Abstract
This paper seeks to explore how Catholic universities can work to dismantle racist campus culture and confront legacies of White supremacy. The paper draws heavily from the concepts and challenges within Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s *the sin of white supremacy* (2017). The paper argues that the virtues of love, humility and solidarity can serve as a theological framework for Catholic universities to become anti-racist institutions. This paper then looks at several possible actions Catholic universities can take to strategically combat legacies of White supremacy and dismantle systemic racism on campus.

Confronting the Sin of White Supremacy
Dismantling Systemic Racism on Catholic College Campuses

In early October 2017, there was a series of blatant racist incidents on Boston College’s campus. Several *Black Lives Matter* posters located on student’s residence hall doors were vandalized and a disturbing racist Snapchat by a current student went viral. In response to these incidents, a vigil and sanctioned march were planned and attended by several hundred students, faculty and administrators. When interviewed about the incidents, a BC administrator stated: “What we’ve experienced is not general to the student body…Our students are not racist, and many of them understand that very nature of [BC] is to treat everyone with human dignity.”

Then, on October 18, 2017, hundreds of Boston College students walked out of class in a protest of what they saw as the administration’s continued failure to directly confront racism on campus. Students who organized the walk-out dismissed the sentiment offered by the BC administrator arguing that the university was not doing enough to combat racism on campus and they failed to name these incidences as a larger racism problem on campus. Student organizer Olivia Sutton argued that, “There is a racist culture here, and it comes in all different forms of micro-aggressions, macro-aggressions, directly or indirectly, or even passivity.”

Many Catholic universities such as Boston College are already actively working to dismantle racist culture on their campuses. Yet this is not done by solely condemning blatantly racist acts and framing them as isolated incidences. Blatant racist acts cannot be seen as “isolat-
ed” incidences, they must be named and dealt with as part of a larger problem of White supremacy on Catholic college campuses. Catholic universities like Boston College, that are predominately White institutions, must examine what it means be a predominately White institution, and how this reality may perpetuate White supremacy and impact the college experience and formation process of all its students.

This paper argues that US Catholic universities must work to dismantle racist campus culture and confront their legacies of White supremacy. The paper draws heavily from Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s *the sin of white supremacy* (2017). This paper explores practical possibilities for beginning the work of examining how to combat the structural realities of White supremacy on Catholic college campuses.

This paper has three parts. The first looks at Hill Fletcher’s interrogation of the historical narrative of the relationship of White supremacy and Christian identity in the United States, with particular attention to the role of Catholic higher education. The second explores the possibility of using the virtues of love, humility and solidarity to create an anti-racist theology to confront White supremacy on college campuses. The third part suggests ways that US Catholic universities can work on becoming anti-racist institutions. I will argue particularly that in order for there to be a shift in campus culture away from White supremacy, explicit work with the White student majority needs to be done on developing healthy racial identities. I draw specifically in this argument on JR Helms, *Toward a Model of White Racial Identity Development* (1990). This section is an exploratory exercise that seeks to begin a conversation of concrete ways universities can begin to take action.

**The Sin of White Supremacy**

In her groundbreaking book *the sin of white supremacy*, theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher explicitly states that, “If Christians desire a world of racial justice and religious integrity, understanding the sin of supremacy and theology’s role within it is our only way forward.” The book’s primary audience is White Christians and she invites us to reflect on White supremacy as systemized racism that prioritizes some to the diminishment of others. Her thesis is that not only have White Christians participated in systems that prioritize White people over People of Color, but that Christian theology has been used to excuse and even promote White supremacy. Ultimately Hill Fletcher argues that the sin of White supremacy is that there is enormous racialized disparity in the United States and Christian theology had a part to play in that. She argues that:

As we seek a way forward we must see how Whiteness and Christianess have been twin pillars of the dominant religio-racial project. Moreover, since the benefits assigned to those who inhabit the category of White Christian have been wide ranging, and the denial of benefits for those who fall outside the category have been death dealing, we need to interrogate the relationship of White supremacy and Christian identity. What this investigation will help us see is that the theology

---

of Christian supremacy gave birth to the ideology of White supremacy, and that White supremacy grew from a dangerous ideology to an accepted position inherited by Whites.  

Hill Fletcher is quick to point out that theologians and universities had a direct role in shaping White supremacist ideology. Hill Fletcher explains that, “Theologians helped shape Christian thought around practices of domination and ‘destruction of indigenous ways.’”5 She urges readers to know that it was not uneducated Christians that were coming up with these links, but “rather the most highly trained Christian theologians, ministers, university professors, and university presidents who manufactured knowledge that would become the ideology of White Christian supremacy.”6 For example, August Thebaud, a French-American Jesuit educator and publicist in the late 1800s played a key role in expanding US Catholic university system and shaped who the Jesuits would focus on educating. Thebaud’s influential writings advocated for Irish Catholics to fit the “White Christian frame” but did little to aid Native Americans in this same light. His writings were persuasive in who Jesuit institutions of higher education focused on educating in the United States.7 His collusion with the religio-racial project had direct influences on how Jesuit institutions perpetuated White supremacy and why they continue to be predominantly White institutions today. 

When one thinks of contemporary issues of White supremacy on college campuses, visions of Neo-nazis marching down the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia may come to mind or incidents like the one described that happened at Boston College at the beginning of this paper. While White supremacists like the ones who gathered in Charlottesville are explicitly racist in their actions and ideologies, the White supremacy that Hill Fletcher is describing in her book is beyond personal racism. She stresses throughout the book that while the evil of personal racism is alive and well, she is more concerned with the broader social sin of structural racism. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva concurs in his book Racism without Racists (2014) by insisting “the more we assume that the problem of racism is limited to the Klan, the Birthers, the Tea Party, or the Republican Party, the less we understand that racial domination is a collective process and that the main problems nowadays is not the folks with hoods, but the folks dressed in suits!”8 

Hill Fletcher strongly critiques those she calls “good White Christians” that see themselves as sympathetic to causes of equality but do not see the problems of injustice and disparity due to structural racism “as their own”.9 This type of “color-blind” racism, as Bonilla-Silva

4 Hill Fletcher, 5.
5 Ibid, 8
6 Ibid, 13.
7 Ibid, 22.
8 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva Racism without Racists (Boulder: Rowman, 2014), xv.
9 Hill Fletcher, ix.
coins it, is just as damaging as blatant racism. This is the type of racism that allows White supremacy as a collective process to continue to exist within the practices, attitudes, and ideologies in wider institutions such as Catholic universities that often are made up of well-meaning White people in positions of power. White supremacy permeates many of our institutions of higher education and to deny this reality is to allow it to perpetuate continued disenfranchisement of People of Color. An urgent question is how do Catholic universities not enable students, staff and faculty who fall into Hill Fletcher’s category of types of “good White Christians” to remain complacent?

Bonilla-Silva urges institutions to consider the nuances of committing to becoming anti-racist and not claiming to be non-racist. He explains that being “anti-racist begins with understanding the institutional nature of racial matters and accepting that all actors in a racialized society are affected materially and ideologically by racial structures.”\(^{10}\) This implies taking responsibility for your unwilling participation in racist histories, practices and cultural hegemony. Hill Fletcher argues that if “Christians are guided by a vision that desires well-being for all, we must see clearly the effects of the sins of the past and the continuing sins of the present that make White supremacy a structural reality.”\(^{11}\) We turn to now look more closely at how certain theological virtues can help us reflect on this vision that desires well-being for all so that it can manifest in our universities, our Church and our world.

### Confronting the “Sin of White Supremacy” through Love, Humility and Solidarity

Hill Fletcher argues that, “Structural White Supremacy is the Kingdom of evil.”\(^{12}\) So how do we instead build the Kingdom of God? Hill Fletcher emphasizes that we must renew a focus on Jesus’ central commandment to love. She explains that emphasizing the Christian call to love can aid in “Reviving ancient wisdoms to critique the epic failure to love that is White supremacy and hoping for patterns for a way forward to love in a weighted world.”\(^{13}\) She points to the Gospels for examples of how Jesus taught us to love. She explains that it is a love in direct contrast to the self-serving love that allows White supremacy to flourish. It is a love that moves beyond boundaries, and is rooted in a desire to intimately know others and to be in right relationship.\(^{14}\) Hill Fletcher also emphasizes that a renewed understanding of Christology can provide an articulation for who we are called to love. She invites readers to reflect on who the crucified are today. She argues that, “God lives within the body of the tortured and through the Crucified

\(^{10}\) Bonilla-Silva, 15.

\(^{11}\) Hill Fletcher, 83.

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 94.

\(^{13}\) Ibid, 111

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 113.
One.” It is a love that is not relegated to the sentimental realm, but one that calls us to action, to stand with the torture victim, to side with the crucified.

While Hill Fletcher’s book is groundbreaking in articulating this sin of White supremacy, she is not the first White Catholic theologian to confront White supremacy. In 1963, Thomas Merton wrote “Letters to a White Liberal” at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. It is lesser known than many of his other works and this is probably no coincidence since it is an explicit condemnation and challenge to White liberals who opposed violence and war, yet were not working for racial justice in the United States.

In the letter Merton invokes Pope Paul VI’s call during the second session of Vatican II for the Church to set an obligation to purify and renew its inner life. He explains that Pope Paul VI’s reasoning was for internal purification was “because it is only after this work of internal sanctification has been accomplished that the Church will be able to show herself to the whole world and say: Who sees me, sees Christ.” Merton saw this as an opportunity for the Church to have an examination of conscience with regard to confronting racism in the United States.

For Merton charity nor mere belief in equality were enough to confront racism. Merton reflected directly to White Christians that:

Our religion adds that what we do to (African Americans), we do to Christ, since we are a free society, based on respect for the dignity of the human personas as taught to the world by Christianity. How then, do we treat this other Christ, this person, who happens to be black?

This was a call to action. And this action was not to be based in charity, but in an honest reflection on how White liberals did damage in assuming superiority. He goes on to explain that:

To assume the superiority of the white race and European-American culture as axiomatic, and to proceed from there to “integrate” all other races and cultures by a purely one-sided operation is a pure travesty of Catholic unity in truth. In fact, this fake Catholicism, this parody of unity which is no unity at all but a one-sided and arbitrary attempt to reduce others to a condition of identity with ourselves is one of the most disastrous of misconceptions.

Merton was severely critiquing the superiority complex of even White liberals who assumed that African Americans wanted to be “accepted into the white’s man’s society.” Rather, Merton be-

15 Ibid, 135.
17 Merton, 17.
18 Ibid, 17.
19 Ibid, 57.
lieved that atonement was necessary and that this consisted of concrete actions of reforming social systems that perpetuate injustices and that the work must be lead by African Americans. These concrete actions of atonement were filled with the call for humility.

In addition to the theological concepts of love that Hill Fletcher offers and humility that Merton offers, the concept of solidarity should support an anti-racist theological framework. Solidarity is a pillar of Catholic Social Teaching and a virtue that must be cultivated if we are to live as disciples who wish to follow Jesus’ examples of how to love. St. John Paul II wrote that:

[Solidarity] is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.

In the work of anti-racism, committing to the common good must be a two-fold project, beginning with looking at both our internalized biases and looking at the systems we are complicit in. Solidarity must be rooted in humility and love, and not based on charity nor sympathy.

Ada Maria Isasi Diaz in her essay “Love of Neighbor in the Twenty-first Century” (1996) explicitly names solidarity as the appropriate “present-day expression of the gospel mandate that we love our neighbor.” The goal of solidarity she explains “is to participate in the ongoing process of liberation through which we Christians become a significantly positive force in the unfolding of the “kin-dom” of God.” This process is one based in mutuality that moves beyond charity, and is rooted in a “dialogic process” in which the oppressed must “utter the first word.” Solidarity is not only the realization of mutuality or engagement in dialogue, it is made manifest in action. Diaz insists that “the unfolding of the kin-dom of God, which indeed promotes human fulfillment, is made possible only when just structures and situations exist.”

Rooted in commitments of love, humility and solidarity, it is the responsibility of all Christians, and most urgently the work of White Christians, to confront the sins of White supremacy and work to dismantle racist cultures in the institutions we belong to. Hill Fletcher argues that:

20 Ibid, 67.


23 Isasi-Diaz, 89

24 Ibid, 98.

Even if Christians today are not directly responsible for creating the conditions of dispossession and disparity, when we do nothing to change current conditions, the story of our faith and our symbolic capital supports an unjust status quo by default.\textsuperscript{26}

We now turn to the Catholic university as a space to do this anti-racist work.

**Confronting White Supremacy on Catholic College Campuses**

There are many facets to how White supremacy permeates Catholic campus cultures. This section is merely an attempt to explore possibilities that can serve as a starting point to inspire brainstorming and encourage action. Below I offer a two-pronged approach for getting started on college campuses. First, what would it look like for college administrations to use an explicitly anti-racist theological lens when making decisions that inform mission, ministry and strategic plans? And second, how could student formation programming help all students develop healthy racial identities?

How can administrations heed Merton’s call to humility and to conduct an internal examination of conscience about how racist culture exists within? While many Catholic universities were founded to give opportunities to the marginalized, historical realities are more complex than these simple narratives and often schools also have a history of complicity and perpetuation of racism in the United States. One must only look to the recent news stories from Georgetown University, where Jesuits in the mid-1800s sold dozens of slaves to create an endowment for the school.\textsuperscript{27} This specific story fortunately has a redemptive component. The current leaders at Georgetown are taking responsibility for these past actions and asking for forgiveness and giving reparations to descendants of the people who were sold at the hands of the Jesuits. This story offers a hopeful model of how universities can face their pasts, and repent. While all Catholic higher education institutions might not have explicit ties to slavery, each institution could go through a discernment process at looking at the school’s historical complicity in systemic racism and be aware of how this history effects the current culture that exists.

Hill Fletcher offers a practical discernment tool to begin to do this work, derived from her personal experiences with the Ignatian spiritual tradition. She suggests that with St. Ignatius of Loyola as a guide to put love into practice, questions that can be asked are: *What have we done to the crucified (past)? What are we doing to the crucified (present)? What ought we do for the crucified?*\textsuperscript{28} What would it look like for an administration to take a serious look at these questions and attempt to answer them in light of a legacy of White supremacy. What would it change

\textsuperscript{26} Hill Fletcher, 107.


\textsuperscript{28} Hill Fletcher, 160.
if all strategic planning, rooted in the theological concepts of love, humility and solidarity, took seriously the last question of what ought we do for the crucified? It is not enough to promote diversity and multicultural education and training. The administration can do more in explicitly working to fight institutional racism by looking point blank at how White supremacy has shaped its past and continues to permeate its present culture.

While the administration has a role at implementing strategic planning, a crucial role in shifting current and future campus culture is fostering healthy racial identity development for all students. While Catholic colleges explicitly want to nurture the faith development of students, nurturing racial identity development should also be a priority. Generally speaking, the task of formation of healthy racial identities currently falls on multicultural offices and it is often assumed that it is formational work to be done with exclusively Students of Color. While it is crucial for Students of Color to have strong support in formational programming for developing healthy racial identities, there is often a gaping hole in explicit racial identity programming and formation for White students. While the goal of fostering healthy racial identity development should be for all students, in order for there to be a shift away from a racist culture, explicit work with what is often the White majority needs to be done.

For this idea I lean specifically on the theories of Janet Helms in her model of White Racial Identity Development. More training and discussion must occur on college campuses with faculty, administrators, staff and students on why healthy White racial identity development is paramount in student formation programming and how to do it. A healthy White racial identity is one in which an individual is aware of how their race unjustly privileges them in society, but it is not an identity that brings shame or resentment. An individual with a healthy White racial identity can be an advocate in the work of dismantling systemic racism and in working on changing their own behaviors and actions which contribute to racist culture.

Focusing on nurturing healthy White racial identities among White students could address Hill Fletcher’s critique of the apathy and often ignorance of “good White Christians” on issues of systemic racism. The goal would be to engage the majority of White students who don’t think that the problems of racism pertain to them. Helms’ argues that “he or she must accept his or her own Whiteness, the cultural implications of being White, and define a view of Self as a racial being that does not depend on the perceived superiority of one racial group over another.”

Helms’ White Racial Identity Development theory consists of six stages: Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-independence, Immersion, and Autonomy. While students will come to college located in a diversity of these stages, the goal is to help identify where students are so they can continue to grow and work towards an anti-racist healthy White identity.

---

29 Helms is a research psychologist well known for her studies on ethnic minority issues. This research was first published in her book Black and White Identity Development: Theory, Research and Practice (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990).


Framing racial identity work within the context of the theological virtues of love, humility, and solidarity will ensure that the reaction to this work is not shame and antipathy. Anti-racism training should not demonize White students nor label them “racist.” The goal instead is to nurture students and embolden them to become more aware of their own identities, and empower them to be advocates and allies in racial justice work. Bonilla-Silva argues that:

We must nurture a large cohort of anti-racist whites to begin challenging color-blind nonsense from within. Whites’ collective denial about the true nature of race relations may help them feel good, but it is also one of the greatest obstacles to doing the right thing. In racial matters as in therapy, admission of denial is the preamble for the beginning of recovery.\(^\text{32}\)

Helms’ theory provides a tool and language to begin to nurture cohorts of anti-racist White students. As student formation work takes into account healthy racial identity of all students, the next question is where/when should this work be taking place and who should be facilitating this work?

While there may not be a need to create new programming, how can current student programming that engage a multitude of students such as orientation, retreats, and service/immersion trips be conducted through a theologically based anti-racist lens? This would require training for staff, faculty, and student leaders. There are many organizations that lead such faith-based trainings. One example is Chicago-based non-profit Crossroads, that has a long history of working with predominately White faith-based organizations at addressing first steps at dismantling racism.\(^\text{33}\)

There are also current campus initiatives to look to for inspiration, if it is decided that additional programming would aid in combatting White supremacy on campus. The multicultural office at Loyola University of Chicago runs a program called R.A.W. (Ramblers Analyzing Whiteness). The website explains that, “The purpose of R.A.W. is to create an affinity space on campus for self-identified White students who want to become anti-racist, anti-supremacist White allies.”\(^\text{34}\) I want to emphasize again though that this work should not be silo-d to multicultural or diversity offices, nor to campus ministry offices. A commitment to becoming an anti-racist institution means that this work should permeate all of the student formation programming. Again, this work should be explicitly steeped in the theological virtues of love, humility and solidarity. This will not only allow an institution to have a cohesive faith-based anti-racist mission across campus, but might also serve as a beacon of hope, and a model for the rest of the Church to follow.

---

\(^\text{32}\) Ibid, 307.

\(^\text{33}\) [http://crossroadsantiracism.org](http://crossroadsantiracism.org)

\(^\text{34}\) [https://www.luc.edu/diversity/programs/ramblersanalyzingwhiteness/](https://www.luc.edu/diversity/programs/ramblersanalyzingwhiteness/)
Conclusion

If Catholic universities leave White supremacy unexamined, then continued ignorance of communal and individual roles in systemic racism will result in perpetuation of racist culture on campuses. This paper has sought to explore Hill Fletcher’s notion of the sin of White supremacy and how it relates to US Catholic universities. This paper has provided a suggestion for anti-racist work on Catholic campuses to be grounded in the virtues of love, humility and solidarity. It has offered concrete suggestions for beginning anti-racist work through strategic planning efforts of the university administration and in student formation programming. This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive overview of the sin of White supremacy, nor offer an easy solution for how to combat it. It is merely my hope that it helps spark conversation on how to explicitly name, confront and begin to dismantle systemic racism at Catholic universities. Bonilla-Silva warns that the commitment to becoming an anti-racist institution is not easy and will not happen overnight. He admits “The ride will be rough, but after your eyes have been opened, there is no point in standing still.”35 Let us pray that Catholic universities do not stand still, and commit to moving forward in confronting the sin of White supremacy.

Works Cited


Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for The Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996),


35 Bonilla-Silva, 15.