

## Chapter Seven

# Prophetic Labrador

## *Expanding (Black) Theology by Overcoming the Invisibility of Animal Life and Death*

Christopher Carter

Growing up in a black church, I was surrounded by a community of church Mothers, and there are certain sayings among the Mothers that a child would hear from time to time. As a young boy, sayings such as “Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning,” “We have to make a way out of no way,” and “This too shall pass” were etched into my consciousness. Among my favorites is a paraphrase from the beginning of Psalm 8, “out of the mouths of babes.” This saying signaled that a young child, in a moment of sheer childlike honesty, might offer insight into a problem that the adults in the room had seemingly overlooked. In these moments, the “simple” musings of a child were given adult-like credibility. Wisdom was thus no longer confined to the margins of community meaning making; instead the kernel of truth was placed in the fertile ground of elder wisdom and allowed to grow.

As a curious, nosy, and (at least in my mind) smart child, I loved hearing “out of the mouths of babes” in reference to something that I said. I longed to be a part of the community that was *allowed* to publicly fashion meaning out of everyday existence. Given the privilege placed upon certain types of agency in my community, that is, adult (generally speaking male) human beings, and my feeling that I was in some ways excluded, I have a particular sensitivity for those who have been silenced.

For these reasons, and reasons that remain consciously unknown, my notion of community has widened to include the more-than-human world. As a black man I know all too well the isolation and disempowerment of *silenced presence*. By silenced presence I mean the awareness one has when one realize that one’s existence in particular spaces is contingent upon how others feel about one being there. In my case, silenced presence describes my realization that parts of me, if not all of me, remain unseen by those in power because they are more comfortable seeing the idea of me that they have cre-

ated within their worldview rather than my reality. For example, as a theology professor at a predominantly white university, I do not have the privilege of dressing as casually (that is, jeans and a t-shirt) as my white male colleagues, who might try to dress informally as a way of disrupting classroom hierarchy between professors and students. In order to be seen by my white students as an authority figure, rather than as a graduate student, I must “look” like what they believe a professional black person should look like. Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland helpfully describes black invisibility, noting that “rules of presence, being, and identity apply to bodies not as human right, but as racial privilege, hence black presence is absence and white presence is presence.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, silenced presence is living with the awareness that all too often white people believe that my contribution toward their education, communal well-being, or identity only matters inasmuch as it fits within the terms set by the dominant white American culture.

Despite this obvious connection between black and nonhuman animal invisibility, I am among the few black theologians who have taken the step to expand my notion of community to include animals and the more-than-human world while also allowing this expansion to shape my academic work.<sup>2</sup> Despite knowing what it feels like to be silenced, the majority of black theologians have followed the path of most of our white colleagues and either rationalize the silencing of the more-than-human world or understand human reason to be the hermeneutical key necessary to give voice to the “others.”

Similar to people of color, the more-than-human world, including animals, is often forced into a state of silenced presence within mainstream theology with its commitment to reinforcing the human/animal binary. When this happens, we give life to the lie that only *socially acceptable* experiences shape our theological ideas. Within this framework our experiences with the more-than-human world only count inasmuch as they reinforce human, male, and white domination hierarchies. Our anti-oppressive constructive theologies will be limited until we break free from this theological worldview. As such, the goal of this chapter is to continue thinking theologically in community with the more-than-human-world. In so doing, I presume that the nonhumans who occupy the world are active agents, expressing themselves within the broader earth community. In other words, I seek to hear the voices of those who have been and are being silenced. Specifically, I explore how my relationship with my now deceased chocolate Labrador Sampson continues to influence how I encounter, experience, and make sense of my relationships with the other creatures that inhabit the planet. Indeed, while the themes of community and sin have been foundational theoretical frames of my academic and pastoral work, how I have come to define these themes has expanded because of how Sampson’s life and death changed me.

## THE MORAL OBLIGATIONS OF RELATIONSHIP

I did not want another dog. My wife called me and asked if I would come to her office to visit a dog she found while running errands for her boss. Of course, I agreed to meet the dog, and I even consented that we could foster the dog until we located his family, but I told her that three dogs were enough. To be sure, we had the space for another dog. We lived in a large four-bedroom house on an acre of land, but that was beside the point. I knew another dog meant more work for me, more cleaning, more training, more walking, a whole lot of more. I did not want another dog. When I arrived at her office, my wife walked me back to the room where she was keeping the dog and said, "This is Sampson." "She's named him," I thought to myself; I could see where this was going. So I took Sampson home. He met our other dogs, Zeus, Zeke, and Cookie, and got along fine with them. I was surprised at how calm he was. It was almost as if he knew that I was looking for a reason to take him to the shelter. It turns out that Sampson was perhaps the rare chocolate Labrador who was, in fact, calm by nature. He loved being in community, he would follow the other dogs around, he would lay on the floor in front of me while I watched TV, he didn't want to distract anyone but he wanted you to know he was present. As the days passed I could hardly tell that we added a fourth dog to our family and I accepted that Sampson was there to stay.

Two years later, my wife, Zeus, Sampson, and I were driving across the country to Claremont, California, where I was to attend graduate school. Given that we were going to downsize and live in an apartment, we decided that Cookie and Zeke, the most rambunctious of the pack, would be better suited living with friends in Michigan who owned houses. Sampson took to California quite easily. He loved the sun and the beach. His laid-back personality was a great fit for the relaxed "bro" vibe of southern California. Unfortunately, the relaxed nature of our household was upended when my wife and I experienced the seemingly predictable graduate school marriage crisis. Our relationship struggles eventually resulted in a four-month separation that was particularly hard on everyone. After my wife moved out of the apartment, I sunk into a deep depression. During the first few weeks, I spent most of my days on the couch. I was not the best companion during this time, and Sampson had every right to be annoyed at my inability to maintain a healthy and active relationship with him and his brother. Sampson stepped into this joyless void. He was exceptionally affectionate during my depression, often laying his head on me so that I could feel his presence. Again, he wanted me to know that he was present, and in these instances, he must have thought that I needed to feel his presence as well. He didn't do anything particularly novel

other than ensuring that I was never alone, which in hindsight was exactly what I needed. A few years later, I would return the favor.

After months of therapy, tears, conversations with friends and family, and countless hours in the loving presence of Zeus and Sampson, my wife and I reconciled. The emotional dynamics of our home evolved into a new normal that was better than I could have imagined. I was able to resume my work toward a PhD, and after finishing my doctoral studies, I accepted a postdoctoral position at the University of San Diego. Several months earlier we had lost Zeus to a soft tissue sarcoma, and now Sampson was our only companion. Because my wife was still in veterinary school at the time, we were going to have to become a two-house family. We decided that Sampson would live with me in San Diego because I would have a more flexible schedule and would be able to spend more time with him now that he was going to be alone during the day. However, this would be my first time teaching an undergraduate class and I quickly realized that I did not know what I was doing. I spent more time on campus preparing for class than I anticipated, which resulted in Sampson being home alone much more than either of us liked. I went to several “new faculty” events that occupied my time as well. Sampson was home by himself much more than he should have been, but I believed I was doing what all great professionals do: I was proving my worth to the university.

One day we were preparing to visit my wife for the weekend and I noticed he was moving slower than usual. I did not think anything of it; he was getting older, after all. When we arrived at her townhome, Sampson was breathing heavy, but I thought it was due to the heat because it was a particularly hot fall that year. When my wife saw him she immediately knew something was wrong and we rushed to the hospital. Sampson had developed a cancerous tumor on his heart, a hemangiosarcoma, which allowed fluid to build up around his heart and limit its ability to function. Sampson was dying. After the doctors drained the fluid that had built up around his heart he seemed like he was back to his old self. I was not sure how much time he had left, but I knew that I needed to spend more time with him to ensure that he was comfortable and enjoying life as best as he was able.

I changed my work habits and started working from home as much as I could. I stopped attending so many university events and reduced my presence around campus. At first, changing my schedule was easy because it seemed like the right thing to do. However, because I was not around as much as I used to be, people started to wonder where I was or what I doing. As a black faculty member of a predominantly white institution, I was aware of the expectations among students of color and the administration that I would participate in the life of the school in order to model “diversity.” Despite the tax placed upon black professors, I still longed to play an important role in

mentoring students of color. Perhaps because of this longing I began feeling like I was missing something by not being on campus or attending as many events. I started to resent having to come home every few hours to walk Sampson and I was frustrated that he seemingly had so much control over my schedule. Sampson had always done such an excellent job of blending in and being low maintenance that I did not know what to do when he required so much additional attention. Moreover, I loved Sam and I was disappointed in myself for feeling any resentment toward him; it's not like he wanted to have cancer. And yet it seemed that the various feelings I had toward him never dissuaded his opinion of me. I was a part of his community, and I belonged to him as much as he belonged to me.

Five months after his first fluid drain Sampson had a second procedure. After this hospital visit we knew that we only had a short time left with him, and it turned out that we just had two days. The night he died we went for his usual evening walk and he smelled all his favorite smells. When we got back to the apartment he was not able to walk up the two steps required to get inside. I knew it was time. I carried him inside, laid him on the couch, and we sat and watched TV for a few hours. We both fell asleep on each other, comforting each other as he comforted me during my depression. My wife and I drove him to the hospital in the morning to say goodbye; I have never wept so hard in all my life.

The following day my wife returned to our townhome in Claremont while I stayed in San Diego. I woke up around 6:30 a.m., the usual time Sampson would wake me up for our walk. I got dressed and went on "our" walk by myself. I walked every morning and every evening for several days, and I as I walked I tried to process how I felt about Sampson's death. I felt a piercing sense of guilt about the last few months of Sampson's life. I felt ashamed that I had been so selfish; the manner I had lived those past few months was inconsistent with the ethical values that I claim to uphold. In this way, my sense of guilt was more than just feeling distressed that Sampson was dead; I felt as though I had sinned against Sampson and also (somehow?) against God.

## SIN AS AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY CONCEPT

As a liberation ethicist, I understand sin to be both an individual and communal theological category. I agree with James Cone that "to be in sin is to deny the values that make the community what it is. It is living according to one's private interests and not according to the goals of the community. It is believing that one can live independently of the source that is responsible for the community's existence."<sup>3</sup> The *source* of our community's existence is

loving relationship grounded in the reality of our sacred interconnectedness, modeled to us in the solidaristic love of the least of these by Jesus the Christ.<sup>4</sup> This love is best understood and expressed through the framework of Jesus's greatest commandment to embody a loving relationship between God, neighbor, and self.<sup>5</sup> To be in sin, then, is to live outside of the truth of the interconnectivity between God and all Creation. It is to believe the colonial myth that we must seek power over others (power understood as some combination of our political, economic, and racial categorization) so that we can determine who can be members of our imagined communities.

"But," you may be asking, "were Sampson and I really in *community*?" To be sure, the theology of the dominant white culture places lines between who counts as community. Traditionally humans can be a part of community but nonhuman animals and nature cannot. Additionally, the fluidity of American Christianity's definition of the "human" has historically prevented certain groups (for example, people of color, women, and Jews, among others deemed not quite human enough) from enjoying the privilege of being a member of the sociopolitical community of the United States. The emergence of ecological theology and ethics in the mid-twentieth century have sought to expand the notion of community to create an ecological consciousness in response to the ecological destruction caused by human beings.

For black people, the inclusion of nonhuman animals and the more-than-human world has been a slow-going process. The legacy of chattel slavery and the long history of animalization of black and brown bodies—from Social Darwinism to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of A Nation*, from the Tuskegee syphilis "experiment" to Memphis sanitation workers proclaiming their humanity—has created some hesitation among black scholars and activists to think theologically with the more-than-human world.<sup>6</sup> The logic that informs this approach is that in order to prove our humanness, black people (and other people of color) needed to distance themselves from "the animal."

Since European colonialism, our definitions of "human" and "animal" have had racialized overtones and undertones within Euro-American culture. This thinking is expressed historically, such as when Prince Henry the Navigator argued that blacks and indigenous humans were less rational and therefore less human than white Europeans. It is also expressed in contemporary society, such as when President Trump refers to the "animals" of the predominantly Latinx gang MS-13, or when police officers refer to black and brown folks as animals. In this way, the modern delineation of human/humanity and animal/animality was constructed along racial lines. Franz Fanon makes this clear in *Wretched of the Earth* when he writes,

In plain talk, [the colonial subject] is reduced to the state of an animal. And consequently, when the colonist speaks of the colonized he uses zoological terms.

Allusion is made to the slithery movements of the yellow race, the odors from the “native” quarters. . . . In his endeavors at description and finding the right word, the colonist refers constantly to the bestiary.<sup>7</sup>

When we drink from the fountain of coloniality, we swallow principles that normalize the logic of oppression that supports white heteropatriarchy. Coloniality is designed such that only a few elite white people are actually accorded *all* the privileges of being as such. In this social and theological structure, all human beings are placed somewhere on the continuum between humans and animals based on their rationality, in which rational is understood to mean a white colonial worldview. “Decolonial” thinking, then, is the twin process of identifying and dismantling colonialist logic—and its hierarchies—in all its forms. Decolonial thinking requires seeking out the hidden aspects of the political, economic, social, and theological ideologies that maintained colonialist thinking even after political independence or civil rights have been achieved.<sup>8</sup>

What I want to suggest is that the traditional ways of delineating who gets to be a member of the community, who is allowed to be visible and heard (rather than a silenced presence), and who possesses agency is steeped in colonial white supremacist logic that defines a narrow “human” category that excludes many people as well as animals and nature. Consequently, theologians of color should seek to give voice to other-than-human bodies and materiality to help (re)shape our ideas about God-talk. In so doing we continue the liberative task of decentering whiteness within theology which requires decentering the human inasmuch as “human” has historically been understood to be a white heterosexual male. By theologically attending to our encounters with nonhuman others, be they animals or nature, we can begin to dismantle the logic that attempts to separate these encounters from our understanding of the Divine and a renewed understanding of ourselves.

Sampson’s death impacted me such that the imaginary lines that had been drawn—which were supposed to prevent me from experiencing him as a part of my community—had been erased. Well, at least erased within the private sphere of my personal life. As noted earlier, during the last few months of Sampson’s life I wrestled with the moral obligations communal membership requires. I did not want to tell any of my colleagues that I was structuring my schedule around a dog. What would they think? Would they assume that I wasn’t taking my role as an assistant professor seriously? Would my actions find their way into my tenure application? My fears of my colleagues’ reactions became excuses for me to avoid taking the risk of faith that is required by all who seek to expand our communities to include marginalized, invisible, and silenced voices. I know what it feels like to be an invisible member of multiple communities, to be present and not be seen, to be asked to speak

and know that no one is listening. As such, my liberatory anti-oppression ethic is rooted in making visible what we would rather not see, giving voice to those we would rather not listen to, and welcoming people into the beloved community who the dominant culture has told do not belong. Through Sampson's death I learned how fear and anxiety can dull our conscious and allow us to "rationally" explain our sinful actions away—actions that deny the truth of the interconnectivity between God and all Creation—as normal.

Our experiences of the world give shape to theological ideas. These experiences shape both our reason, how we make sense of the world, and our very being, meaning how we feel about the world we inhabit.

My experience of Sampson's death revealed to me how easy it could be for anyone to fall prey to human selfishness and shrink our communities and therefore reduce our moral obligations toward others. His death helped me intellectually understand and affectively feel that I had an inconsistent worldview—that is, a part of me still wanted to retain some tacit support for the limiting of moral obligations toward communities that do not appear to be like "us," whoever "us" happens to include.

This is the same reasoning that has been used by Euro-American Christians to justify all manner of sin, from the genocide of indigenous peoples, to the enslavement of millions of Africans, to the raping of black women, to the internment of Japanese Americans, and much more. In Sampson's death I learned that racist, anthropocentric, and androcentric ideologies run deep in the psyche of even the most vigilant of persons and that we have to practice decolonial thinking as an everyday process.

Through my encounter with Sampson, sin and community are no longer abstract theoretical concepts rooted in Euro-Christian colonial norms of moral impurity or group purity. My theological description of what sin is and how it (mis)shapes communities can only make sense in light of my encounter with Sampson. My theological definition of community can only make sense in light of my experience as a member of Sampson's community. Those who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of love and justice rightly recognize that we will be confronted by forces that seek to stand against our goal of fashioning a liberatory, anti-oppressive community. History shows us that if we are persistent in our struggle we may be invited to the negotiating table of those who hold some power within the dominant culture. It is at the negotiating table where we will have to discern how much and for whom are we willing to compromise our theo-ethical commitment to those on the margins of our community. My behavior during Sampson's illness and subsequent death showed me how easy it is to settle for an alleged permanent seat at the table, to settle for equality with, rather than liberation from, the oppressive structures we claim to fight against because we have bought into the idea that to include all the marginalized at the table would be too inconvenient.

Abstract theological concepts such as sin and community reflect the morality we project onto Divine character when those theological concepts are constructed in ways that dismiss our encounters with nonhuman others. These abstractions are poignantly expressed by media coverage after natural disasters such as hurricanes. When referencing the “death toll” commentators rarely, if ever, mention the millions of nonhuman animals who were abandoned to die.<sup>9</sup> Nor do they tell the stories of the psychological trauma experienced by those who live near these farmed animal factories (who are often poor black and brown folk) who encounter the dead nonhuman animals when they return to their homes. These nonhuman animals are rendered invisible and the people who live in the surrounding communities experience a silenced presence. In their lives and their afterlives, our encounters with nonhuman animals are dismissed so that some might numb their conscience and assuage their guilt when encountering their death. In this way, the concepts of sin and community that we find in modern theologies will remain underdeveloped so long as these concepts allow human beings to either dismiss any feelings that contradict what we are supposed to feel or rationalize our desire to avoid feeling compassion for marginalized groups.

By attending to the complex feelings that arose within me during Sampson’s illness and death I was able to learn just how deep colonial logics of human and community are embedded within me. Moreover, I am able to continue my work as a black liberatory theological ethicist with a clearer picture of what an anti-oppressive society requires from those committed to realizing such a society. In this way, Sampson is as much of a prophet as any within the Christian tradition. Through his life he showed me that, from the perspective of care, expanding our notion of community is rarely as challenging as we make it out to be. There was no discernable difference between my experience loving Sampson and my experience loving another member of my family. Through his dying and his death he taught me the depth of what Jesus meant when he said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”<sup>10</sup> Within the Christian tradition our communities are the source of our life. Time and time again, Sampson pulled me back to that source. As such, my notion of the Divine pull toward a beloved community, and the ways we seek to resist the pull of those whom we classify as Other, will forever be interpreted in light of my being a part of Sampson’s community.

## NOTES

1. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 16.

2. Other notable black theologians and religious studies scholars who are addressing the intersection of nonhuman animals and black religion are Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017); and Carol Wayne White, *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

3. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, fortieth anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 110.

4. Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 92–105.

5. Matthew 22:36–40, NRSV.

6. The following authors have specifically discussed how the tension within the black community as it relates to human-nonhuman animal studies due to the history of slavery and animalization of black bodies: Lindgren Johnson, *Race Matters, Animal Matters: Fugitive Humanism in African America, 1840–1930* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*, rev. and exp. edition (New York: Mirror Books, 1996); and Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (New York: Continuum, 1998). *Animal Matters: Fugitive Humanism in African America, 1840–1930* (New York: Routledge, 2017)

7. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, repr. edition (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 7.

8. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, third edition (London: Routledge, 2013), 73.

9. Zoë Schlanger, “The Farm Animal Death Toll Continues to Rise in Hurricane Florence Floods,” *Quartz*, accessed September 26, 2018, <https://qz.com/1395700/hurricane-florence-drowns-3-4-million-poultry-birds-and-5500-pigs-in-north-carolina/>.

10. Matthew 25:40b, NRSV.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Third edition. London: Routledge, 2013.

Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Fortieth anniversary edition. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010.

Copeland, M. Shawn. *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Reprint edition. New York: Grove Press, 2005.

Harris, Melanie L. *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017.

Johnson, Lindgren. *Race Matters, Animal Matters: Fugitive Humanism in African America, 1840–1930*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Spiegel, Marjorie. *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*. Revised and expanded edition. New York: Mirror Books, 1996.

Townes, Emilie M. *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care*. New York: Continuum, 1998.

White, Carol Wayne. *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.