

whiteness, it will better reflect Christianity's relational anthropology, and it may help depression sufferers, including many white women, by casting a better vision for another possible world.³³

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II. Family Welfare and Pernicious Property: White Womanhood and Catholic Social Thought in the United States

A significant literature presents the Catholic social thought tradition (CST) as a resource for combating racism and white supremacy, and an equally important body of work critiques the documentary tradition for the ways it fails to adequately address these pernicious social sins.³⁴ This essay will combine elements of both approaches to address a topic relatively modest in scope: showing how attention to the historical and contemporary

³³ Special thanks to Megan McCabe, Kate Ward, Jaisy Joseph, Elisabeth Vasko, Tracy Tiemeier, and Julia Feder for their helpful feedback on drafts of this essay.

³⁴ A representative, though no doubt incomplete, list of constructive and critical readings includes Joseph A. Francis, "Catholic Social Teaching and Minorities," in *Rerum Novarum: A Symposium Celebrating 100 Years of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Ronald F. Duska (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 99–107; Jamie T. Phelps, "Racism and the Church: An Inquiry into the Contradictions between Experience, Doctrine, and Theological Theory," in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 53–76; Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "The Grace and Fortitude Not to Turn Our Backs," in *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002), 73–82; M. Shawn Copeland, "Disturbing Aesthetics of Race," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 3, no. 1 (2006): 17–27; Diana L. Hayes, "The Color of Money: Racism and the Economy," in *Romero's Legacy: The Call to Peace and Justice*, ed. Pilar Hogan Closkey and John D. Hogan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 79–91; Margaret R. Pfeil, "The Transformative Power of the Periphery: Can a White US Catholic Opt for the Poor?," in *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, ed. Laurie M. Cassidy and Alexander Mikulich (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 127–46; Mary E. Hobgood, "White Economic and Erotic Disempowerment: A Theological Exploration in the Struggle against Racism," in *Interrupting White Privilege*, 40–55; Dawn M. Nothwehr, *That They May Be One: Catholic Social Teaching on Racism, Tribalism, and Xenophobia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

operation of white womanhood, exposed by sociologist Jessie Daniels in her book *Nice White Ladies*, informs, critiques, and presents opportunities for Catholic social thought on gender and family, both in the ecclesial documents and in their appropriations by white US Catholic scholars. I will address three themes: images of women; the nexus of families and the welfare state; and whiteness as property.³⁵

An unforeseen commonality between the image of women in Catholic social thought and the trope of nice white ladies is their limited, unrealistic depictions of women's moral agency.³⁶ Papal teaching on sexual ethics heavily foregrounds the role of women in avoiding and even preventing sin, an emphasis carried through in catechesis where girls and women are depicted as "sexual gatekeepers," according to Karen Ross.³⁷ By contrast, the *social* encyclicals say almost nothing about women's participation in sinful realities. In the social encyclicals, women appear as victims of exploitation, sinned against. To find discussion of women's agency in papal teaching, we must look to documents directly focused on women and family. The image of womanhood that results is a fusion of the angel in the house and the girl-boss, gracing the workplace with an undefined feminine "genius," even as her role in the family is "irreplaceable."³⁸ In the papal tradition, not until *Amoris*

³⁵ I would like to thank my coauthors, Jessica Coblentz and Megan McCabe, for organizing the panel on which this paper originated, providing the guiding framework, and offering generous feedback on an early draft, including suggesting reading recommendations that proved to be crucial. Thanks as well to the panel attendees at the College Theology Society annual meeting for their valuable input and suggestions.

³⁶ Theologians have tirelessly critiqued CST's limited, naive portrayal of women, and this essay will neither catalog all the limitations nor attempt to fix them. See, for example, Christine Gudorf's characterization of papal teaching on women as "romantic pedestalization" in "Encountering the Other: The Modern Papacy on Women," *Social Compass* 36, no. 3 (September 1989): 298; see also Ivy A. Helman, *Women and the Vatican: An Exploration of Official Documents* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012).

³⁷ Karen Ross, Megan K. McCabe, and Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Christian Sexual Ethics and the #MeToo Movement: Three Moments of Reflection on Sexual Violence and Women's Bodies," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 2 (2019): 344; for women's "unique and decisive" responsibility to avoid and prevent the sins of abortion, euthanasia, and birth control by "transforming culture," see Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life), March 25, 1995, \$99, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

³⁸ Pope John Paul II, "Letter to Women," June 29, 1995, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html; Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), September 14, 1981, \$19, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html.

Laetitia do we see discussion of women as potential wrongdoers, and even that is discussed within the context of family, without mentioning social repercussions.³⁹ Daniels's work shows how white women protect white supremacy by creating and maintaining educational and wealth inequality, lamenting their victimhood at the hands of men while failing to acknowledge the specific ways white women can act as oppressors.⁴⁰ But CST's treatment of women offers no lens through which to see women abusing systemic power in these and other ways.

It is not a coincidence that the woman depicted in the social encyclicals fits rather seamlessly into the US social imaginary of a perpetually innocent white lady at service to capitalism and her nuclear family. As Jacob Kohlhaas has shown, the ecclesial framers of Catholic teaching on families responded to the same social and cultural realities that shaped contemporary US ideals of white womanhood. CST framers developed what Kohlhaas calls a "private, biological, and nuclear" conception of families by observing the economic and cultural signs of their times.⁴¹ Significantly, the Industrial Revolution created the material conditions for nuclear families by allowing one wage-earning male to support a wife and children without the need for collaboration with extended family, as would have been necessary in traditional agricultural settings.⁴² Idealization of nuclear families is also central to US understandings of white womanhood, though Daniels points to the historical role of racially exclusive government subsidies that enabled mostly white families to achieve—at least the appearance of—self-sufficient economic independence.⁴³ The encyclical tradition on women and families was also shaped by Romantic thought, which portrayed women and men as distinguished not only by separate social roles and spheres of influence, but even as possessed of distinct virtues.⁴⁴ So, too, Romantic thought shapes the understanding of whiteness throughout the US cultural

³⁹ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (On Love in the Family), March 19, 2016, §242, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

⁴⁰ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 169–70.

⁴¹ Jacob M. Kohlhaas, *Beyond Biology: Rethinking Parenthood in the Catholic Tradition* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 14.

⁴² Kohlhaas, *Beyond Biology*, 21.

⁴³ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 159. Willful ignorance of this history may have contributed to US readings of the papal tradition that can seem deliberately cherry-picked, such as those by Michael Novak, who read warnings against dependence into a tradition that all but shouts that the state should provide families with economic support. See, for example, "Economic Rights: The Servile State," *Crisis Magazine*, October 1, 1985, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/vault/economic-rights-the-servile-state>.

⁴⁴ Kohlhaas, *Beyond Biology*, 23.

imagination, as Toni Morrison demonstrates in *Playing in the Dark*.⁴⁵ Certainly, the papal portrayal of women and the US ideal of nice white ladies are not identical, but US theologians must remain alert to the danger of conflating the two and thereby introducing US-centric racist ideas into our theological reflection. This is an especially important duty for those theologians who do find constructive insights in the depiction of women in the papal encyclicals.

As is well known, the papal encyclical tradition has a robust view of the place of the family in social and ecclesial life. Families are domestic churches, microcosms of the people of God; they are the means of checking the justice of an economic system; they are havens for the elderly.⁴⁶ Just as US theologians must resist reading “nice white lady” where the papal tradition says “woman,” we must resist reading the papal tradition through dominant US-culture imagery that imagines the family as straight, white, and nuclear, as if only certain models of family life could manifest all the goods witnessed in the family by CST framers.⁴⁷ For many, such a misuse of the encyclicals would easily be identified as an Americanist error, but even US thinkers who read the documents more accurately are not free from reading them with cultural bias, as we see in some Catholic scholarship on families and the state.

Many US theologians would explain the connection between families and the state along these lines: CST highly values the family; CST supports a strong welfare state to support the family; ergo, the US welfare state should be strengthened in order to provide for families.⁴⁸ I have made this argument

⁴⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2007), 36.

⁴⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), November 21, 1964, §11, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html; Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, §19; Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §48.

⁴⁷ Nichole Flores’s exploration of how Latina/o families manifest the goods of solidarity is a welcome corrective to narrow, white-dominated views of family in Christian tradition. “Latina/o Families: Solidarity and the Common Good,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013): 57–72. With *Amoris Laetitia* §52, the papal tradition has acknowledged families founded by same-sex couples.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar, “Valuing Family Care: Love and Labor,” in *Sex, Love & Families: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Jason King and Julie Hanlon Rubio (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), 151–61; Christine Firer Hinze, *Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a US Catholic Economic Ethic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021); Kate Ward, “Universal Basic Income and Work in Catholic Social Thought,” *American Journal of Economics & Sociology* 79, no. 4 (September 2020): 1271–306; Kate Ward, “During This Primary Election, Vote for

myself and will probably make it again. To anyone who reads the papal documents with intellectual honesty, it ought to be unassailable. This argument can be correct *and* naively incomplete. To be clear, I do think it is important for white theologians, specifically, to call for a strengthened US welfare state. I credit this insight to Monique Moultrie, who pointed out during a discussion at the Society of Christian Ethics that Black scholars may face racist stereotyping when calling for improvements to the welfare state in a way that is not the case for white scholars. The fact that white US scholars have a unique responsibility to point out the tradition's insistence on a welfare state that supports families means it is especially important for us to do it with honesty and a broad view of history.

White US Catholic theologians, including myself, engage with our tradition naively when we issue calls for improved government support of families without acknowledging and actively strategizing against the pernicious ways racism has operated, and continues to operate, to keep such support out of reach. As Daniels writes, white women "have embraced a version of feminism that fits neatly with state power rather than challenges it ... For white feminism ... harnessing the State in the service of (supposedly) feminist goals is a taken-for-granted, rarely questioned assumption."⁴⁹ In contrast, US feminists of color draw on histories of women who just as often had to build and nurture their families in spite of bureaucratic and even violent state opposition.⁵⁰ Johnnie Tillmon, a Black mother and activist, founded the National Welfare Rights Organization to push back on dehumanizing policies that accompanied state support to families in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁵¹ Antiracist leaders such as Tillmon and Selma James, cofounder of Wages for Housework, proudly claimed their right to state support for their family care work, but they knew exercising that right would take canny organizing and power-building. The state could not be trusted to honor the dignity of mothers and their families even once it had been convinced to provide for their material, basic needs.⁵² Adequate Catholic advocacy for state support of families in the United States must credit the Black

Family Justice," *U.S. Catholic* (blog), March 4, 2020, <https://uscatholic.org/articles/202003/during-primary-election-vote-family-justice-31984/>.

⁴⁹ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 79.

⁵⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 45–66.

⁵¹ Judith Shulevitz, "Forgotten Feminisms: Johnnie Tillmon's Battle Against 'The Man,'" *New York Review of Books* (blog), June 26, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com>.

⁵² Selma James, "The Wages for Housework Campaign Began in 1972, Yet We Are Still Working for Free," *Independent (UK)*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk>.

leaders who pioneered these arguments, while acknowledging the history of racist ideas in undermining support for the welfare state.⁵³

White Catholic theologians must also be honest about the extractive ways white families, led by white women, frequently engage with public goods, including, most visibly, public education. Daniels is right to point out white women's leading role in "opportunity hoarding" by seeking out segregated educational opportunities for their white children. Many white parents, including myself, came to see the reality of present-day school segregation thanks to the work of Black journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, who charges that "so much of school segregation is structural ... but it is the choices of individual parents that uphold the system."⁵⁴

This offers another caution to white US Catholics using the social encyclical tradition to argue for improved governmental support for the family. White US people have not quite learned the lesson that public goods are for everyone and that our "presumption of dominance and entitlement," to quote Bryan Massingale,⁵⁵ does not, or at any rate certainly should not, hold true in the use of public goods like transit, libraries, and public education. A growing literature responding in large part to Hannah-Jones details the habits of white parents engaging with US public schools: families first segregate; secondly, they hoard opportunity; and when all else fails, they show up in majority-Black and Brown schools with the expectation of white dominance firmly in play.⁵⁶ As these authors detail, white parents who do this are simply enacting white cultural ideals of what good parenting looks like; changing expectations of white dominance will mean new understandings of good parenting, too.⁵⁷ But successful calls for a robust social safety net

⁵³ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type, 2016), 358, 446.

⁵⁴ Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Choosing a School for My Daughter in a Segregated City," *New York Times Magazine*, June 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/12/magazine/choosing-a-school-for-my-daughter-in-a-segregated-city.html>.

⁵⁵ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 24.

⁵⁶ Courtney E. Martin, *Learning in Public: Lessons for a Racially Divided America from My Daughter's School* (New York: Little, Brown, 2021); Sarah W. Jaffe, *Wanting What's Best: Parenting, Privilege, and Building a Just World* (Chicago, IL: Parenting Press, 2022); "Introducing: Nice White Parents," *New York Times*, July 23, 2020; Linn Posey-Maddox, *When Middle-Class Parents Choose Urban Schools: Class, Race, and the Challenge of Equity in Public Education* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

⁵⁷ Catholic theologians have addressed the problem of opportunity hoarding by wealthy white families and urge concrete practices of solidarity and resistance; see Cristina L. H. Traina, "The Vice of 'Virtue': Teaching Consumer Practice in an Unjust World," *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 1 (January 2018): 13–27; David M. Cloutier, "Wanting 'the Best' for 'Our' Kids: Parenting and Privilege," in *Sex, Love & Families: Catholic*

for families will backfire if white parents engage with this improved public good in the competitive, zero-sum manner many currently do with public schools.

A final contribution to our study of white womanhood in dialogue with the social encyclical tradition is the insight of Cheryl Harris, a legal scholar and foundational critical race theorist, that whiteness in the US legal context is treated as property. As Daniels explains Harris's thought, "the law has accorded 'holders' of whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded holders of other types of property" ... in fact, "whiteness is, according to the legal definition, a kind of property."⁵⁸ We know from Aquinas's natural law tradition that private property is not, strictly speaking, natural to human life, but rather is a useful addition to the natural law. We may own private property, but we should regard it always as potentially another's and stand ready to share it with them if they are in need. Another can have a right to our private property if we have more than we need and they are endangered by their own privation.⁵⁹

Can this well-trod line of thinking apply to the property that is whiteness? On one hand, Daniels makes an excellent case that whiteness and its pink-packaged variant, white womanhood, are poisoned apples that nobody, whether they have whiteness or not, ought to want. Whiteness is "the lie that is killing all of us," with white racial self-deception resulting in illness, despair, acceptance of abuse—and those are just the ills that affect the white person herself; they do not even begin to address her complicity in racist harms.⁶⁰ Unlike ordinary forms of property that exist in nature, whiteness is a human-created fiction that nonetheless has material results.

The view of whiteness as property therefore asks a question of the Catholic natural law tradition. Does this tradition give us the tools to think about property that should never exist? I will refer to property that should not exist as "pernicious property" and explore the natural law tradition to see if it has resources for thinking about property in this way.

It does not seem to me that Aquinas's natural law view of property envisioned the possibility of pernicious property, property that should not exist. Rather, there are right ways or wrong ways to use property. Weapons could be rightly used in a just war, or wrongly used, to harm someone innocent

Perspectives, ed. Jason King and Julie Hanlon Rubio (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), 259–70.

⁵⁸ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 161.

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas (ST)*, trans. Dominican Fathers of the English Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1921) II-II, q. 66, art. 7.

⁶⁰ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 193.

or overthrow a just government.⁶¹ Inequalities of wealth were not inherently problematic, but surplus beyond one's ordinary outlay could be put to good use when dispersed to meet human needs.⁶² Even slavery, treating human beings as property, was not unjust under any circumstance, but based on the possibility of the enslaved person's good being served.⁶³

The papal tradition, following Aquinas, generally does not investigate pernicious property, although it adds more specificity to the ways property should *not* be used. In the encyclical tradition, large landholdings in personal hands, not being cultivated for sustenance, are called *latifundia*.⁶⁴ The papal tradition recommends they be broken up and sold at fair terms to farmers who will put them to use serving immediate human needs, and even allows for the possibility of expropriation. The fact, however, that this property can be put to good use reveals that *latifundia* are not a particular type of property, but rather, a divinely created good—arable land—being used unjustly. I would argue that this papal tradition on *latifundia* could be expanded to argue for the dissolution of extremely wealthy fortunes: resources being used not for a good purpose to meet human needs, but simply to enrich their owners. As with *latifundia*, large fortunes are financial assets being used in an unjust way; they are not a different, pernicious type of property.

Birth control methods and even nuclear weapons do not meet the criteria for pernicious property, in that the natural law tradition permits their possession under certain conditions. For example, condoms and the birth control pill have potential just uses.⁶⁵ Even nuclear weapons may be justly possessed for deterrence under certain conditions restricting the intent of their use, according to Pope John Paul II and the US Bishops.⁶⁶ Deterrence, however,

⁶¹ Aquinas, *ST* II-II q. 40 ad. 1; II-II q. 64; II-II q. 42.

⁶² Aquinas, *ST* II-II q. 32 ad. 6.

⁶³ Aquinas, *ST* II-II q. 94, ad. 5; q. 57, ad. 3.

⁶⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples), March 26, 1967, §24, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html; Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), December 7, 1965, §71, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁶⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (Of Human Life), July 25, 1968, §15, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html; Alan Holdren, "Analysis: What the Pope Really Said about Condoms," *Catholic News Agency*, November 22, 2010, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/21465/analysis-what-the-pope-really-said-about-condoms>.

⁶⁶ Pope John Paul II, "Message to the Second Special Session of the United Nations for Disarmament," June 7, 1982, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/pont_messages/1982/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19820607_disarmo-onu.html; National

cannot be an end in itself; although it can be just to retain nuclear weapons as part of a deterrence strategy, the church's position remains that the end game must be nuclear disarmament. Thus, nuclear weapons might be the closest thing the church envisions to a pernicious type of property that should never exist.⁶⁷

It might be tempting to think of whiteness as a property injustice analogous to *latifundia*: the problem is not that this property exists, but that some have too much of it while others do not have enough. The solution then would just be redistribution: ensuring that everyone in a population enjoys the level of safety, material comfort, legal credibility, or whatever other goods are envisioned as accompanying whiteness. Some might look at the historical context wherein groups once excluded from whiteness, such as Irish Americans and Italian Americans, have gained the privilege of whiteness and see this as a redistribution of property as envisioned by the social encyclicals. And certainly, unjust accumulations of property in the ordinary sense, such as money and land, do occur along racial lines and can be redistributed. As Daniels writes, "If you are passing down wealth from one white generation to another, you are actively contributing to the racial wealth gap ... put your money to work for racial justice."⁶⁸

Cheryl Harris's foundational work, however, makes clear that whiteness itself is a pernicious property, which cannot gain goodness by just distribution, but must be eradicated. Harris shows how US law treats whiteness as property with the typical rights the law envisions as pertaining to property, including, most importantly, "the unconditional right to exclude."⁶⁹ It seems obvious that a natural law tradition cannot envision a just distribution of the right to exclude others from enjoyment of society and participation in the common good. Harris therefore writes that "affirmative action is required

Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," <https://www.usccb.org/upload/challenge-peace-gods-promise-our-response-1983.pdf>.

⁶⁷ The existence of pernicious property reminds scholars to be careful about uncritically equating *property*, a term drawn from positive rather than natural law, with *goods*, the natural law term that views possessions in terms of their telos. For example, the Catholic principle of the universal destination of goods envisions a just distribution of the goods necessary to sustain life with dignity, but would not advocate redistribution of nuclear weapons or the power to exclude others from a flourishing life. Thanks to one of our anonymous reviewers for helpful clarity on this point.

⁶⁸ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 236.

⁶⁹ Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1707–91, esp. 1780.

on both moral and legal grounds to de-legitimate the property interest in whiteness.”⁷⁰

From a Catholic perspective, whiteness as property may prove a more generative way forward than the more common depiction of whiteness as identity.⁷¹ Whiteness as identity, a thing that goes deep to our core and that we cannot shake, tangles white people up in knots about whether they can ever be good and involves theologians in unproductive disputes about the goodness, or lack thereof, of our created selves. As Daniels notes, this keeps the focus on the white person and her feelings and does little to advance the pursuit of racial justice. But if whiteness is property, as a Catholic, I already know that I ought not be defined by my property. When I see someone overly invested in identifying their self-worth with their property, or the worth of others by their lack of the same property, I already know that something’s gone seriously wrong. The reasons I have more property than some other folks are historical, systemic, and not that difficult to identify and understand. Viewing whiteness as property undoes the canard that a white person who upholds racist exclusion is being challenged for her identity, something she has no control over. For Catholic theology, what makes me a good person, or at least recognizable to others as someone aspiring to be good, is not what property I have but what I do with it.

This returns us to the theme of expectations for women in the Catholic tradition and in the US context. Both the Catholic tradition and the dominant US understanding of the family reserve a leading role for women in making decisions about how and where to educate children, and these decisions, as Harris shows, have played a central role in the creation and maintenance of the pernicious property of whiteness.⁷² As Daniels writes, “White women are key to creating and maintaining white families and to hoarding wealth,

⁷⁰ Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1779.

⁷¹ I would argue that the consideration of whiteness as property, rather than identity, is distinctly applicable to white racial identity due to the unique historical and legal treatment of whiteness as property that Harris demonstrates. There is no legal precedent for regarding racial labels besides whiteness as property in and of themselves. Quite the contrary, under legalized slavery, Black racialization imposed “the potential threat of commodification” (1791), and Native racialization was used against the legal property rights of Native land inhabitants (1722). I will leave for others the question of whether other racial identities might fruitfully be understood as property today and what that might entail for Catholic thought.

⁷² Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1750–57. Because Harris’s diagnosis of the problem is focused on the law, which has created the legal fiction of whiteness as property, her solutions focus on legal remedies. Daniels, consistent with the aim of her book, discusses personal choices including divesting from majority-white institutions such as de facto segregated schools or school systems (236).

education, and other resources within” them.⁷³ White women have a particular responsibility to “de-legitimize the property interest in whiteness” due to our leading historical role in creating this pernicious property, and we have a unique opportunity to do so due to the cultural scripts that expect white women to be at the center of educational decisions and the maintenance of white families.

I have shown how reading the CST through a lens mindful of white womanhood challenges white US theologians. US theologians must remain alert to the dangers of reading whiteness into the depictions of women, families, and welfare in the encyclicals, especially since the “nice white ladies” trope and papal teaching do respond to some common cultural roots. Catholic social thought’s natural law tradition can envision a view of pernicious property informed by Cheryl Harris’s critical race theorizing, one that underlies the urgency of pursuing inclusive public policies and personal choices to dismantle the pernicious property that is whiteness.

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III. Rethinking Feminist Theologies of Sin in Light of White Women’s Racist Violence

In 1960, Valerie Saiving published a groundbreaking essay, “The Human Situation: a Feminine View,” in which she pointed to the failures of classical sin-talk to account for the ways that women sin. As an early work of feminist theology, the article pointed to the androcentrism of theology: classical notions of sin were rooted in the failures and temptations of men. It also set the stage for feminist treatment of sin going forward. For Saiving, it was theologically inaccurate to identify women’s experience of sinfulness with pride and will-to-power. Instead, she argues, the “feminine forms of sin ... are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness ... in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.”⁷⁴

Saiving’s perspective on sin shaped white feminist theologies that followed. Many follow her lead in a rejection of the tradition’s identification of

⁷³ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 169.

⁷⁴ Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in *Womanspirit Rising* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1979), 37.