, these whites refused to acknowledge their shared kinship, social relatedness, or ethical obligations toward Africans. Demonstrating this as inconsistent with God’s will for humanity, Dube (2000, 618) argues that the ubiquitous Christian recitation of the Lord’s Prayer demands recognition of shared kinship across continents: “Women and men of different colours, sizes and shapes in different countries and continents are all ‘children’ of the same parent. Suppose all the reciters of the Lord’s Prayer began to grasp this truth, how would they live with globalization that strips naked many members of the family in order to over-embellish a few others?”

In a similar vein, the American Baptist minister [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) (2015, 96) notes the deep intertwining of racism, economic exploitation, and neo-colonialism as he describes the interdependency of all people under conditions of globalized capitalism. Speaking to the “fierce urgency of now” and against the always-not-quite-yet liberal deferments of justice ([Povinelli 2011](#)), [King \(2015, 83\)](#) castigates the immorality of keeping people of the Global South “locked out of the earthly kingdom of wealth, health and happiness.” Since, from a Christian perspective, all humans are ultimately one family sharing one roof together, King echoes Dube’s demand: “We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother . . . do we have the morality and courage to live together as brothers and not be afraid?” (87–88).

For the South African Anglican theologian [Desmond Tutu \(2000, 31\)](#), these kinds of Christian calls lead to a consideration of the traditional Christian doctrine of *imago Dei*, that each and every human being was created equally in the image of God. Developing an “*ubuntu* theology,” Tutu synthesizes the doctrine of *imago Dei* with philosophical precepts, common to many southern African languages, such as *Motho ke motho ka batho* (or *Umuntu ng’umuntu ng’abantu*), that “to be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them,” and *Feta kgomo o tshware motho* which requires “that mutual care and sharing with one another precedes concern for the accumulation and safeguarding of wealth” ([Ramose 2005, 149–150](#), see also [Tamale 2020](#)).

The work of these theologians helps illuminate the way that Francis’s theorizations of racism and coloniality point directly to the diseased heart of secular modernity and its pretensions of formal egalitarianism between nations and peoples despite the realities of a system of growing global apartheid ([Besteman 2020](#); [Mullings 2009](#)), of apart-ness. In Francis’s account, this diseased heart is the violent fiction of the ethical dis-connection between peoples separated by continents and the rigidly patrolled borders of settler-colonial and postimperial states in the Global North: as if the brutal legacies of enslavement and colonization of Africans leave no lasting moral obligations.

NEW POLITICAL FUTURES

For many good reasons Francis’s recuperation of the ethical potentials of colonialism—to bring people together—can appear anathema to an anthropological discipline engaged in a project to decolonize its methods and political orientations. But Francis’s theorizations also point to a different kind of decolonization, a road not followed in the twentieth century, occluded as it was by, in Francis’s words,

colonizers' "segragative" mentalities. There was a window in the decolonizing era, from about 1949 to 1962 in Britain and 1958 to 1974 in France, even while some of the bitterest anticolonial struggles raged in places like Algeria and Kenya, when a different kind of decolonized world might have emerged. During this period both Britain and France, the two largest imperial powers, experimented with new forms of officially non-racial, transnational citizenship grounded not in the narrow borders of the metropolitan nation-state but expansively across the entire colonial realm. In France, this was termed *citoyen de la Communauté* (citizen of the community), in Britain, "Commonwealth citizen." As decolonization proceeded, the expansive ideology of these new articulations of transnational citizenship ensured that even as the former colonies became independent, sovereign republics, the citizens of these newly-sovereign entities retained the automatic legal right to come and go from the imperial metropole as they pleased, and to settle there at any time if they so wished (Cooper 2018).

There was thus a brief potential for two kinds of decolonization to have proceeded in parallel. On the one hand, as national liberation movements were winning victories across the former colonies, independent nations could emerge with hard-won rights to popular sovereignty and self-determination, "to stand on their own," as Francis phrased it. On the other hand, the imperial metropolises themselves might have been decolonized as, instead of the jealously guarded fortresses of imperially amassed privilege and prosperity they became, they might have maintained rather than severed the open forms of connection they once promised their colonial subjects.⁸

Of course, what happened instead is that the colonizers gave into their "segragative" mentalities, resulting in rather different forms of connection than those once promised. These connections were premised on the neocolonial economic manipulation of the former colonies (Nkrumah 1966), rather than an open social connection with their peoples. At the same time, the former imperial powers adopted stringent immigration barriers intended (quite explicitly) to close off opportunities for legal immigration by "colored" subjects from the former colonies, while making entry as easy as possible for immigrants of white European ancestry. This process culminated, by 1974, in most of the main European colonial powers (including Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium) opening their gates wide to a free migration zone (in the form of the European Communities) of unrestricted migration throughout Western Europe, a free migration zone that in its later incarnation of the European Union would stretch across almost all of Europe (Consterdine 2017). At the same time, successive British governments

implemented immigration laws in the period 1962–1971 designed to facilitate white immigration from the settler colonies of the Commonwealth (Canada, Australia, New Zealand), while seeking to eliminate labor migration from all other Commonwealth nations (Paul 1997). Beginning in 1974, the French government similarly repudiated its commitments to former colonial subjects which guaranteed their right to settle within the metropolitan borders.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on the United States, Savannah Shange (2019, 10) describes the necessary orientation of an abolitionist anthropology toward working “within, against, and beyond the state in the service of collective liberation,” especially with regard to the state’s myriad carceral forms that keep Black folks *locked in* (or locked up). From a transnational Zambian vantage point, Francis’s critical theorizations lend weight to another possible dimension of an abolitionist anthropology: the demand to abolish not only, for example, immigration detention centers (García Hernández 2019; Lindskoog and Young 2021) but also the entire edifice of immigration control and surveillance that keeps Black folks like Francis *locked out* (Tazzioli 2023; Tazzioli and De Genova 2023). Doing so would require recognition that being born into the societies of the Global North constitutes a form of birth-right privilege analogous to feudalism (Carens 2013), wherein legal constraints on mobility operate as de facto lines on which to draw the division of wealth (Easterly 2013). It would also necessitate a reconsideration of social organization and the distribution of life chances based neither on narrow genres of the human (Wynter 2003) nor on the exclusionary, territorializing logics of nationalism, but rather on the recognition of our shared kinship across continents, all of us the descendants of Noah, and the mutual relations of connection, care, and provision this shared kinship demands. It would recognize that, as the Ghanaian Methodist theologian and founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1982, 179), reminds us, “the real problem . . . lies in the eradication of [those] forces that work against the solidarity of the human race.” Engaging with the Christian thought of liberation theologians and Francis alike as a form of critical social theory provides an opening for anthropology to think past the hegemonic dictates of secular liberal modernity and to imagine worlds otherwise (Meek and Morales Fontanilla 2022) through a nonsecular, transnational African approach to decolonizing anthropology.

ABSTRACT

For centuries, Europeans interpreted the biblical curse of Ham to justify the colonization and enslavement of Africans. Yet some Zambians today repeat this story as a demonstration of God's intention for Africans to be servants to whites, thus explaining global inequalities. I approach these apparently anti-Black views not as evidence of false consciousness but as counterhegemonic theorizations of racism, coloniality, and capitalism. Many Zambians use the Ham narrative to challenge the liberal fetishization of equality amid the territorializing border logics of the nation-state. They demonstrate how, in a radically unequal world, these fetishes perpetuate social divisions that contravene God's will. This constitutes a non-egalitarian decolonizing critique that instead demands relations of mutual connection, kinship, and care across continents. Working toward moral repair, I enlist the resources of liberation theology to imagine new ethical and political futures that are both anti-racist and anti-statist. [hierarchy; liberation theology; kinship; borders; Christianity; abolition; Zambia]

NOTES

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1. In the account of Genesis 9, which resembles but is not identical with Francis's history, Seth is named Shem and the brother whom Francis leaves unnamed is called Ham. As a result, the story of Genesis 9 is conventionally called "The Curse of Ham." This name is somewhat misleading, however, since, as Francis's history makes clear, it is Canaan, not Ham, who is cursed.
2. The differences between Zambian conceptualizations of race, in which Asians such as Chinese and Indians qualify as whites but not as "real whites," and more globally hegemonic Euro-American styles of racialization are discussed at greater length in [Haruyama 2023](#).
3. Francis's explicit comparison of the relative moral qualities of Black and white people here is of course in direct contradiction of other discourses prevalent in many African countries, including Zambia, for example *ubuntu* (in South Africa) or African socialism. Contrary to Francis's account, these alternative discourses tend to valorize the moral qualities of African over individualistic and materialistic Western culture, emphasizing Africans' willingness to assist one another and to work toward common goals. I suggest that the aftermath of experiences of abjection ([Ferguson 1999](#)) and disillusionment with a relatively ineffectual and increasingly ethnicized Zambian state, unable to adequately contest the foreign-induced neoliberalization of the Zambian mining industry, may

contribute to Zambians' more frequent contemporary emphasis on the moral failings of Africans rather than narratives of *ubuntu* and African socialism that prevailed in an earlier era.

4. The word *mzungu*, which Nyanja and Chichewa share with Kiswahili, is cognate to similar terms in many Bantu languages throughout eastern and southern Africa, including, for example, *musungu* in CiBemba, *muRungu* in chiShona, and *mlungu* in isiZulu, isiXhosa, and siSwati. All these terms are usually glossed in English as “white (person)” and are perhaps all descended from a common proto-Bantu form, *mòjóngò*. Nevertheless, varying stories about these words are told in different parts of Africa, connecting them in different ways to the contemporary Bantu languages spoken in those regions. As noted, Nyanja/Chichewa speakers in Zambia sometimes connect the word *mzungu* to *mulungu* (God), but in east Africa, people connect it with the Kiswahili word *kuzunguka*, “to wander,” and in South Africa the word *mlungu* is connected with the abeLungu clan, descended from whites shipwrecked on the Pondoland coast around 1700 (Tshabe et al. 2006). There is, as far as I am aware, no existing scholarly consensus on the “true” etymology of the term across all these languages.
5. In the Gwembe Valley ciTonga spoken in Mugoda, *luzubo* (“clan”) is the singular of *ma-zubo* (“clans”). The equivalent terms used by ciTonga speakers on the Plateau are *mukowa* (sing.) and *mikowa* (pl.).
6. *Segregasive* is a common word in Zambian English used to express a concept that in American English would usually be rendered as “segregationist.”
7. Though the Curse of Ham story was employed in both Christianity and Islam to justify enslaving Africans (Goldenberg 2017), Christian practices of plantation slavery proved far more deadly to those enslaved (Robinson 2020).
8. This decolonization would have been far from automatic, and long struggles to contest entrenched racism lay ahead (Gilroy 2002). Contrary to popular narratives, however, this racism resulted more from contingent choices by political elites than from an inevitable reaction by existing white publics (Paul 1997).

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