

Direct Action on Ourselves: Anti-Racism Work in the Midwest Catholic Worker
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This essay was written in collaboration with CWs Frank Bergh, Maria Bergh, Joe Kruse, Laura Lasuertmer, Lincoln Rice, Chrissy Stonebraker-Martinez, and Jenny Truax.

“Personalism, hospitality, nonviolence, manual labor, voluntary poverty, the Gospels...” These were some of the words used by a hundred Catholic Workers at an anti-racism training in St. Louis to define the “roots, trunk, and branches” of our movement. Divided up into small groups for this exercise, we proudly hung the drawings of our “trees” for all to see. I had that gratified feeling I always have when describing the CW to somebody who has little experience with it. It seemed as though we were all trying to communicate to our trainers, “See how beautiful this movement is? Now do you get us? We can’t be racist... we’re too radical!” Then somebody pointed out that, out of fifteen small groups of mostly white CWs, only one had written down “racial justice” as a core value of our movement. It was then that I began to see how much work we had to do.

I was at the first of three **Midwest CW Resistance Retreats** in a row that have focused on confronting racism within both our own movement and wider society. The original purpose of the gathering, begun fourteen years ago by Chrissy Kirchoeffer and Carolyn Griffeth, was to bring together a large group of CWs experienced in civil disobedience to support the ongoing nonviolent campaign of a local community.

For the first eleven years, the retreat confronted issues such as drone warfare, mercenary soldiers, environmental destruction, nuclear weapons, and unjust immigration policies. For some time, the St. Louis CW had been encouraging the group to go through an anti-racism training together; after the 2014 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, we agreed it was time. While St. Louis CWs – mostly white at the time – had been supporting the subsequent uprising on their streets, they were confronted with the large gap between their own experience of activism and that of the leaders of the movement in Ferguson. Wanting to bridge that divide, but recognizing that their whiteness might blind them to seeing the ways that racism was playing out in their communities, they requested outside help. In March 2015, CWs from about twenty different communities underwent a two-day training led by [Crossroads AntiRacism Organizing and Training](#) to essentially begin a direct action *on ourselves*.

The conversations in St. Louis were messy, confusing, and at times quite tense. For many of us, this was the first time we had ever taken a serious look at why the CW was a movement made up of mostly white people; feelings of defensiveness, anger, shame, and grief arose.

It took a lot of humility and listening to even *begin* to admit that, while our communities had bravely and selflessly confronted militarism and capitalism, we were still deeply infected by the insidious disease of white supremacy.

Conversations within and between communities have continued in the almost three years since that training. With the generous assistance of [#BlackLivesMatter Minneapolis](#) and the [#LetUsBreathe Collective](#) in Chicago – a grassroots alliance of artists, journalists, and activists of Color that aims to “deconstruct systemic injustice,

amplify marginalized voices...and offer opportunities for healing and education” – we have begun to explore more deeply how the white supremacy inherent in the existence of this nation has affected our own movement. The better we understand white supremacy, the better we can recognize it, more accurately address it at home, and be better equipped to confront it in our society.

At the May 2017 retreat in Chicago, #LetUsBreathe helped our group understand that white supremacy, rather than an explicit ideology of intentional racism, is an entire institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of people of color for the purpose of maintaining a system of wealth, power, and privilege for white people. From the moment Columbus landed in 1492 – killing and enslaving the Arawak people – to the present day mass incarceration and police targeting of black men and children, this system has been in place.

By categorizing people into socially-constructed race identities, white supremacy has damaged every single one of us. Those who have been categorized as white have given up ancestral heritage, traditions, languages, familial bonds, and, some would say, humanity (for how else would genocide, slavery, or incessant war be possible?) in order to maintain this advantage. Needless to say, those who have been categorized as “non-white” have suffered astronomically more vicious effects.

Within our own communities, the CW has largely replicated this system that maintains white dominance. Almost all of the power to make decisions – about finances, about the lives of our guests, about which injustice we will write about and/or protest, and about how we run our meetings – lies in the hands of white people, and very few of us are thinking about how to become accountable to people of color. In a land where whites came to power because of the intentional genocide of American Indians and the enslavement of African-Americans, white people usually define the “norm” in our houses. As a majority-white movement, we continue to have relatively easy access to property, while our black and Native sisters and brothers continue to be institutionally stripped of theirs. And though our analysis of the violence, injustice, and even racism behind international issues like war, sanctions, and torture is razor-sharp, our critique of these issues at home (in which we are more deeply implicated) has not been as vigorous or as vehement.

Our black trainers at the last two resistance retreats detailed some of the horrific oppression from which they and their communities continue to regularly suffer, an oppression the specifics of which our white members were largely ignorant. This is not surprising, as whiteness usually functions to protect and prevent white people from knowing the harsh realities of racism. **The result, however, has been that our majority-white movement – most often through lack of attention, but at times through direct opposition – has overall dismissed the liberation struggles of black people as peripheral to the “real work” of hospitality to the homeless, anti-war activities, and farming.** From Dorothy Day’s undermining of Dr. Arthur Falls’ racial justice work in Chicago in the 1930s to several CWs publicly refusing to support the Ferguson movement, the CW, with few exceptions, has failed to show up for our black sisters and brothers.

The work to dismantle white supremacy is twofold: first, **to do an ongoing inventory of our own communities**, honestly looking at the ways we perpetuate white supremacy, and to begin to dismantle it. This work is necessary, though it will likely be slow, difficult, and painful. Second, **we can challenge white supremacy in the broader community** by following and partnering with organizations led by people of color, and use the abundant resources at our disposal – property, finances, a broad network of support, newsletters, and other means of communication – to uplift the work they are doing.

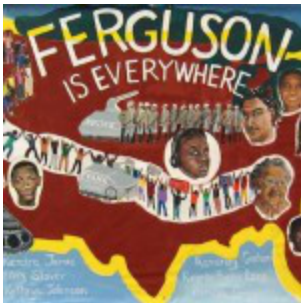


These methods go hand in hand; we cannot do one well without doing the other. If we try to engage in solidarity work without first examining the damage our own whiteness has done to us as individuals and to our communities, these efforts can be surface-level at best, and can backfire at worst. Alternately, if we continue to only “naval-gaze” (as the first method has been accused of doing), without seeking critical and authentic feedback from leaders of color in organizations we respect, we can end up becoming paralyzed in our own self-righteous anxiety.

Communities in the Midwest CW – through internal dialogue as well as through seeking outside support – have been challenging one another to do both. Below are a few examples of how some of have tried to get started.

St. Louis

Over the past several years, [Karen House Catholic Worker](#) has devoted a lot of energy to examining their whiteness and changing their structures to become a more anti-racist community. After the murder of Mike Brown, Karen House’s communal energy expanded to support the subsequent uprising while continuing to do hospitality. Based on feedback received from several leaders of color, Karen House members began to devote a lot of time to working within the white community – organizations, churches, activist groups – to combat racism.



They also attempted to confront the racism present in their own community by changing some specifics about how they run their house. As one example, recognizing that one way that racism shows up in CW communities is by basing membership on “who you know” or who would be a “good fit” (almost always white), Karen House tried to make the process of joining their core community more transparent by writing down the [specific responsibilities of participation](#).

As part of their transition, Karen House members reviewed the [CW Aims and Means](#), on which their founding principles are based, through a specifically anti-racist lens. The group began to notice that, as beautiful as the document is, it assumes certain things about who counts as a real CW. For example, the **Green Revolution** tenet promotes rediscovering “the proper meaning of our labor and our true bonds with the land.” Only a certain point of view, and only a certain history, is being represented here – for who else but white people need to “rediscover” their connection with the land? There is no recognition of the consistent 500-year struggle of the indigenous people of this continent to maintain such a connection, nor is there a mention of those whose ancestors were first forced into labor on the land, and then later prevented from having access to that land. Language like this conveys that the Aims and Means were written *by* white people, and – though not intentionally – only *for* white people.

And so Karen House wrote a [new statement of principles](#) attempting to reflect the original intent of the Aims and Means without presuming a white point of view. As one example, in writing about nonviolence, Karen House took seriously the feedback they had gotten from black-led organizations: that the term “**nonviolence**” is often used to silence the voices of people of color and promote the status quo and that what white people often categorize as “violent” (particularly yelling and swearing) can be a reflection of the culturally-white practice of politeness and compliance with state power. Karen House also wished to acknowledge the infinitely greater risk that people of color take than white people when they perform acts of civil disobedience.

With this in mind they wrote, “We promote bold acts of nonviolence that promote love, connection and justice. We believe that active nonviolence as a tool for revolution helps us to avoid replacing one violence with another. We do not promote nonviolence to maintain the status quo, to silence angry or outraged voices, or to dictate to oppressed groups how they should respond to state oppression. Our interpretation of nonviolence includes courageous, risk taking acts – both large and small – that challenge oppression and injustice.”

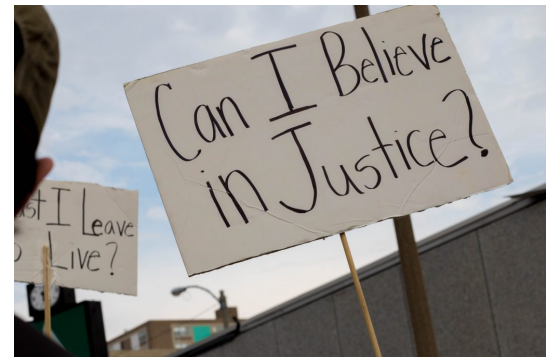
Minneapolis

The [Minneapolis CW](#) (MCW), too, has spent several years evaluating its own whiteness, recognizing the lack of racial diversity in the movement as a sign that people of color haven't felt particularly safe or welcome in it. The all-white group asked themselves how they could make their community more appealing to people of color, and for a while worked to restructure their community based on anti-racism principals. However, while this continues to be good work, CW Joe Kruse notes that the discussions had become very heavy and inward-focused, and that they didn't seem to be making much progress.

Inspired in part by a talk given by preacher and anti-racism activist [Rev. Osagyefo Sekou](#), the group decided to reorient their primary focus to combating white supremacy in their city and in wider society, remaining grateful for their CW community as a place to ground themselves. Appreciating that dismantling white supremacy could not be done within a white bubble, **they began to seek leadership from, and deliberately partner with, organizers of color, instead of trying to get people of color to join them.**

Understanding that it is much easier for their white community to raise money than a black-led group, the MCW as one concrete action has committed to tithing a portion of its **fundraising efforts** to organizations led by people of color. Noticing too that it is particularly difficult for grassroots organizations of color to find physical space in which to do their work, the MCW has offered their own house as a space for organizing, and has cooked food for events that they themselves were not leading. While continuing to provide hospitality to those in need, many MCW community members either have outside employment from, or volunteer their time with, organizations led by people of color. This has been both a way to develop authentic relationships with people of color as well as to work under their leadership for change.

Kruse, one of the facilitators of the 2016 CW retreat led by #BlackLivesMatter, believes that one of the biggest assets the CW has to offer a radical group led by people of color is the **sheer number of CWs who are steeped in the tradition of nonviolence and civil disobedience**, and who are knowledgeable about and willing to go through the legal system. Historically, CW actions have been conceived of, led, and executed by white CWs, and often by those who are not directly affected by the injustice they protest. (Needing to lead actions or approve of them in advance, rather than trusting in the leadership of people of color, is a symptom of white supremacy.)



When a hundred CWs from around the Midwest came together to take direction from BLM Minneapolis – a community disproportionately impacted by state violence – the MCW was better able to build strong and ongoing relationships with these organizers. **Supporting leadership of color around resistance to injustice** is one practical way the CW can remain accountable to communities of color and combat our own racist tendencies to run the show. (For our upcoming 2018 resistance retreat, the Duluth CW has approached the [Makwa Camp – an Ojibwe-led initiative to block Enbridge Pipeline 3](#) in Northern Minnesota – to ask if we could be of assistance to them. They have invited us to participate in a large direct action against the pipeline next April.)

Witness Against Torture

[Witness Against Torture](#) (WAT) is a coalition of interfaith and human rights activists – many of whom are Catholic Workers – working to shut down Guantánamo, build awareness in the U.S. about torture and indefinite detention, and forge human ties with the prisoners at Guantánamo and their families. Although WAT is not a CW community, many Midwest CWs have been a part of the movement since its early days. WAT serves

as a good model for how CWs might think about remaining deeply rooted in our core values while attempting to become accountable to communities of color.

WAT may be best known for its civil resistance in Washington, DC each January 11th, the date the first “war on terror” prisoners arrived at Guantánamo in 2002. However, WAT leadership – which includes people of various racial backgrounds – also works to **highlight the connections** between the Islamophobia fueling the injustice of Guantánamo, the anti-brown racism directed at Central American and Middle Eastern migrants and refugees, and the anti-black racism that is behind so many police killings of unarmed civilians.



For example, WAT has been partnering with the [Coalition of Concerned Mothers](#), an organization of women of color whose children have been killed by police. Also, the day after the 2016 public action in DC against indefinite detention and torture in Guantánamo, WAT honored a request from the family of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice to [bring a message to the Department of Justice](#) demanding an investigation of Tamir’s fatal shooting and the non-indictment of his killers.

Chicago

In May 2017, the annual Midwest Resistance Retreat was co-led by Chicago CWs ([Emmaus House](#) and [Su Casa](#)) and the [#LetUsBreathe Collective](#). The Chicago CWs deepened their already working relationship with #LetUsBreathe almost two years ago, when Su Casa agreed to rent the Collective a large section of its building at a very low rate. (Also, as the building needed major repairs, the **Milwaukee CW redirected a large bequest** that they had received to the Collective in order to help cover some of those costs.) #LetUsBreathe, in turn, has opened its space to several other groups of color, including [#BlackLivesMatter Chicago](#), the [Brave Space Alliance](#), and the [Black Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Collective](#). These groups plan to convert even more of their space into a community conference room for organizations typically excluded from access to affordable and private meeting space in Chicago.

At the retreat, **#LetUsBreathe suggested two guiding principles** as the Midwest CW continues to dive more deeply into anti-racism work: to open space to, and to seek the robust participation of, people of color. They invited us to make room in our communities to directly face the overt and covert damage that systemic white supremacy and anti-black racism has done in our movement. (They also suggested that one concrete way to support and partner with the struggle would be to work for police abolition.)

As part of our response to this request, [several of us collectively composed a letter](#) to our fellow CWs in the US, admitting the painful truth that the CW *is* an institution shaped by white supremacy, and it is far past time to lament, repent, and repair the damage we have caused through our inability and/or unwillingness to face this reality. In December, this letter was mailed out to every CW community in the country, with a cover letter stating our hope that **“this letter inspires thoughtful examination of our own communities, creative changes, and action and collaboration on anti-racism work.”**

We have invited communities to print the letter, as well as their response to it, in their newsletters. A follow-up discussion, led by members of Midwest CW communities, is scheduled at the New York CW for the weekend of February 2nd. [Video from the discussion [can be found here](#)] At this discussion, we hope to dig deeply within our tradition, open ourselves to critiques of our tradition, and highlight the perspectives and voices of people of color both within and outside of our tradition in order to flesh out a CW response to white supremacy going

forward. May it soon be so that the CW is known not only for its hospitality, personalism, and nonviolence – but also for its commitment to, and work for, radical racial justice.