

focus attention on the prayer's author, but to show how this prayer can assist others not to come to know Merton better but to come to know themselves better, to discover their own true identity, to reflect on the process of their own spiritual journey, above all to encounter and deepen their relationship with the Lord who is their companion, their guide and their goal. Ultimately, the "I" of the prayer is not primarily its composer but anyone and everyone who makes its words their own, the "pray-er" (see 9) who engages in this "exercise in authenticity." Thomas Merton himself, no doubt, would wholeheartedly agree.

Patrick F. O'Connell

MIKULICH, Alex, *Unlearning White Supremacy: A Spirituality for Racial Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022) pp. xl, 168. ISBN: 978-1-6269-8466-0 (paper) \$27.00.

Kerry Connelly writes in *Good White Racist* that the best way for white folks to begin the conversation on unlearning white supremacy culture is to accept our own part in it, unequivocally: "Hi. I'm Kerry, and I'm a racist," she begins.¹ Catholic theologian and ethicist Alex Mikulich takes a similar approach in *Unlearning White Supremacy: A Spirituality for Racial Liberation*, admitting his own complicity and frequently addressing the reader as "we": "*We* have never fully confronted the colonialist roots of white supremacy. *We* need to confront the ways in which US democracy is built upon anti-Black coloniality" (xxxviii, emphasis added). Drawing on Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Destruction*,² his "primary inspiration" (xi), Mikulich doesn't just invite white people of faith to take responsibility for our role in anti-Black white supremacy; he insists the responsibility is ours, and he doesn't spare himself, even as someone who has been doing anti-racist work in churches for decades.

To be honest, I wondered what Mikulich might bring to this ongoing conversation that hasn't already been said. The canon of white folks writing about issues of racial justice and white supremacy is growing, after all, and Mikulich himself has been writing about the topic for more than 20 years while working as an antiracism facilitator. In this book, he draws on years of practical personal experience to invite white readers of faith into hard truths, historical perspectives, powerful self-reflection and possible ways forward. This approach is an important addition to the genre, especially for white Merton scholars and white Catholics.

1. Kerry Connelly, *Good White Racist? Confronting Your Role in Racial Injustice* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2020) 1.

2. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964).

Unlearning White Supremacy revises and expands on Mikulich's work from 2012 to 2021. In the first half, he encourages white people to "confront our historical amnesia" (xxiv) through laying out how the church and white supremacy are entwined historically, including in the enslavement of Africans to anti-Black colonialism and the creation of carceral society. And he doesn't equivocate on the racist origins of the U.S.:

This nation was founded amid the genocide of the First Peoples of the Americas, and it was built on the backs of millions of Africans, stolen from their place of birth to create unimaginable wealth for white Americans. We have never fully confronted the colonialist roots of white supremacy. We need to confront the ways in which US democracy is built upon anti-Black coloniality. (xxxvi-xxxvii)

He describes the "white habitus" (28), a sociological concept that normalizes white "physical, social, and moral separation from Black people" (49) creating a kind of *habit* (habitus is Latin for "habit"). This provides the sociological framework for the rest of the book, which I found personally helpful as a way of framing the problem.

In the second half, he pivots to more spiritual work, both internal and external, with a resolution-oriented focus engaging the impasse at hand through mystical spirituality, W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" (86), reparations and the ways in which ecological intimacy can remind us of the important work of "living in loving concert with our human and nonhuman kin" (157). Though Mikulich addresses a number of ways forward, he also reminds the white reader of faith, "The point is not that white sacrifice will lead to Black liberation – that is part of the lie of white supremacy. Rather, people who believe in the myth of whiteness need to recognize and address the plentitude of ways that whiteness is literally killing us" (xxxv).

In addition to his own experience as scholar and activist, I was especially glad to see how much Mikulich has been formed by the African American religious experience and the ways he is in conversation with the work of Black scholars and writers like James Baldwin, M. Shawn Copeland, Claudia Rankine, Bryan Massingale, Frantz Fanon, Delores S. Williams and W. E. B. Du Bois, to name a few. He also offers a nod of gratitude to the late Jim Forest, friend of Merton and co-founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, whom Mikulich acknowledges as the first to attentively listen to and encourage his work with affirmation, leading to the book taking shape.

As I continue to confront my own role in racial injustice, I often think about the false narrative of white supremacy culture that is embedded in

white contemplative spaces, where I do much of my own scholarly work. That narrative appears any time contemplation is deployed as an excuse to do nothing – to sit back and remain silent in the face of injustice. Mikulich quotes Merton: “To forget or ignore one’s implication in the sin and injustice of the world, continues Merton, ‘does not absolve the monk (or any contemplative) from responsibility in events in which his very silence and ‘not knowing’ may constitute a form of complicity’” (27).³ I have experienced this myself, and I now recognize it as a lack of courage that is rooted in denial and privilege. “That the church hesitates to proclaim that Black lives matter only seems to reveal a certain lack of courage and affirm a blind attachment to a status quo that leaves sinful assumptions of white innocence unacknowledged and unaddressed,” Mikulich writes (xxxv). Many white contemplative spaces operate on the same false narrative, and it is one on which countless systems of oppression have been built, and which we as white people benefit from and participate in – knowingly or unknowingly.

While in many ways the book is written primarily for a white *Catholic* audience, the book remains an important contribution to the exploration of what it means to be anti-racist and the work that requires. In full agreement with Mikulich, I believe white people of faith find ourselves at “a historical crossroads where we can no longer evade the legacy of modernity/coloniality and its cornerstones of patriarchy and anti-Black white supremacy” (81). As a white Merton scholar, as a queer cisgender woman of faith, as a human, I welcome this strong rebuke as I continue the daily work and journey of unlearning white supremacy.

Cassidy S. Hall

BECKETT, Sister Wendy and Robert Ellsberg, *Dearest Sister Wendy: A Surprising Story of Faith and Friendship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022), pp. 371. ISBN: 978-1-62698-475-2 (paper) \$28.00.

Dearest Sister Wendy chronicles the correspondence between two deep thinkers and lively conversationalists. One is Sister Wendy Beckett, “the art nun” who hosted the 1990s BBC series *Sister Wendy’s Odyssey* in which – in full traditional habit – she expounded in often surprising terms on some of history’s most significant artworks. The other is long-time Orbis Books publisher and editor-in-chief Robert Ellsberg, who has edited Dorothy Day’s letters and diaries and authored multiple books on the saints and the spiritual life.

This book appealed to me immediately on two levels. In 2021, I co-authored *How to Be*, a book of my own correspondence over a period of

3. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) xiii.