

After White Supremacy? The Viability of Virtue Ethics for Racial Justice

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CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING THREE SCENARIOS that critical race theorist Joe Feagin would call “racial events” or “distinctive, often recurring happenings in people’s lives that reveal the larger forces of the centuries-old racial hierarchy of this society.”¹

Scenario #1 – A white female professor of theological ethics pulls into an out of the way municipal parking lot on a Friday evening. Frazzled because she is new to the area and late for her event, she frantically looks around the lot for instructions as to the parking process and calms her fears about the black man walking toward her by telling herself he is the parking attendant, only to learn that he is a patron like her approaching to indicate his willingness to give her his spot.

Scenario #2 – Comments made during a faculty meeting dedicated to “hiring for diversity” in a Catholic theology department quickly devolve into semantic and intellectual parsing of the terms “diversity,” “white,” and “people of color” that effectively evades examination of the dominant Euro-American racial identity of the faculty and their engagement with the tradition.

Scenario #3 – A racial slur scrawled on the door of an African American female resident assistant at a Catholic university is only addressed publicly by the administration when students of color demand it after nearly two weeks of silence; mission-driven language of moral outrage at unnamed perpetrators in public performances of inclusivity and hospitality fail to acknowledge the initial institutional inertia, the presumption of “the other” in such language, and narra-

¹ Leslie Houts Picca and Joe R. Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2. Characteristics of a racial event include: embodied performances in either front or backstage spaces, usually in the context of small-scale groups or social networks, that “reflect or exemplify the overarching racist system and are central to its reinforcement and perpetuation,” 29.

tives shared by students, faculty, and staff of color about regular encounters with white supremacy.

As a white Christian ethicist and protagonist in the scenes above, I wonder whether virtue ethics as it is understood and practiced in Catholic moral theology serves as a viable moral method for examining and responding to these racial events. There are many reasons to think that would be the case. To begin, virtue ethics generally aims for moral development in personal or intrapersonal spheres,² which are also the spaces where racism in our post-civil rights era has retreated and remains firmly entrenched as evidenced in the first scenario. Virtue ethics is also attentive to the material or concrete particularities of agents and contexts, and therefore invites attuned perception to the more subtle dimensions of human moral action such as intention and emotive reasoning, as well as the fitting or appropriate response in light of the underlying relationships of a given situation.³ This would make it helpful in combating racism in its more covert contemporary forms such as internalized dispositions of superiority (operative in the first scenario), situations where stereotypes are likely to occlude actual facts (the second scenario), or situations where one's place in the racial hierarchy is likely to determine how one relates to others (the third scenario). Finally, virtue ethics encourages ongoing and future-oriented transformation through a process of striving toward a vision of what one hopes to become, whether as an individual or as a community, operative in the second and third scenarios.⁴ Americans were recently reminded of the indispensability of virtue ethics for racial justice as we marked the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, recalling a prophetic imperative to judge people on their character rather than the color of their skin and recommitting ourselves to making dreams of racial equality a reality.

So it would seem at first blush that virtue ethics would be resourceful in responding to the scenarios above. However, in what follows, I will suggest that this depends on whether or not white moral theologians examine the personal and interpersonal aspects of white supremacy in virtue ethics itself. Although there are a variety of terms that could be used somewhat interchangeably here—whiteness, white culture, white privilege, white racism—I have chosen white supremacy for two reasons: to challenge popular assumptions that only extremely racist individuals or groups on the fringe of soci-

² For example, Diana Fritz Cates, *Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship, and Compassion for Friends* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

³ This is a driving question for James F. Keenan's revision of the cardinal virtues in "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 709-29.

⁴ Consider Stanley Hauerwas's *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

ety are white supremacists and to highlight ways in which whites and the attributes of whiteness have long been associated with the highest or greatest good (i.e., the Thomistic concept of the *summum bonum*) in Catholic moral theology, from its historical development and methods to hiring practices and the content and procedures of doctoral degree programs in the discipline.⁵ By white supremacy I mean the dispositions and behaviors that reflect and defend the normativity and superiority of white experience,⁶ justify continued racial inequality by assessing people of color as culturally or morally deficient,⁷ motivate weak commitments to racial justice through inflated notions of white innocence and moral goodness,⁸ and shape encounters with racially different others with the twin responses of fear and guilt.⁹ Critical race theorists increasingly recognize that the individual and collective dispositions and practices of white supremacy undergird structural, systemic, or institutional racial injustice. White supremacy is the persistent driver of the ongoing evolution of racism since its more overt or blatant iterations in American history between the 1600s and the 1960s. These include “dysconscious racism”¹⁰ or “covert racism”¹¹ or “internalized racism”¹² or “color-blind racism.”¹³ Moreover, in the relatively rare occasions where racism is examined

⁵ For a critical examination of Catholic theology through this lens, see *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, ed. Alex Mikulich and Laurie Cassidy (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

⁶ See Peggy McIntosh’s now classic “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” retrievable from www.amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html. See also Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, revised edition 2011).

⁷ Assumptions of the intellectual, moral and cultural inferiority of people and communities of color is a central component of what Joe R. Feagin calls the “white racial frame,” which he unpacks in *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁸ See Barbara Applebaum, *Being White Being Good: White Complicity, Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2011).

⁹ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

¹⁰ See Joyce King, “Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity and the Miseducation of Teachers,” in the *Journal of Negro Education* 60.2 (1991): 133-46 where racial inequality is unquestioned or tolerated because it is seen as a social given or simply the way things are.

¹¹ Feagin describes this in terms of the persistent racism in the private “backstage” of white life with a higher tolerance for the assumptions of white supremacy and the inferiority of racial minorities in *Two-Faced Racism*.

¹² Camara Phyllis Jones, “Levels of Racism: A Theoretic Framework and a Gardener’s Tale,” *American Journal of Public Health* 90, no. 8 (2000), 1212-15.

¹³ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009) and Tim Wise, *Color-Blind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and Retreat from Racial Equity* (New York: City Lights Media, 2010).

or critically engaged voluntarily by whites, the dispositions and practices of whiteness are rarely the focal point.

Consider how the three scenarios above reflect white supremacy. The first points to internalized feelings of white superiority that in turn fuel the irrational fear of black male bodies and assumptions of others' inferiority. The second deals with white gatekeeping to the academy rooted in the unspoken assumption that a color-blind approach to hiring is most equitable. The third illuminates the recalcitrance of mission-based communities of higher education in doing the hard work of dismantling white normativity and a preference instead to appeal to white moral goodness in creating inclusive communities and white innocence when it comes to expressions of overt racism.

With all of this in mind I contend that if Catholic moral theologians wish to employ the virtue ethics tradition in our work for racial justice—personal, intrapersonal, and structural, particularly in the racialized social system of higher education in which the vast majority of us do our work¹⁴—then white moral theologians will need to identify the pervasive whiteness of virtue ethics itself and inculcate a new set of virtues that continually illuminate and disrupt the ways of knowing, reasoning, and agency associated with white supremacy. A failure to do so will not only limit the viability of Catholic virtue ethics for race justice but perhaps more dangerously will also run the risk of perpetuating a culture of white supremacy in the very language and application of virtue ethics itself.

My argument unfolds in three parts. First, I offer a brief introduction to the notion of “white supremacy” or “white culture” or “whiteness” in critical race theory, with an eye for the implications of white supremacy for virtue ethics generally speaking and the particular problems it poses when engaged within the framework of Catholic moral theology. I then identify the potential promises of virtue ethics for resisting the dispositions and practices of whiteness, which undergird structural racism. I conclude by offering an alternative set of virtues that might assist us in identifying and resisting white supremacy and apply these virtues to the three scenarios I presented at the outset.

WHAT ARE THEY SAYING ABOUT WHITE SUPREMACY?

In this brief overview of white supremacy, I organize the contributions of critical race theorists around four dimensions, each with implications for virtue ethics, particularly when employed in the

¹⁴ See “Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege,” a 2013 study by Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl published by Georgetown University’s Public Policy Institute: www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/Separate&Unequal.FR.pdf.

framework of Catholic moral theology: epistemological, habitual, performative, and relational.

Epistemological

White supremacy first and foremost is a way of making meaning about the self, others, and the social reality. Joe Feagin understands whiteness as a way of “framing,” or “unifying perceptions that help with cognition and understanding”¹⁵ with varying levels of intentionality. He roots white supremacy in the dominance of the centuries old “white racial frame,” which draws on the twin pillars of negative ideas, emotions, and images of African Americans and positive ideas, emotions, and images about whites and white institutions. “The white racial frame,” is “a set of beliefs, cognition, emotions and actions” which “accent continuing aspects of white superiority—that is, that whites are typically more moral, intelligent, rational, attractive, or hardworking than other racial groups.”¹⁶ The white racial frame is “aggressively propagated and adopted by whites” but also “to some degree penetrates the minds of those in all other U.S. racial groups.”¹⁷ With an implicit nod to virtue ethics, Feagin also notes that whites “make the general tools of the racial toolbox their own” lending the white racial frame a pliable or “slippery” meaning-making structure that can be made to fit certain circumstances.

This “generic meaning system”¹⁸ also functions as a kind of unknowing, a filtering out of contradictory information or experiences that maintains stereotypical emotions and judgments, and justifies discriminatory treatment of racial minorities in interpersonal and institutional contexts. In her now classic “Unpacking the Knapsack of Privilege,” Peggy McIntosh explains how she plumbed the depth of her conscious and subconscious self in order to enumerate the ways in which her white skin not only brings her advantages that people of color do not enjoy but also simultaneously disadvantages persons of color when she exercises them.¹⁹ Philosopher George Yancy identifies dimensions of the “psychic opacity of racism” when reflecting on his experience of riding an elevator with a white woman who was

¹⁵ Feagin, *The White Racial Frame*, 93.

¹⁶ Feagin, *The White Racial Frame*, 96. Feagin explains the frame this way: “Today, as whites move through their everyday lives, they frequently combine racial stereotypes (a beliefs aspect), metaphors and concepts (a deeper cognitive aspect), images (the visual aspect), emotions, interpretive narratives, and inclinations to discriminate within a broad racist framing of U.S. society,” 3. He also notes, “Because of [the white racial frame] most whites have never been committed to the comprehensive racial desegregation of major U.S. institutions, to really aggressive enforcement of existing antidiscrimination laws, or to substantial reparations to Americans of color for extensive past and present discrimination,” 192.

¹⁷ Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*, viii

¹⁸ Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*, 10.

¹⁹ See McIntosh’s list in “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”

unaware of the way her body language conveyed her conscious and unconscious thoughts about his black body.²⁰ This ongoing learning not to see the ways in which whites continue to be the recipients of social advantages and affirmative action, or to see the ways in which we react to persons of color in our day to day lives, has continued since the pseudo-scientific construction of racial categories by Europeans during the Enlightenment period. Charles Mills notes that “part of what it means to be constructed as ‘white’ is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities...” and that this epistemological stance is not accidental but “prescribed by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindness and opacities in order to establish and main the white polity.”²¹

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva names the epistemological stance of white supremacy in post-civil rights America as “color-blind racism” anchored by four operative frames that shape white logic in racial events: abstract liberalism with its appeals to equal opportunity and free choice, naturalization or the sense that “like naturally stick with like,” cultural racism or stereotyping, and the minimization of racism.²² To claim that you do not see yourself or others in terms of racial markers or to claim that racism is no longer a major facet of American life is one of the ultimate privileges of being white, as well as the way in which white dominance is maintained. As such Yancy notes “whiteness, as site of power, obfuscates self-scrutiny.”²³

What implications does this have for virtue ethics in a Christian context? Theologian Willie Jennings sees the persistent “resistance of theologians to think *theologically* about their identities” as the source of a “collectively anemic” Christian social imagination that will remain unable to identify the source of racial injustice.²⁴ This pervasive unknowing of one’s racial identity and the way it functions to perpetuate a system that disadvantages people of color only amplifies Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre’s critical assessment of the epistemological flaw in the discipline: “Ethics is less concerned with ‘what you do’ than ‘how you think.’”²⁵

²⁰ See Yancy’s chapter, “The Elevator Effect: Black Bodies/White Bodies,” in *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 1-32.

²¹ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 19.

²² Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 25-52.

²³ Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gaze*, xvi.

²⁴ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 7.

²⁵ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Latino/a Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 4.

Habitual

In addition to a way of thinking and knowing, white supremacy can also be understood as a habituated set of dispositions and practices, performed with varying levels of intentionality (discussed in further detail in the next section) and calcified over lifetimes and generations, which inform and reinforce whites' individual and collective stances toward themselves and others. MacMallin explains whiteness in terms of "the practices, habits, and assumptions that impede human flourishing and democracy and that stem from the concept of whiteness as a superior and pure group within the human family."²⁶ Whiteness, he contends, is a predisposition that runs deeper than our intentional will and organizes both thought and behavior consciously and pre-consciously.

In terms of the dispositional dimension of the habitus of whiteness, scholars identify fear and hatred of racial others, and the confusion of navigating the contradictions and cognitive dissonance of whiteness, evidenced by the fact that most stereotypes of people of color are deeply rooted in affective dimensions of the self. Everyday practices of white supremacy are too many to enumerate here but generally include a general antipathy to difference, a sense of entitlement to social advantages, denial of the reality of racism or shock when confronted with overt expressions of racism, or guilt about racial injustice. Applebaum identifies a common denominator in the "belief in one's authority and in one's own experience as truth" along with "an unwillingness to be challenged that is protected by perceived white moral goodness or white benevolence."²⁷ The habituation of whiteness is not limited to individuals but also depends on the social context of many racial events, where the reception of these habits by other members of the dominant group only further entrenches them in the self-understanding and worldviews of individual members and the group as a whole.

Yancy identifies several such habits of whiteness: clutching purses, crossing streets or locking car doors as men of color approach, and policing one's thoughts for political correctness or one's neighborhood for residential correctness. Psychologist Derald Wing Su describes these habits in terms of "microaggressions" or regular insults, assaults or invalidations unknowingly communicated verbally, nonverbally or symbolically by good intentioned whites that convey messages of our own superiority or normativity and another's inferi-

²⁶ Terrance MacMullin, *Habits of Whiteness: A Pragmatist Reconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 18.

²⁷ Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*, 16, quoting Marilyn Frye's "White Woman Feminist," in her *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism 1976-1992* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press), 151.

ority or difference.²⁸ These might include inability to properly pronounce or remember names of persons of color, inquiring as to their country of origin or qualifications for a job or degree, or invalidating their experience by simply not asking about it.

Obviously, the habitual characteristics of white supremacy correlate to features of virtue ethics, which we will turn to in the next section. For now, I call attention to Yancy's observation that "the ways in which whites have *become* the *white* selves we are"²⁹ underscores the point that whiteness is an unfolding social construct in which whites participate, and this construct shapes our way of being, not simply our way of seeing or of thinking, in ways that we are not able to recognize. It also shapes our physicality. Karyn McKinney notes that for many Euro-Americans, "becoming white," an assimilation process that spans generations and is easier for those without distinctive ethnic markers such as skin color, comes at the cost of cultural distinctiveness so essential for identity and character formation.³⁰ Moreover, neurologists are discovering the impact of the dispositions and practices of whiteness on the biochemistry of the human brain.³¹

Performative

In a way that deepens the habitual nature of white supremacy, Feagin calls attention to its "dramaturgical" features by highlighting the ways in which whites perform our individual and collective racial identity in the various "stages" of our lives—the more public and potentially multicultural "front stages" (classrooms, meetings, academic convocations or conventions, liturgies, etc.) and the more private and predominantly white "backstages" (faculty offices or lunch tables, family gatherings, dorm rooms, etc.).³² Even though most whites today have come to recognize that it is not socially acceptable

²⁸ See Derald Wing Su, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation* (New York: Wiley, 2010).

²⁹ Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, xvi.

³⁰ Karyn McKinney, *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 75-113.

³¹ See Jennifer Katouba et al., "The Neuroscience of Race," *Nature Neuroscience* 15 (2012): 940-8.

³² Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*, 24. The authors call this dramaturgical because "these events usually involve one or more white actors performing in a specific place and time—and activity that communicates racial views, images, emotions, or inclinations, and that usually tries to influence the behavior of others" (32). Yancy underscores the ritual significance of these performances in his explanation of the previously mentioned "elevator effect" in *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 1-32. Jennings notes the ways in which whiteness is performed in the theological academy via an insistence on a certain set of "regulative" intellectual skills or traits to the exclusion of more "adaptable" or "morph-able" modes of thinking: "capacities to clarify, categorize, define, explain, interpret" rather than adapt, assimilate, resist, reclaim. See *The Christian Imagination*, 8.

to be blatantly racist in the front stage, Feagin's research indicates that whiteness remains more than just a sideshow on the backstages of white life. Moreover, everyone associated with these backstage spaces plays a role in conveying the message of the performance: protagonists, cheerleaders, and passive observers. Performances of whiteness include forms of speech such as slurs, jokes, or rants; speech acts such as whispering, dropping or raising pitch, interrupting or talking over people of color; and gestures such as eye rolling or eye contact, or avoiding people of color or discussions of racism.

Regardless of the stage or the audience, the performance of whiteness reinforces a sense of who does and does not belong in either space (private or public) and as such creates a sense of solidarity among members of the dominant group.³³ Moreover, Feagin notes that performances of whiteness ascribe social acceptability to white justification of racial inequality, white defense of white normativity, and white acceptance of racial bias and weak commitments to racial justice. Performances of whiteness are an expression of virtue in and of themselves insofar as they are embodied expressions of dispositions of white superiority that are learned, practiced, perfected, and adaptable to the type of stage or even position on it. Ultimately these separate "scenes" are all part of the "deep-lying macro plot" of a "systemically racist society that is several centuries old."³⁴

This echoes Bryan Massingale's claim that whiteness is a culture in that it is learned, formative, informative, and symbolic.³⁵ The formative nature of white culture has direct connection to virtue ethics, since "bits of racist culture are passed much like social genes, which replicate and amplify over time. These everyday performances link and reinforce ideas and propensities to act."³⁶

Relational

Finally, building on the notion of white supremacy as habitual and performative, white supremacy can be understood in terms of its relational qualities. Feagin warns against underestimating the power of performances of whiteness in the midst of the more tight knit relationships of the backstage. He cites the work of sociologist Nina Eliasoph, who notes that interactions in friend and kinship networks create "the muscles and tendons that make the bones of structural racism move."³⁷ Moreover, white supremacy negatively affects the relational capabilities of whites. In her groundbreaking work on

³³ Nina Eliasoph, "'Everyday Racism' in a Culture of Political Avoidance: Civil Society, Speech, and Taboo," *Social Problems* 46.4 (1999): 479-95.

³⁴ Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*, 26.

³⁵ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 21-33.

³⁶ Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*, 15.

³⁷ Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*, 13.

whiteness and Christian ethics, Mary Elizabeth Hobgood names dimensions of the matrix of whiteness that inhibit whites' capacities for meaningful relationships with self, others, and creation: a denial of vulnerability and mortality that condones unfettered exploitation of others and natural resources in the name of control and dominance, an emphasis on hard work rooted in productivity and efficiency and fueled by the insatiable desire to consume, a fear of fleshy embodiment and the physical needs and desires associated it with that avoids weakness or suffering, and a suspicion of emotional and sexual intimacy, which creates a binary sexual ethic that shapes marriage and family.³⁸ The common denominator here is a white inability for authentic self-love. "Because white status depends on denying the deepest parts of the relational self, our humanity is impoverished, and our capacity to be moral—in right relationship with others—is diminished."³⁹

This in turn limits capacities for neighbor love. Feagin and Vera have identified the "social alexithymia" of whiteness or the sense that "white racism involves a massive breakdown of empathy, the human capacity to experience the feelings of members of an out-group viewed as different."⁴⁰ Jennings names this lack of empathy as evidence of a "distorted relational imagination" among white Christians who have failed to come to terms with the historical contradiction of colonialism and continued rejection of the Christian call to intimacy for the sake of "ways of being in the world that resist the realities of submission, desire, and transformation."⁴¹

AFTER WHITE SUPREMACY—VIRTUE ETHICS AND RACIAL JUSTICE

In light of all of this, there are several reasons why critical race theorists would be hesitant to employ a virtue ethics approach, particularly within a Catholic framework, to engage the three scenarios that sparked this essay. Primary among them is the fact that virtue theory is largely if not thoroughly a Euro-American preserve whose pervasive whiteness renders it susceptible to participating in that which it seeks to upend when it comes to racial justice. This anthropological heritage is evident in virtue theory writ large: an individualistic focus on personal agency, an emphasis on choice and linear progress or development, a reliance on an intellectual rationality to identify the mean within the givens of a particular social context or moral situation, a binary worldview, an association of the good with

³⁸ Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

³⁹ Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege*, 48.

⁴⁰ Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 228.

⁴¹ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 8 and 4.

excellence or perfection, and an approach to others as instrumental in orienting the autonomous self in her striving for perfection.

While others have examined theological underpinnings of the historical and contemporary racing of the world's peoples⁴² or the inherent whiteness in Euro-American theological anthropologies⁴³ or even in academic discourse in which it is engaged,⁴⁴ De La Torre has been most forthright when it comes to the limits whiteness places on virtue ethics. "Virtues, whether beneficial or detrimental to the disenfranchised communities, are in the final analysis a construct of what the dominant culture deems good or evil," he notes. "By constructing virtues and employing objectivity, that culture legitimizes and normalizes injustices within society."⁴⁵ I offer four dimensions of that inherent whiteness in virtue ethics itself which present significant limitations when it comes to bringing a virtue approach to upending the dominant culture of whiteness, which as we have seen, must be the central task of racial justice work.

Narrative

In an attempt to answer his now classic ethical question as to the types of practices conducive to human flourishing which sparked the renaissance of virtue ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre points toward the centrality of stories in communicating and inculcating virtues that shape individual and collective identity as well as a sense of the good toward which we are to strive. Stanley Hauerwas deepens the social significance of narrative for Christian virtue ethics by claiming that the central ethical question of contemporary disciples is to figure out "what kind of community the church must be to be faithful to the narratives central to Christian convictions" and to allow those convictions to give shape to a community of characters with character or to virtues that are intelligibly Christian.⁴⁶

Narratives and practices of storytelling and listening, however, provide a central vehicle for the transmission of white supremacy and bolster the way it functions to reinforce assumptions of superiority and inferiority and access to social goods based on these assumptions. First, Bonilla-Silva highlights the ideological power of story-

⁴² See J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4 and Jennings, *Christian Imagination*.

⁴³ M. Shawn Copeland, "Disturbing Ethics of Race," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 3.1 (2006): 17-27.

⁴⁴ Jennings describes the posture of academic theology with its "cultivated capacities to clarify, categorize, define, explain, interpret" realities typical of colonizers rather than more fluid capacities for adaptability and reformation demanded of the colonized in *The Christian Imagination*, 8.

⁴⁵ De La Torre, *Latino/a Social Ethics*, 29.

⁴⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Ethic* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 12-3.

telling noting, “stories seem to lie in the realm of the given, in the matter-of-fact world. Hence stories help us make sense of the world but in ways that reinforce the status quo, serving particular interests without appearing to do so.”⁴⁷ If the content of narratives and practices of storytelling tend to be controlled by the dominant culture, we need to interrogate the pervasive whiteness of our formative narratives so that the virtues that emerge are not intelligible by their whiteness.

Moreover, Hauerwas’ observation that “to be a person of virtue, therefore, involves acquiring the *linguistic*, emotional, and rational skills that give us the strength to make our decisions and our life our own”⁴⁸ creates further problems. He points to the relationship between narrative and language when it comes to shaping character or developing virtue. This linguistic connection between narrative and identity is not without peril for persons and communities of color. Rebecca Chopp notes the exclusionary practices of narrative discourse itself that both insist on working with “present signifiers” and also assign moral worth, validity, or goodness to particular kinds of linguistic expression, particularly in civic spaces where justice is mediated.⁴⁹ Chopp notes that the practices of hegemonic discourse preclude basic ethical capabilities such as compassion, memories, and imagination—all of which virtue theorists identify as central contributions the tradition might make in light of its narrative character—and relegate to the margins of public discourse individuals and communities for whom these are central forms of narrative and motivations for storytelling. These practices of narrative exclusion were evident in the confusion around the semantics of the testimony of Rachel Jeantel, Trayvon Martin’s childhood friend and the last person to speak to him while he was alive, in the trial of George Zimmerman, as well as in the public assessment of her character.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 75. He goes on to describe two forms of storytelling, both of which “‘make’ whites, but also help them navigate the turbulent waters of contemporary public discussions on race”—story lines (“provide ‘evidence’ to solidify their viewpoints” and “serve as legitimate conduits for expressing anger, animosity, and resentment toward racial minorities”) and testimonies (serve to promote a nonracial “self-presentation” particularly for whites “totally submerged in whiteness”), 98-9.

⁴⁸ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 115, emphasis mine.

⁴⁹ See “Reimagining Public Discourse,” in *The Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 103 (March 1999), 33-8.

⁵⁰ For discussion of African American Vernacular in the Martin case, listen to NPR’s program, *Here and Now*, on 28 June 2013: “Language on Trial: Rachel Jeantel,” where linguist John Rickford notes that “African American Vernacular English is testament to existence of difference.... Language is a profound mark of education and work, and you can beat up on this rather than on other aspects without being criticized. [Rachel] is being put on trial by the defense attorney and all of America.” <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2013/06/28/n-word-language>. See Rickford’s 10 July

Finally, De La Torre implicitly points to the “slippery” nature of whiteness in the ability for whites to opt out of familial, communal and national narratives of white supremacy, which then allows the power of these narratives to go unchallenged and as such to continue to inculcate the habits of whiteness.⁵¹ In a similar way, Bryan Massingale and James Cone note the theological academy’s readiness to engage the narrative of Martin Luther King, but not necessarily those of Malcolm X or of lynchings.⁵² At the conclusion of a litany of evidence of raced-based social injustices invoked to support his claim in his 2013 Presidential Address to the Society of Christian Ethics that “you can lynch people by more than hanging them on a tree,” James Cone directly asked the predominately white audience: “If you’re not talking about this, then what are you talking about?”⁵³

Moral goodness

A distinctive feature of virtue ethics, particularly in a Catholic framework, is its orientation toward the good as it is discerned and experienced by individuals in response to the invitation to participate in the love of God in order to become the moral person we are capable of being. This stands in sharp contrast to a focus on more socially constructed and externally-motivated notions of the right.⁵⁴ The very point of virtue ethics is to strive continually for the good, which in and of itself can critically examine “the rightness of whiteness” at the core of white supremacy. However, what if the good—no matter how self-reflective and discerning the individual who seeks it or how embedded it might be in the narrative of a community or thick it might be with multicultural understandings—was not immune to the ideology of the white racial frame but actually an expression of it? We can find evidence of white notions of goodness in the emphasis in virtue ethics on individual character development and personal perfection, the goal of linear or forward progress, its confidence in the inherent moral goodness of individuals, and perhaps false notions of innocence in light of its limited consideration of sin both individual and collective. Moreover, what if certain goods that whites associ-

2013 blog post on this subject on Language Log: <http://languageblog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=5161>. See also MSNBC’s Melissa Harris-Perry’s 1 July 2013 program on this topic. Trymaine Lee notes “in this case a whole group of people were criminalized by [Rachel’s] diction and her grammar.” <http://video.msnbc.msn.com/-mhp/52355909#52355909>.

⁵¹ De La Torre, *Latino/a Social Ethics*, 27.

⁵² See Bryan Massingale, “*Vox Victimarum Vox Dei*: Malcolm X as Neglected ‘Classic’ for Catholic Theological Reflection,” *CTSA Proceedings* 65 (2010): 63-88 and James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

⁵³ James H. Cone, address to the Society of Christian Ethics, 5 January 2013.

⁵⁴ See for example, James F. Keenan, SJ, *Goodness and Rightness in Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992).

ate with racial justice and toward which we strive—equality, diversity, inclusivity, civility, and unity—were actually impediments for justice so long as these goods operate within the white racial frame, where they actually cultivate the vices of white supremacy: equality is equated with merit, diversity functions as tokenism, inclusivity reinforces the power of whites as gate-keepers to the social goods of community, civility amounts to little more than superficial political correctness, and unity evokes weak commitments to standing with those offended in racial encounters but not necessarily standing up to our own racist dispositions or those of our family members, friends, or colleagues.

In addition, what if, in fact, a focus on moral goodness of whites actually engaged in the work of racial justice only served as means of evading those same persons' individual and collective complicity with systemic racism or as a means of justifying weak commitments to building inclusive communities? These are Barbara Applebaum's concerns in her examination of the "white complicity claim" or the persistence of whites to either claim our own moral goodness and innocence when it comes to racial justice or to confess our complicity in an attempt to prove that goodness. Both short circuit the difficult work of dismantling white supremacy by re-inscribing it. She notes, "since the white complicity claim presumes that racism is often perpetuated by *well-intended* white people, being morally good may not facilitate and may even frustrate the recognition of such a responsibility."⁵⁵ What's more, unreflective confessions of badness, in this case the badness of participating in systemic racism, are equally as problematic. "To put it simply," says Applebaum, "if we admit to being bad, then we show that we are good."⁵⁶

So can virtue ethics, with its orientation toward the good, effectively illuminate a culture of white supremacy by also illuminating that individual whites are not good given our deep complicity in the habitus of whiteness? Can it reveal that our collective understanding of what the good demands in racial justice work is actually bad in its ineffectiveness to motivate the difficult work of dismantling the white racial frame? Can it make evident that striving for the good in and of itself is a way of perpetuating our voluntary and therefore culpable ignorance because such striving protects us from the shame

⁵⁵ Applebaum, *Being White Being Good*, 3.

⁵⁶ Applebaum, *Being White Being Good*, 55. She explains it this way: "What I refer to as the 'white complicity claim' maintains that white people, through the practices of whiteness and by benefiting from white privilege, contribute to the maintenance of systemic racial injustice. However, the claim also implies responsibility in its assumption that the failure to acknowledge such complicity will thwart whites in their efforts to dismantle unjust racial systems and, more specifically, will contribute to the perpetuation of racial injustice."

of our individual and collective complicity in racing ourselves and others?

Fit

In addition to an insistence on an internally-motivated desire for the good, virtue ethics is rightly heralded for encouraging moral agents to seek out the “appropriate” or “fitting” response to situations in which they find themselves. Aristotle’s notion of the mean, the middle path between extreme options presented by the situation as well as extreme tendencies abiding within the moral agent, functions to both preclude both rash reactions and invite moral agents to lean into the growing edge of their own moral capabilities and emerging identities. Act in a way that seems most fitting in light of the vision of who you are trying to become, advises the virtue ethicist, rather than in an unreflective way or with a distanced and impersonal moral calculus that fails to acknowledge the effects of your actions on you—your character and your body.

Aside from the fact that the epistemology and *habitus* of whiteness obfuscate the ability of whites to discern the mean in racial encounters, an emphasis on fitting or appropriate action may itself be an expression of white supremacy. Feagin identifies an attuned sense of social appropriateness as a well-developed capability that allows whites to navigate the contradictions in the performance of white racial identity in the front and backstages of their lives. That white actors are so adept at “tailor[ing] one of their several selves to fit the requirements of a certain situation”⁵⁷ gives whiteness its “slippery” qualities, making its appeals to appropriateness the very source of its invisibility to most whites. Sara Ahmed suggests that an emphasis on fit gives rise to a “kinship logic” that perpetuates white culture particularly when “fit” becomes associated with an exclusive sense of belonging. Under these conditions, the virtuous mean can easily become a “reproduction of likeness,” both in terms of similarity and affinity, that keeps certain kinds of social structures in place and persons of color in their proper social places.⁵⁸ When whites seek the fitting response, the middle way between extremes in the situation and within ourselves, are we simply replicating whiteness?

All of this is to say that without critical examination of its inherent whiteness, virtue ethics will have limited capacities in undoing the dominant culture of whiteness and constructing an alternative to Feagin’s white racial frame so long as socially formative narratives, moral goodness, and the fittingness of actions are determined and controlled by the dominant culture. De La Torre draws connections

⁵⁷ Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*, 46.

⁵⁸ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2012), 38.

between colonial “virtuous ways of conduct that ignore[d] the ‘virtuous’ complicity with the structures of empire” and contemporary “middle class” desires for politeness, acceptability or likeability, and respectability which serve to cultivate today’s “complicity with empire.”⁵⁹ It is with an eye for the dispositions, habits, and frameworks of whiteness that I concur with him in “raising concerns about uncritically adopting Eurocentric methodologies for conducting ethical analysis, especially when those methodologies are complicit with the prevailing social power structures.”⁶⁰

THE VIRTUES OF UNDOING RACISM⁶¹

Most critical race scholars encourage whites committed to racial justice to see continually that “all actors in a racialized society are affected materially (receive benefits or disadvantages) and ideologically by the racial structure” and to take “responsibility for [our] unwilling participation in these practices and begin a new life committed to the goal of achieving racial equality.”⁶² To do so, Yancy exhorts whites to “*become* antiracist racists.”⁶³ This strikes me as the language of virtue and leads me to conclude that so long as we diligently attend to its pervasive whiteness, virtue ethics offers the optimal moral approach for whites to employ when it comes to racial justice. Let me suggest three reasons why I make this claim.

First, of the prominent approaches to the moral life, virtue ethics takes seriously the emotions, whether as expressions of cognitive reasoning or motivations for moral action. Given the underlying emotional content of stereotypes, prejudices, and evasive behavior, Feagin pinpoints the emotions and dispositions associated with whiteness—fear and guilt, innocence and ignorance, superiority and inferiority—as the optimal place to begin the process of deconstructing the white racial frame. Whereas a deontological approach to racial justice might reinscribe a moral obligation to values such as equality or liberty or dignity eviscerated by generations of white dominance and teleological approaches potentially reinforce an ineffective pragmatism that sidesteps the ideological grip of whiteness

⁵⁹ De La Torre, *Latino/a Social Ethics*, 4.

⁶⁰ De La Torre, *Latino/a Social Ethics*, 6.

⁶¹ This subtitle refers directly to a 2.5-day workshop with the same name sponsored by The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, which builds anti-racist communities by focusing on the history of the racing of the world’s peoples, the economic and cultural drivers of poverty, shared language around racism arising from personal and collective reflection and conversation, and a celebration of cultural distinctiveness as the most optimal tool for all people to resist the dehumanization of white supremacy. For information, see their website: www.pisab.org/programs#urcow.

⁶² Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 16.

⁶³ George Yancy, “Exploring Race in a Predominantly White Classroom,” pedagogy workshop hosted by the Philosophy Graduate Student Association at Villanova University, 20 September 2013, emphasis mine.

on white responses to racial justice, virtue ethics might actually illuminate the easily overlooked emotional dimensions of white supremacy that need to be exposed in the work toward racial justice. These emotions include: stubborn nostalgia that maintains a narrow ahistorical lens so as to protect the certainty of white goodness and the badness of blackness or brownness, antipathy or imperviousness at the cognitive dissonance generated by alternative narratives of history or the present reality, defensiveness when it comes to justifying entitlements or privileges, fear of the dark-skinned other so ingrained by a historical trope and reinforced by the contemporary media, false innocence or paralyzing guilt when faced with the realization that one participates in a culture of white supremacy, and fatigue and even frustration at having to navigate the front and backstages of white life with either hyper-sensitivity to political correctness or a willingness to sacrifice personal integrity in order to fit into the dominant culture. Naming and examining these emotions provides an important place to begin the process of inculcating alternative dispositions.

Second, in its search for the mean or the middle way, virtue theory provides whites committed to racial justice with what Jennings calls a “fluid, adaptable or even morph-able” approach to thinking and likewise to human character that has historically been characteristic of indigenous and dark-skinned peoples forced to navigate the “regulative intellectual postures and character” of white colonial domination.⁶⁴ The adaptable, flexible, fluid, pliable nature of the virtue approach provides potential anti-racist racists the possibility of transcending the rigidity of the white racial frame and the capabilities to habituate our “imaginative capacity to redefine the social, to claim, to embrace, to join, to desire”—practices generally rejected in white culture but embraced in more multicultural ways of knowing and being.⁶⁵ Cultural distinctiveness has long provided bodies of color—individual and collective, physical and symbolic—an antibody for the dehumanizing pathologies of white supremacy. Just as feminists turned to virtue ethics to challenge a masculine moral normativity, antiracist racists might use a search for and recovery of the cultural meaning of our own personal and collective identities to begin the necessary work of recovering from the “cultural suicide” of becoming white and to embrace the ethical dispositions and practices of our own distinct ethnic heritages. Attention to a middle way might then reject the arbitrary binaries of whiteness or blackness and illuminate instead a far more multivalent and adaptable context and character of multiculturalism.

⁶⁴ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 8.

⁶⁵ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 6.

Finally, Yancy notes that whites cannot claim to be antiracist racists by pointing to a particular set of strategies or goals, but rather must continually aspire to *become* such persons. The former places too much emphasis on a pragmatic point of "arrival"⁶⁶ or a quick fix with a clear set of moral imperatives to follow, which seems in its very articulation to point to more deontological or teleological approaches to ethical reflection and action. However, such an orientation to racial justice work can easily replicate the habits of whiteness we have explored here. The notion of process, on the other hand, offers the promise of personal and social liberation through a gradually transformative conversion that is never fully complete, where humble recommitments replace guilt, where ongoing critical self-examination replaces voluntary ignorance, where a willingness to remain engaged in the messy work of undoing racism replaces a triumphant sense of being one of the "good" white people who is somehow above the fray. In short, becoming an anti-racist racist necessitates the method of virtue ethics.

THE CARDINAL VIRTUES OF ANTIRACIST RACISTS

In his presidential address to the Society of Christian Ethics in 2013, De La Torre calls for virtues of "trickery" that disrupt whiteness from margins or from sidelines where he and other Christians of color have been relegated.⁶⁷ As a protagonist in the performances of white supremacy described in the scenarios at the outset, I conclude with a few "virtues of treason"⁶⁸ that might disrupt white supremacy from its center and make committed whites more effective in our work for racial justice. In the spirit of Keenan's contemporary reassessment of the Thomistic cardinal virtues, which he defines as the virtues that "have the task of making a person sufficiently rightly ordered to perform morally right action,"⁶⁹ I too name these treasonous virtues as the "hinges" on which other dispositions and practices of racial justice might hang, and attempt to apply them to the scenarios above.

⁶⁶ Yancy, "Exploring Race in a Predominantly White Classroom."

⁶⁷ Miguel A. De La Torre, "Doing Latina/o Ethics from the Margins of Empire: Liberating the Colonized Mind," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 34, no. 2 (2013), forthcoming.

⁶⁸ The language of race treason was indicative of what sociologist Charles Gallagher has described as "first wave whiteness" when black public intellectuals like W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin and even Malcolm X held up a mirror to the white community in order to expose the traits and practices of white supremacy and called for a wholesale rejection of them. See Gallagher's "The Future of Whiteness: A Map of the Third Wave," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008), 4-24, but especially 7-10. For a theological examination of what this entails, see Bryan Massingale, "Vox Victimorum."

⁶⁹ Keenan, "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," 714.

Vigilance

Vigilance is what the virtue of prudence looks like in the work of racial justice insofar as it attempts to make visible the invisibility of whiteness so that a more accurate vision of the mean might surface in racial encounters. In other words, vigilance is an epistemological virtue that resists the voluntary ignorance of whiteness about our own racial identities as whites or the fact “*we don’t know what we don’t know and don’t want to know what we don’t know.*”⁷⁰ Whereas vigilance normally cultivates a defensive stance that protects something of value—in this case a culture of white supremacy—against an intruder or an attack, the virtue vigilance against white supremacy involves a radical vulnerability to allow one’s self to “become undone” by an ongoing acknowledgement of one’s identity as a racist by virtue of one’s participation in a culture of white supremacy. This kind of vigilance makes it possible for whites to accept what Jennings calls “the risks and vulnerabilities associated with being in the social, cultural, economic, and political position to be transformed.”⁷¹ As such, the virtue of vigilance navigates the extremes of polite avoidance and unreflective or potentially policing pragmatism, both of which preclude the possibility of transformation, and invokes instead an ongoing self-awareness of the pervasiveness of the white racial frame in both the front and backstages of white life, humble and regular self-interrogation as to the way the frame functions in everyday experience and encounters, and a willingness to remain engaged in the ongoing process of creating alternative ways of knowing, being, and relating. When engaged this way, vigilance empowers whites to assume a different posture toward the various gates to privilege and power we guard on a regular basis, a posture of openness toward the wider community rather than defensive protection of institutions that provide us exclusive privileges based on our white identities.

In the scenarios that shape my inquiry here, the virtue of vigilance would entail being attentive to the ways in which I see myself and others through the white racial frame in order to deconstruct the trope of the dangerous black man or the intellectually inferior candidate of color or the innocence of my university community in fostering whiteness. By habituating vigilance I would encourage myself to become undone or to use Yancy’s term, “unsutured” by the wounds my assumed superiority inflicts on others⁷²—the black man in the parking lot, the few people of color in my department conference room or in the job applicant pool, the students and colleagues who

⁷⁰ This is language from the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond. See www.pisab.org.

⁷¹ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 7.

⁷² Yancy, “Exploring Race in a Predominantly White Classroom.”

experience my microaggressions on campus every day. And by becoming undone, the virtue of vigilance creates an openness within me for alternatives to white ways of being.

Counter-framing

Feagin notes “in everyday situations we need more Americans, especially white Americans, to disrupt and counter the millions of racist communications and the racist actions that take place in the United States every day.”⁷³ In addition to being vigilant about our own known unknowing and our complicity in white supremacy, anti-racist racists must employ the dispositions and practices of counter-framing to dissent from or disrupt practices of white supremacy in frontstages and backstages of white life, particularly when whiteness is performed by people in kinship, friendship, and professional networks. We need also to create alternative spaces where a racially multicultural and integrated communal identity can be embraced by inculcating practices that run counter to white supremacy. The virtue of counter-framing navigates between the extremes of passive complicity in performances of whiteness and righteous denial of our own participation in these performances. Counter-framing practices, those that challenge the dominant white racial frame explained above, include asking or even waiting to be received rather than welcoming or receiving others, listening to others without drawing immediate connections to our own experience, dissenting rather than dismissing, interrogating the legitimacy of our claims or privilege first—before questioning those of others, sitting with pain of complicity in racial injustice rather than escaping it with pragmatism, publicly owning our racist habits rather than ignoring them or waiting for others to challenge us, and remaining committed to a gradual process of transformation rather than to a particular end goal or solution.

In his 2010 Presidential Address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, Massingale named the virtue of counter-framing as a “conflictual solidarity” that does not “evade social conflict, resistance, and recalcitrance” but instead sends whites to the frontlines of the battle for racial justice in our own racially segregated neighborhoods, schools, congregations, and academic departments.⁷⁴ In the scenarios above, counter-framing would entail: publicly naming and identifying the pre-cognitive or conscious assumptions about my white identity; frank or truthful or dangerous speech that brings the shadowy contours of covert racism into sharper focus;⁷⁵ challenging the performances of whiteness in the various backstages of my white life—jokes around family dining room tables, off-handed comments

⁷³ Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*, 205.

⁷⁴ Massingale, “*Vox Victimarum*,” 83.

⁷⁵ Yancy, “Exploring Race in a Predominantly White Classroom.”

or evasive behavior around university conference tables, micro-aggressions committed by me or other whites in my classrooms—by asking people to explain what they mean when they invoke racial stereotypes, by dissenting from a racialized consensus, by offering counter narratives, or simply by outing myself on a regular basis as a racist or someone who wrestles with the convergence of prejudices and power afforded to me by my whiteness.

Sitting with it

Racial justice cannot be about “hunting for ‘racists,’” which focuses on targeting isolated acts of racism or racist individuals and names them as aberrations while keeping its ideological pervasiveness hidden from the rest of us. Racial justice cannot simply examine institutional or structural racism while ignoring internal dispositions and personal practices of racial superiority that put them in place and maintain them. Racial justice cannot too easily condone or cathartically confess those dispositions and practices in attempts to be seen or understood as a nonracist, since good intentions or confessions in the name of striving for goodness where racism is concerned do little to upend the racial hierarchy that permeates all levels of social relationships. And finally, racial justice cannot simply point a finger toward the good of racial integration or racial equality or racial solidarity or any other kind of good toward which we ought to strive, if we are not able to put a finger on the ways in which those goods of integration, equality, or solidarity might actually serve to perpetuate whiteness in intra- and interpersonal contexts as well systemic and institutional ones. In short, “the white self who tries to flee white power and privilege is the source of white power and privilege.”⁷⁶

So a central virtue of anti-racist racists must be dispositions and practices associated with “sitting with it,” and by “it” I mean our individual and collective identities as white supremacists.⁷⁷ The virtue of sitting with it finds the mean between paralyzing guilt and domineering pragmatism, both of which keep the focus of responding to racial injustice on the white individual—as either irreparably flawed or as the righteous fixer of social problems—and fail to accept the invitation of continuing to allow one’s white self to be undone by continuing to acknowledge one’s ongoing participation in others’ oppression and the pain that causes all of us. In the spirit of the spiritual of the same name, the virtue of sitting with it is akin to wading into the water of one’s personal history of white supremacy and the water of the pain that it continues to cause in order to experience the

⁷⁶ Yancy, “Exploring Race in a Predominantly White Classroom.”

⁷⁷ I owe this phrase to my friend and colleague, Laurie Cassidy, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Marywood University, who uses it frequently and in a variety of contexts.

blessings of God's troubling presence there. In terms of disposition, sitting with it is akin to Christopher Pramuck's notion of white mourning at the tragic pain and suffering of white supremacy, for both persons of color and whites.⁷⁸ Ahmed recommends remaining proximate to embodied experiences or situations of racial privilege, since it is a "somatic norm" after all, as well as situations of racial exclusion, noting that proximity resists denial of complicity.⁷⁹ George Yancy describes the practices of the virtue of sitting with it under the umbrella of "tarrying" or slow-going work that doesn't rush toward some particular end but rather diligently remains with the task at hand.

Clearly, this essay is an intellectual attempt to sit with the three scenarios described above, but in each case with a willingness not to jettison the memories, emotions, physical sensations, verbal exchanges, or bodily gestures of racial encounters. Sitting with our racial encounters—pondering them, praying with them, speaking with others about them, reflecting on them, mourning through them, seeing ourselves and others more clearly in them, writing about them, teaching through them—might transform otherwise sites of white supremacy into moments of grace. An opening line from Pramuck's book, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful*, provides a fitting final note on this point: "None of us enters into the conversation about race as a fully developed, completely integrated, whole person. Each needs to be challenged by each other, but we also need room to imagine and grow into a future different from where we are now and where we have been over the course of our lives."⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

Catholic moral theologians need to become undone by an evolving awareness of the pervasiveness of white supremacy in the virtue tradition so that we might more effectively incorporate virtue ethics in the much-needed work for racial justice. With an eye for the ways in which my own moral agency continues to be compromised by a culture of white supremacy, the fundamentals of the virtue ethics approach in the Christian tradition continue to transform my three racial encounters described at the outset of this essay into graced encounters of personal, group, and institutional incarnations of anti-racism. Like my own racial consciousness, virtues open up the possibility for more just relationships to emerge, relationships that can deconstruct our racialized society with the dispositions and habits of racial justice. **M**

⁷⁸ Christopher Pramuck, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters Across the Color Line* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2013), 105-22.

⁷⁹ Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 6.

⁸⁰ Pramuck, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful*, 1.

The historical legacies of slavery and white supremacy have made premature death all too present for Black people. But if Buddhist praxis were sufficient for achieving racial justice, then Buddhist communities in the Euro-Americas would be beacons of beloved community. Cue the laugh track. Thankfully, a strong current of racial justice Buddhism is now ascendant due to the long labors of teachers such as Rev. angel Kyodo williams, bell hooks, Mushim Patricia Ikeda, Larry Yang, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, and Lama Rod Owens.²⁴ The Buddhist Peace Fellowship and East Bay Meditation Center are organizational leaders in this current. There are also non-Buddhist organizations informed by Buddhist praxis, such as White Awake and UNtraining, doing vital racial justice work. White supremacy or white supremacism is the belief that white people are superior to those of other "races" and thus should dominate them. The belief favors the maintenance and defense of white power and privilege. White supremacy has roots in the now-discredited doctrine of scientific racism, and was a key justification for colonialism. It underlies a spectrum of contemporary movements including neo-Confederates, neo-Nazism and Christian Identity. White fragility matters. Photo: Chicago Tribune/TNS via Getty Images. From the time of the Constitution's ratification until Joe Biden's junior year of college, the United States was governed by a de-jure racial caste system that denied most Black Americans political power and economic opportunity. For this reason, America's working class is much less white than its rich. Which means that any economic policy that takes resources away from America's economic elite and gives them to its laboring masses will also, on net, transfer resources from white Americans to Black ones. Historically, Re Virtue ethics is currently one of three major approaches in normative ethics. It may, initially, be identified as the one that emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to the approach that emphasizes duties or rules (deontology) or that emphasizes the consequences of actions (consequentialism). Suppose it is obvious that someone in need should be helped. A utilitarian will point to the fact that the consequences of doing so will maximize well-being, a deontologist to the fact that, in doing so the agent will be acting in accordance with a moral rule such as "Do unto others as yo