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**Review of Jennifer Harvey, Karin A. Case, and Robin Hawley Gorsline's, eds., *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within: White People on What We Need to Do* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press 2004).**

**by Marguerite Spencer**

In their work *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within: White People on What We Need to Do*, editors Jennifer Harvey, Karin A. Case and Robin Hawley Gorsline collect nine white scholars who respond to James H. Cone's criticism of white theologians at the 2001 AAR meeting for failing to make racism a starting point of theological reflection (7). Their goal is to attack the seemingly intractable sin of white supremacy that harms whites and all others by reifying "white" as normative and superior and by granting advantages to whites over non-whites. In so doing they call whites to inventory their racialized lives, institutions, and nation, and more specifically, to discern how the theology they write is in the interest of the status quo (12). They argue, however, that reconciliation between whites and non-whites is only possible by means of repentance and reparation, which requires dismantling the inter-structural, "saturating" systems of domination that sustain white supremacy (6, 25, 28). The editors warn that throughout this process, whites must avoid solipsism and abstraction, focusing on transformation within the particularity of the contemporary context (28).

Grouping the essays together thematically, we find several that are expository in nature. The first is by Sally Noland Mac Nichol, who in "We Make the Road by Walking: Reflections on the Legacy of White Anti-Racist Activism," examines the sin of white supremacy and how whites wrestle with it. An anti-racist feminist mother, Mac Nichol writes angrily and sorrowfully *against* the fear that she will reproduce "the same old white racial narcissism" she works to escape. She describes white supremacy as a social, political, and economic phenomenon that theologically manifests itself as an idolatrous faith, a spiritual disease Martin Luther King, Jr. said *infects* us the day we are born white. Often called America's *original sin*, racism enslaves us to privilege and leads us to acquiesce in domination (189). Self-awareness of and collective historical responsibility for this sin are forbidden by the rules of white supremacy and white Western patriarchal Christianity, the latter of which Mac Nichol claims, worships at "the altar of the status quo (191)." *We learn* to be white, she argues, at the same time that we are encouraged to 'not notice' race and to disassociate ourselves from and erase our racist history (193). Mac Nichol recounted how she shamefully examined her own slave-owning and -trading ancestors, despite her family's silence. That most of society is ignorant of white anti-racist activists ("race

traitors”), or that we describe them as unstable, shows that powerful forces of social control are in operation (196-98).

More specifically addressing theologians, Gorsline examines white supremacy in the Theological Academy in “Shaking the Foundations.” She concurs with Cone that, although white theologians and ethicists have written about race, they have not presented “an anti-racist or anti-white supremacist theology or ethic grounded in the concrete reality of white racism (33).” Too often discussions of race are about the *other* as having a race, rather than about how whites maintain their racial superiority through a matrix of structures, attitudes, and behaviors, sometimes hidden, that are self-perpetuating (36). Gorsline argues that theologians need to engage in a sustained and open conversation that demonstrates a larger institutional commitment to overcome the power of white supremacy through real social and ecclesial change (39). In so doing, she surveys several white theologians since World War II who made great strides talking about racism, but failed in the end to challenge white supremacy. Among them are Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, who outlines the costs of and strategies for undoing unearned privilege, but fails to outline how the over-privileged can come to understand and divest themselves of their sense of entitlement. Rosemary Radford Ruether, argues Gorsline, also falls short by failing to allow white feminism to be changed by the lives of women of color to whom she listens (46).

Most troubling to Gorsline is the way white supremacy has infected white theological worldviews. White theologians assume their theology *is* theology, not white or Euro-American theology, and is the norm against which all other views must contend (49). If white scholars continue to build upon Bart and Tillich and others without qualification, they maintain white privilege (55). Gorsline finds this normalization in white Christianity as well, which values white supremacy over gospel values of justice (52). For example, our dualistic labeling of Christ as the Light creates a holiness associated with light and unholiness with dark (54). Gorsline does provide several suggestions for moving forward both personally and communally, epistemologically and hermeneutically. As white theologians we need to take on more dialogue partners, interconnecting their work to avoid fits and starts; live Blackness and think nonwhite; dis-identify ourselves from the image of God as a *white person*; go deeply into the beauty of the dark and black, seeking a truth that feels foreign; and work in coalitions to transform social systems (55-59).

Two other expository essays explore the intersectionality of race with class and gender. In “Gaps and Flashpoints: Untangling Race and Class,” Elizabeth M. Bounds describes how her initial inability to address class in a dialogue between black and white women rendered it invisible. In an attempt to sort out the complex intersections of race and class, Bounds acknowledges how theory as a reflexive hermeneutical tool easily hardens into fixed claims about the way the world is. A thicket of qualifiers, many believe, including those involved in identity politics in the 80s and 90s, will weaken the clarity and strategic success of a

problem (129). Bounds argues that the ongoing sense of class in the United States is complicated because we mistakenly view ourselves as classless, basing value on the merits of the individual. Historically, poor white immigrants were able to ignore class restrictions through the identification with white superiority, i.e., by becoming white (133). Yet the class stratification today, as measured by income, job status, place of residence etc., is actually increasing (131). Bounds concludes that we need to understand whiteness and blackness, not as static categories, but as a relational constructive process shaped by history and by immediate context (137)."

Similarly, Laurel C. Schneider examines race and gender in "What Race is Your Sex," arguing that race, sex, and gender are co-constitutive and contribute to the tenacity of human and divine hierarchies that solidify the power and make resilient white male supremacy (142). To contemplate them in isolation, she argues, is to perpetuate their insidious social and political effects that keep individual persons in their place, and to ignore their more profound theological implications (which unfortunately Schneider does not address here) (144). Sex and gender conceptualizations became racialized and classed in service of European and American colonial capitalism (147). Drawing upon John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Schneider locates the divinely ordained true woman as subservient, passive, soft, blond, wanton and white (150). She is also upper-class because her qualities can not be obtained by working women (155). Schneider argues that this co-constituality allows white, male, heterosexual supremacy to remain strong even among those of us who claim to be opposed to it, unless we begin to take the supremacy out of whiteness and the dominance out of masculinity (158, 161).

Several essays group themselves around resistance to and reparation for the sin of white supremacy. In "Claiming White Social Location as a Site of Resistance to White Supremacy," Case strives to provide clarity and direction to whites whose whiteness and lives—both structured by white supremacy—keep them from knowing what to do about racial injustice (64). Case points out that not only are individuals and communities of color at risk, but whites and their psyches, relationships, and communities are as well (67). Case outlines steps of what she calls *emancipatory praxis* for whites that include breaking silence on and acknowledging our denial of issues of race; recovering memory of "what we never knew" of our racialized historical narrative; listening to people of color; analyzing our social location as whites; and taking action (73-85). Unfortunately, Case does not indicate how we can actually relinquish white power beyond it being a choice we make that is counter-(white) cultural. If we come near, we will have gained in honesty, compassion and humbleness before our brokenness.

Harvey examines a related line of action in her essay, "Race and Reparations: The Material Logics of White Supremacy." After adopting a constructionist methodology that identifies race as a social construct, both for nonwhites and whites, and after warning against making essentialism the problem instead of

white supremacy or against concluding that any use of race is problematic, she brings the implications to bear on the issue of reparations and the “implicit themes of repentance, repair, and reconciliation (95, 98).” To lay groundwork she maps the historical trajectory of how whites became whites, which was a development that emerged during forced colonization. The primary categories of the old world were “Christian” and “heathen”, which developed into “white” and “nonwhite” as the colonizers committed atrocious crimes to justify Native American massacres and black subjugation (105). Through this *co-production* of oppression and our whiteness, Harvey argues that all who became white received direct benefits, privileges, and or protections which their legacies accumulate. This “unjust enrichment” constitutes our current social landscape and fuels the social, political, and moral call for reparations (111-12). Harvey writes, “[in] theo-ethical terms, reparations is nothing less than the possibility, for white people, of teleological movement from the brutal inhumanity and moral malformation...to the possibility of a fundamental reconstitution of who we are as racial selves.” It is through reparations as well that whites and nonwhites can achieve reconciliation and solidarity (115). Reparations are a call of hope, Harvey argues, for *metanoia* (repentance) changes our individual and social direction, as we turn from the brokenness of sin and evil (118).

Becky Thompson provides an international perspective on anti-racism work in “El Testigo Verdadero Libra Las Almas: The Central America Peace Movement and Anti-Racism.” She agrees with Case that recovering our memory of what we never knew requires us to acknowledge and resist our ethnocentrism, imperialism, and English language elitism (163). Thompson warns against the tendency to both look down on and romanticize the “other,” rather than “looking horrors and inhumane acts against people in the face (177).” She asks what it requires for people to go to Central American in this case “without having an arrogant assumption that we were helping people and they needed us (179).” Unfortunately, there has been little analysis of the racial dynamics of the sanctuary movement there, reminding us how the use of a color-blind approach to social movements renders the role of racism invisible. White-dominated organizations rarely know how to confront their own race and class privileges. (181-82).” Thompson urges us to forge more progressive multiracial bases as going hand in hand with an anti-racist agenda (184). Mac Nichol also devotes the latter part of her essay on the anti-racist activism of two figures who exemplify James Baldwin’s call for us to “do our first works over (191).”

Finally, two authors provide us with some pedagogical insight into how to eradicate white supremacy. In “To Hear and to be Accountable: An Ethic of White Listening,” Aana Marie Vigen argues that white scholars need to incorporate a method into our way of being and working, which disciplines the way we hear peoples of color. In this de-centering process, we must resist co-opting discussions, thinking that we know best, and quickly offering answers (216). The history of whites and men claiming the domain of rationality, civility and humanity lives on in contemporary arrangements, subverting the moral

agency intrinsic to peoples of color (222). Vigen suggests that whites take on a double consciousness of a different kind: being fully present to peoples of color, while at the same time stepping back to be cognizant of the bigger picture as well as to check one's self (222). She also picks up on something that is of great concern: the danger of turning our self-critical efforts into a narcissism that fails to turn back to face the other (224). Calling for a radical shift in what it means to be human Vigen, offers a theological anthropology that challenges an abstract view of humankind as white, male, European, and individualistic in favor of a concrete, particularized, and embodied vision. This shift from a deductive to an inductive anthropology welcomes persons and communities who have to often been left out of the common lexicon of society (226-27). In addition to inductive methodology, which is also essential to white theologians doing social and racial justice work, Vigen calls for reflectivity, which requires us to be self-critical of our discipline and engage in a dialogical, mutual give and take with those to whom we are listening (collaborators). This in turn requires us to interrogate our biases, including our social origins, location within our academic discipline, and tendency to write about rather than to concretely begin to solve problems (235-36). Vigen also argues that our research must be accountable to priority of and feedback from our collaborators, to the nuance of description, and to the need to transform society.

Sharon D. Welch offers more pedagogical insight in "Ceremonies of Gratitude, Awakening, and Accountability: The Theory and Practice of Multicultural Education." Welch describes the transformation of students in her class on the theory and practice of multi-cultural education. She employs many methods to foster a model of multicultural-education that promotes social structural equality and social advocacy, including the Theatre of the Oppressed, developed by Augusto Boal, which involves play acting an oppressive dilemma (256, 263). Welch does not deal directly with white privilege.

These essays are helpful first forays into white supremacy, but leave the budding theologian wanting more guidance into the methodology, hermeneutics, and theo-praxis that take us from white supremacy through repentance, reform, reconstitution, redress, repair, reconciliation and redemption. Mac Nichol discusses the sin of racism. Gorsline surveys work done by theologians in the past and begins to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to white theology as *the* theology. Harvey proposes a constructionalist methodology and an anthropological and teleological movement of whites from morally malformed to racially reconstituted. And Vigen addresses theological anthropology calling for a radical shift in our view of ourselves and humanity and the way we go about our dialogical work. In their Afterword, the editors agree that three arenas need much work: (1) the development of anti-white supremacist theories in theology and ethics, (2) the strengthening of anti-racism work in churches, and (3) the beginning of sustained anti-white supremacist investigation and conversation in the theological academy (281). I anticipate with great interest the equivalent effort of Catholic theologians in *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians*

*Break the Silence*, wishing to be better informed on how to “do our first works over” from a theological perspective.

**Substantive Questions for Discussion:**

1. Several authors make reference to Baldwin’s call to “do our first works over.” This seems to be critical to letting go of white privilege/supremacy. How can theologies of liberation, including feminist theology, provide us with models on how to begin this process? Are their hermeneutics helpful?
2. Why is it that Cone’s call is left largely unfulfilled? Why do the authors not address the three arenas that need work more fully? This is not meant as an “I could have done a better job”-type criticism, but rather a sincere concern. Doesn’t Hopkins point out one way in the Foreword when he writes that Christian white supremacy “uses language about God, democracy, freedom of speech, assembly, and all other manifestations of bourgeois theology to hide white monopolization of God’s creation (ix)?” Simply following up on these claims could be very helpful. Gorsline begins this work by critiquing white theological world views. What are the next steps?
3. Pedagogical questions interest me. How would I set up a theology course on white privilege?