

## **White Evangelical Christian Ideology and the Construction of Whiteness: Lessons for Educators**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this manuscript, we revisit data from a 9-month ethnographic study that examined whiteness in early childhood. Specifically, the study explored the epistemological and ontological reality of three young white children and how they learned to conflate ethnocentric love with whitewashed justice through the lens of their religious upbringing. We theorize how such epistemological and ontological realities of religious ideologies potentially shape the pedagogies of educators who identify themselves as white Evangelical Christians (a demographic that represents over one-third of the total teaching force in the United States). Finally, we suggest how learning from black theologies could offer a way to expand notions of biblical love and justice to encompass those that are rooted in agency, social justice, and explicit attention to systematic oppression.*

**Keywords:** antiracist pedagogy, Black liberation theology, Christianity, education, teacher education

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## INTRODUCTION

My<sup>1</sup> earliest memory of my white Evangelical church is singing *Jesus Loves the Little Children* at Vacation Bible School. I vividly remember sitting in a large open foyer with other white children and singing the following words:

*Jesus loves the little children. All the children of the world.*

*Red, brown, yellow. Black and white.*

*They are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children.*

*All the children of the world.*

My friend Cynthia, another white child, sat next to me. We belted these lines together, fundamentally convinced of the love Jesus has for all people.

Years later, my mother told me something that Cynthia's father said during an adult Sunday school class at the same church.

"Do you know what would be the worst thing that could ever happen to me as a father?" he asked the group of white adults, including my mother: "That Cynthia would be raped by a Black man."

In the very same church where Cynthia and I were learning about Jesus' color-blind love, Cynthia's father expressed the inherently white supremacist fear that Black men (Kendi, 2016; Wells-Barnett, 1892) violently lusted after and attacked white women. For me, this story illustrates how white Evangelical churches can operate as sites of entangled contradictions—both places to learn about Jesus' love and places to construct and perpetuate violent racism.

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Erin learned much about what she came to name love<sup>2</sup> through her Christian upbringing in the very same space that perpetuated racist stereotypes, such as the one Sterling Brown (1933) named the "Brute Negro" stereotype, in which "black and beastly [are] exact synonyms" (p. 191). The story shared at the outset haunted her years later when she became a second-grade teacher working with predominantly Black children. Erin, like so many other white teachers, tried to love her students in the ways she had been taught passionately and color-blindly. However, she never addressed the societal racism that situated and mediated their relationships.

Erin has spent years working to better understand her whiteness. Nevertheless, this story continues to haunt her as a teacher educator in a

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<sup>1</sup> This opening story is told from Erin's perspective. The remainder of this manuscript will be written from the point-of-view of all four authors.

<sup>2</sup> When we write about love learned in white churches in this manuscript, we are not referring to the kind of revolutionary love Johnson, Bryan and Boutte (2018) describe that is a "deep-seated love that is cloaked in pain and that is bounded in action" (p.48). The kind of love we describe here learned in white religious spaces is what Johnson, Bryan, and Boutte would deem "simple" and/or "superficial" (p.48).

Predominantly White Institution (PWI), where many white Evangelical Christian preservice teachers struggle with the disequilibrium that antiracist curricula can cause when it conflicts with their white Evangelical Christian understandings of love. It is important to clarify from the outset that despite popular assumptions that America is a religiously diverse country, a 2014 Pew Research Center study demonstrated that America is only moderate in its religious diversity. Ninety-five percent of the American population identifies as Christian or nonaffiliated. Furthermore, a recently conducted Pi Delta Kappan poll (2019) revealed that over one-third (37%) of the teaching force in America identifies themselves as Evangelical Christian. Since 79% of US teachers identify as white, non-Hispanic (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2020), we have reason to believe white Evangelical Christian ideology is a mostly unacknowledged dynamic shaping the ways teachers and preservice teachers interpret and respond—or fail to respond—to racial injustice in classrooms and schools.

In this manuscript, the role of a white Evangelical church in the making of whiteness is considered through a reexamination of data collected from a nine-month ethnographic study that examined how three young white children became white (Miller, 2015). We explore the intimate connection between whiteness and white Evangelical Christian ideology. We suggest acknowledging and attending to the contradictions of love and justice in some white, Evangelical churches means reckoning with ideologies that run counter to racial justice agendas. After revisiting this study, we use its findings to theorize about how educators who were socialized to believe similar ideologies might enact—or fail to enact—antiracist pedagogies. In conclusion, we provide a series of recommendations for teacher educators who want to take seriously the connection between religious ideologies and racial justice pedagogies.

Ultimately, we ask the following questions:

- How do three young white children explore and construct racial identities in a white Evangelical Christian church?
- What are the intersections of white Evangelical Christian ideology and racial identity development in the lives of three young white children?

## **Evangelical Christianity**

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that white Evangelical Christianity has contested meanings. It is at times used synonymously with white, Republican right-winged conservatives. It is at times used as a cultural distinguishing marker from Catholic or Orthodox Christians. It is at times used broadly to refer to Christians whose will is to share the news of Christ. Many borrow David Bebbington's (1989) four-pronged theological characterization of Evangelicals as Christians who a) focus on the importance

of conversion; b) spread the word of Christ through missionary work; c) have a high regard for Biblical authority; and d) emphasize Jesus' atonement. Anthea Bulter (2021) traces how the meaning of white Evangelical Christianity has changed over time from Christians who primarily focused on missionary work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the more contemporary understandings of born-again Christians or Christians who make a personal and public commitment to follow Christ. It is also important to acknowledge that there are many white Evangelical churches who denounce white supremacy just as there are examples of white Evangelical Christian leaders<sup>3</sup> who have publicly denounced racism and supported antiracist movements such as Black Lives Matter. However, it is difficult to ignore the long and tangled history that white Evangelical Christianity in the US has with racism.

In a comprehensive history about the relationship between American racism, antiracism, and American churches, Tisby (2019) illuminates how many white Evangelical churches were *the* dominant social platform influencing ideological support for slavery, racial apartheid, and silence in the face of ongoing racial violence against People of Color. Traced through Evangelical movements such as the Great Awakening and Second Great Awakening, Tisby documents how white Evangelicalism's "fixation on individual conversion without a corresponding force on transforming the racist policies and practices of institutions has remained a constant feature of American evangelicalism and has furthered the American church's easy compromise with slavery and racism" (p. 69). Influential white Evangelical religious leaders such as the Reverend Billy Graham valued personal conversations over understanding social dynamics such as structural racism and advocated for an Evangelical Christianity that emphasized "one conversion and one friendship at a time" (p. 135). Such a focus ignored systemic racial violence. This emphasis on interpersonal relationships in white Evangelical Christianity can serve to disguise the importance of communities and institutions in shaping the ways people think, behave, and come into relationships. This dynamic, in concert with the ways that institutional structures reduce individual accountability, is among the characterizing ideologies of white Evangelical Christianity today (Tisby, 2019).

Extending Tisby's (2019) work, Bulter (2021) traces how the ideologies of white Evangelical Christianity are rooted in a false naivete about its relationship to US racism. Butler, however, posits that this unwillingness among white Evangelical Christians to reckon honestly with racism is not only because of a religious ideology but rather a nationalistic political movement. According to Butler, Evangelicals, in their support for the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the 2020 Southern Baptist Convention president, JD Greear and a Texas Evangelical megachurch pastor, Joel Olsten claimed to support the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020

Republican Party and its conservative quest to retain America's "status quo of patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and nationalism," (p. 4), turn moral issues into political ones to gain power and influence on the broader American public.

### **Black Resistance to White Evangelical Christianity**

It is important to note that Black people long resisted a white Evangelical Christianity that was used to justify slavery and oppression. In rejecting the ideological claims that to be Black meant one was legitimately destined for servitude, people of African descent reinterpreted Christian scriptures to reflect the rituals and cultural practices of a myriad of African cultures. Centuries after the abolishment of slavery, Black theologians of the Black Power Movement, such as Albert Cleage, interpreted Jesus "as an armed Zealot" (as cited in Ruether, 2012, p. 106) working against the rule of a white nation in Rome. Cleage suggested that Jesus is embodied in Black people today who are engaged "in a struggle to liberate themselves from a white imperial domination" (Ruether, 2012, p. 106).

Theologian James Cone (1986/2019), the father of Black Liberation Theology, ascribes to the notion of Jesus as Black "in the sense of being historically on the side of the oppressed" (p. 106). The central concern of Black Liberation Theology is about the poor and the weak, who are disproportionately Black. It is about the liberation of Black people from the bondage of white supremacy. Cone explains, quite frankly, "Either God is for blacks in their fight for liberation from white oppressors, or God is not. God cannot be both for us and for white oppressors at the same time" (p. 7). Black Liberation Theology has as much to do with religion as resistance to white supremacy—it disavows itself of any notion of religious color blindness. Black Liberation Theology suggests that God cannot be colorless in a society where human beings suffer *precisely* because of their blackness. Not only does Black Liberation Theology insist on God's blackness, it is also driven by a sense of urgency for justice, "demanding that justice become a reality now, not tomorrow" (Cone, 1986/2019, p. 128).

Black women theologians, too, have addressed both the racism and sexism of Black and white American Christianity. Inspired by Alice Walker's (1983) collection of womanist writings, theologians Katie Geneva Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Delores S. Williams dislodged the wisdom of Black women from the "masculinist erections of black liberation theology" (Turman, 2019, para 11) and promoted a womanist theology that accounts for a structural analysis of the intersection of race, class, and gender. Womanist theology is concerned about the ways in which Blackness and womanhood are experienced as part of a community of acceptance. In a comprehensive review of black womanist theology, Emilie Townes (2006b) suggests that

womanist theology should engage in global dialog while maintaining conversation with Black Christian churches to include the following:

advocacy for full parenthood between men and women, the care and nurture of children, respect for the dignity and wisdom for elderly individuals, a prophetic witness within Christianity, and a relentless instance that the church universal and its theological principles reflect a spirit of justice and love for all humanity and the rest of creation” (p. 1173.)

In these ways, Black Americans and other racially oppressed peoples in America have a long-standing history of challenging the whiteness inherent in white Evangelical Christianity, even as white Evangelical Christianity was at times constructed to support and enforce white supremacy. Ultimately, it is clear that there is an ongoing entanglement between racism/antiracism and white Evangelical Christianity in America. A better understanding of this relationship is an important way to illuminate how young white children can be socialized into whiteness through their religious upbringing.

### **Critical Whiteness Studies**

This writing runs the risk of recentering the experiences of white people, and this is important to acknowledge. However, Black intellectual thought has repeatedly and earnestly implored that for too long, scholars focused on the wrong subject in our quest to answer our country’s most enduring questions about racism. White people, these scholars assert, are psychically and spiritually damaged by white supremacy (Baldwin, 1984; Dubois, 1920/2017; Ellison, 1970; hooks, 1990; Morrison, 1994; Thandeka, 1999; Townes, 2006a; Yancey, 2012; Wright, 1945/1988). They argue that to better understand and redress American racism, it is important to understand why perpetrators of racism behave in the ways that they do. That is why, in this manuscript, specific sites of white socialization are analyzed. Because the identities of the research team certainly shape the ways this work is interpreted, it is important to state that Erin and Sam are white scholars who study critical whiteness and antiracism. They are also both teacher educators. They have also spent time in white Christian churches as children and adults. Evan is a Black, Seventh-day Adventist Pastor and critical race scholar whose work explores the experiences of Black students in religious schools. Stephen is a Black critical whiteness scholar who studies, specifically, white women teacher identities.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### The Larger Study

What follows is a reexamination of data collected by Erin from a nine-month ethnography<sup>4</sup> in 2013 that documented how her three young white children came to understand themselves as white. The overarching study paid attention to how Ella (9 years old), Oliva (6 and 7 years old) and Max (5 years old) developed understandings about whiteness in home and community settings. Erin chose to study her own children because (a) they self-identified as being white, (b) they were growing up in a mostly white community, and (c) in the spirit of rigorous and well-known parent-child studies (Haddix, 2014; Long 2004; Martens, 1996). Erin had daily and intimate access and investments in their worlds, utterances, and activities. The study originated from a desire to better understand how white supremacy is learned in small, usually unnoticed, and mundane ways during early childhood; therefore, data collection took place in the home and community environments of the children, including the white Evangelical church the children attended during the time of the study.

More detailed discussions of the comprehensive study can be found in other work (Miller, 2015a; 2015b), but briefly, findings from the study demonstrated that messages that normalized whiteness came through in a range of dominant discourses through church and Sunday school, dance classes, magazines, catalogs dropped through the mail slot, worksheets, texts from school, images on packages of food on shelves, the toys with which the children played, and the very neighborhood in which the family lived. Over and over, the children received messages about the supremacy of whiteness through an overrepresentation of white people, characters, and the exaltation of white people. Blackness was often portrayed in ways that conjured feelings of superiority, fear, pity, or hatred. For example, pictures of brown-skinned and helpless looking orphans on toy drive fliers that were routinely stuck in the mail helped the children construct notions of blackness with pity. Concurrently, there were also discourses of omission wherein the perspectives of People of Color were literally void. These discourses of whiteness and blackness were the backdrop that led to Erin's children's constructions of race. They were also recycled among those in her family and the wider world in which they lived. That is, as the world passed messages to the children about hegemonic whiteness, the children used those messages to construct their own microcosm of larger society and thus reflected whiteness back as

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<sup>4</sup> This study received IRB approval from Erin's university. Erin was the only person who collected data. Other participants in the larger study included family members and friends of the children. All participants signed consent forms. Participants were not compensated for their participation in the study. For more details about the larger study, please see Miller (2015a).

the norm. The white Evangelical Christian church Erin's family attended played an important role in ushering the children into whiteness.

It is important to note that this is not the same church Erin attended when she was a child. It was only through this ethnography that she realized the insidious nature of whiteness, especially as it intersects with Christianity. It is also important to point out that Erin's goal in this study was to study her children's socialization into whiteness as a participant observer rather than correct the racism she at times witnessed being constructed. As Erin has written about this tension in other work (2019), this is not to say she never taught antiracist lessons or intervened in the blatant examples of racism she witnessed but that she "danced this dance during the entire 9 months... when should I jump in and intervene? When should I simply collect data no matter how raw and racist it was?" (p. 6). As she explained, these decisions were usually made moment to moment rather than adhering to a predetermined template.

## **Methods**

For this project, data collected in religious spaces were reexamined. These data came in the form of field notes during 9 months of Erin's observation in Max's Sunday School class, hundreds of pages of collected artwork, Sunday School worksheets and Sunday School curricula that Erin collected on a weekly basis. Data also included audio and video recorded conversations about the children's religious understandings collected during informal play and during car rides. The church where data were primarily collected was a mid-sized, majority-white Evangelical Christian church.

Using a constant comparative approach (Fram, 2013), these data were reanalyzed with an explicit focus on what the children learned about love and racial justice through religious lessons. Erin shared data from her project with Sam and Evan. To reduce bias or influence from Erin's familiarity with the study, Sam and Evan independently analyzed Erin's data using a constant comparative approach. In their analysis, they tested and confirmed assertions against the enormous data corpus. Fram (2013) described this open coding method of analysis as an "iterative and inductive process of reducing the data" that compares incidents or data to "other incidents or data" (p. 3). Following these independent analytic sessions, Erin, Sam, and Evan met via Zoom during the Spring and Summer of 2020 to clarify and consolidate codes. For an added element to ensure trustworthiness, Stephen joined the study after the initial coding was complete. Given his relative distance to the data compared to Erin, Sam, and Evan, he played a crucial role in confirming earlier analysis of the data.



## Findings

In what follows, we share three overarching themes that were constructed from the data related to what Ella, Max and Olivia were taught or not taught about love and justice through their experiences with white Evangelical Christianity. These findings have much to do with how white children might also make sense of race and racism in the broader landscape of the United States, especially as they continue to be socialized as white in a white supremacist society.

In the data we examine below, the children were lavished with messages concerning race in church. Whiteness, more often than not, is associated with superiority, goodness, virtue, safety, and talent. This is in stark contrast with messages of blackness as bad, scary, different, and worthy of pity. These lessons learned at church solidify the social reality of race by crediting God with its construction—God made all of us, even if he made us different. Furthermore, the messages the children received during church often equated God and Jesus to whiteness and reinforced the idea that a patronizing love of blackness is virtuous. Noticeably absent are lessons about justice or about Jesus challenging notions of racial superiority or cultural hegemony throughout the Gospel.

### God made us: Ontological Ideologies

One of the most powerful messages that Erin’s children learned at church was that all people are created by God. The idea that God created the universe as well as the social order and that things functioned exactly as he intended was pervasive and insistent. The creation story was a popular one that the children heard in Sunday School, Children’s Church, and through stories at home. For example, Olivia repeatedly asked for bedtime stories to come from a collection of Biblical stories with the very first story explaining,

“Then, God made Adam, the very first man. In addition, God made Eve, the very first woman” (Devries & Madsen, 2009). As with many other messages in their lives, the children took these messages and used them to make sense of themselves and their own self-worth. For example, Olivia’s picture in Figure 1 demonstrates how she used the message of divine creation to make sense of her place in the world.



**Figure 1** *God Made Olivia*

Part and parcel of the message of divine creation was the idea that God made human beings racially different. For example, one night, Max confidently asserted, “God made you [Erin] white. God made me white. In addition, God made Ella white and Livie [Olivia] white because we are a white family.” Max rationalized that his friend Miles was not white because God made him that way: “And God made Miles Black because he is in a Black family.” On another occasion, the children spontaneously began a game at the dinner table in which Olivia and Max listed things that God may have made and things that people were responsible for making. Ella was positioned as the teacher during this exchange, and she either affirmed or disaffirmed God’s role in the creation of the suggested items:

Max: God made our skin. God made our skin.

Ella: I know. God made everything.

Olivia: Except the laundry.

Olivia: He made our cats.

Ella Uh-huh.

Olivia: He made the grass.

Ella: No, someone invented the grass.

As the game continued, Ella confirmed for Olivia and Max that all of our physical characteristics (hair and eye color) were made by God. Other things (food, furniture, etc.) were invented by humans. Likewise, one day in the car on the way to a dance lesson, Erin told Max and Olivia about laws that discriminated against Latinx people. While asserting these laws “were not fair,” Olivia maintained her religious lessons to rationalize that “they were just made like that”, meaning persons could not help their race and ethnicity because it was a God-given characteristic.

It is important to note that there are problems with this divine account for race, particularly because, according to the messages from our church and our family, biological and genetic characteristics are intended by God. Thandeka (1999) claims that whites cling to genetic definitions of race because it relieves them of thinking of race as socially constructed in ways that enable their hold on power. If race is a social construction, so are the positive and negative repercussions that come as a result of one’s race. However, if race is genetically—or in this case divinely—determined, whites are absolved from playing a role in creating and perpetuating oppressive structures. There’s little room for free will in the pervasive doctrine the children were exposed to in church.

### **Loving Difference in Patronizing Ways: Ideologies about Humanity**

Lessons in the children’s Sunday School communicated that human beings should appreciate difference, but difference was almost always positioned in relation to an unspoken and normalized whiteness. One way the children were invited to explore this idea that Christians should value others

was in a Sunday School lesson about Peter and Cornelius, a Jewish man, and a Gentile. The teacher's guide included the following written script to accompany the lesson:

However, God made everybody—and God loves the whole world! Ask Peter and Cornelius became friends because they realized God loved both of them. Who can you become better friends with even though that person is different from you? No matter how different we are from other people, we can still be loving and friendly. We have to remember God loves the whole world, and we should too.

The word “still” in this excerpt sends a clear and confounding message about superiority and patronization. All depictions of Jesus in Erin's church represented a white man. The pastor was white. The people in the stained-glass windows were white. Most of the congregations were white. The pictures in the curricula were of white people. The lesson was clear and patronizing: *white people* are the chosen ones, and no matter how different white people are from other people, white people can *still* be loving and friendly.

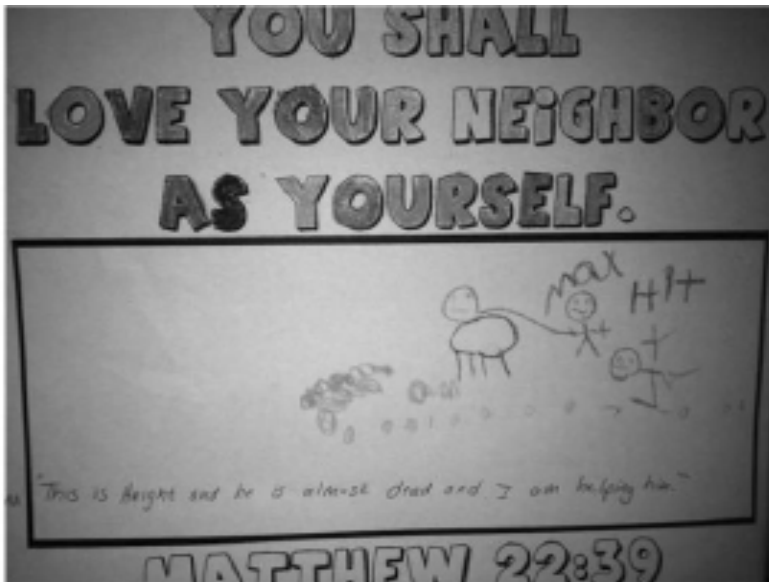
This lesson of superiority and patronization continued when children learned the parable of the Good Samaritan during Sunday School. Their teacher pointed out that Samaritans, according to the Bible, were despised by the Israelites and were treated unfairly. The teacher explained that the Israelites believed, “The Samaritans don't talk the same [as us], they don't look the same [as us]. We don't want to be nice to them.” The story then describes how—despite the animosity between the Israelites and Samaritans—a particular Samaritan cared for a badly beaten Israelite left on the side of the road. The teacher did not situate the context of this racial relationship, nor did she speak into how obscene it would have been during that time for Israelites and Samaritans to come into relation with each other, thereby illustrating the antiracist nature of the story. Instead of focusing on the political and institutional norms that demarked racially diverse people—and that Jesus repeatedly spoke out against—the simplified message shared with children was that it was virtuous to be kind and charitable to the victims of racial violence. Last, the teacher did not communicate that Jesus' final instruction was to go and do like the Samaritan, rebuking the Israelites inferred superiority and serving as a disruption to the social hierarchy.

The message of patronization the teacher offered was not lost on Max. After Sunday School that day, Erin asked Max what he remembered about being a good Samaritan. He explained, “you're supposed to treat people good, you're supposed to treat them nice, you're supposed to treat 'em like family.” His coloring sheet from that Sunday (see Figure 2) contained a space for the children to draw their own interpretations of the Scripture lesson that day and included a citation from the Bible verse, Matthew 22:39: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Demonstrating his understanding of this concept, Max

drew a picture of himself and his white friend, Heidt, and explained, “this is Heidt and he is almost dead and I am helping him.” The affirmation of Max’s whiteness was clear—it was for him to offer help for others who were not as fortunate or normal as him without ever questioning the inequities that caused “misfortune.”

**Figure 2**

*“This is Heidt and he is almost dead and I am helping him”.*

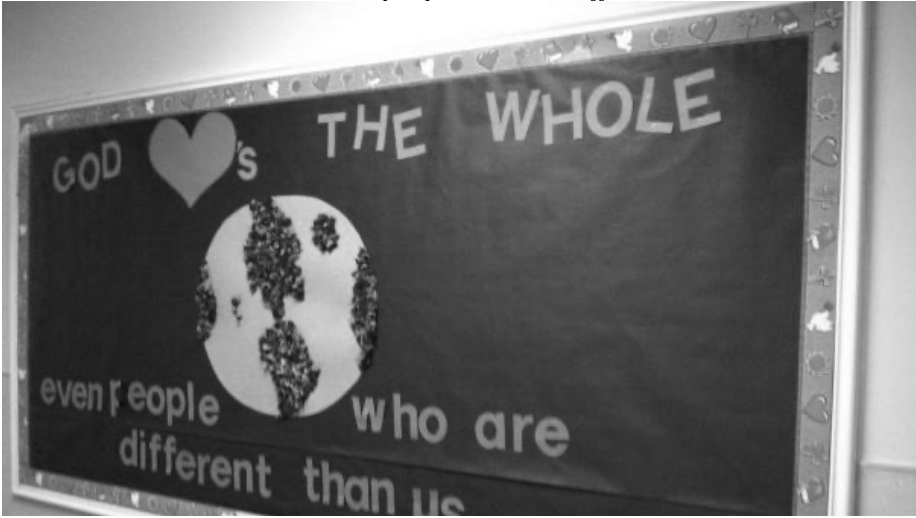


Patronizing difference was a message that was not contained in lessons alone but also in texts that filled the church buildings. Bulletin boards such as the one in Figure 3, which states, “God loves the whole world even people who are different from us”, adorned the children’s ministry building, where all grade level Sunday School classes were held after a lesson on the Bible story of the day.

The use of the word “even” in the bulletin board, much like the use of the word “still” in the example above, sends a small subtle message of superiority that was subconsciously linked to whiteness. Ultimately, while the lesson expressed that everyone is a child of God and deserves to be loved and treated fairly, Max was learning about difference only in relation to his normalized, unspoken whiteness. The sort of love that Jesus illustrates in the four Gospel stories is self-sacrificial and radical—he dies instead of participating in an unjust social order that affirms racial difference and oppression. However, this love becomes, through the messaging in Max’s church, a patronizing affirmation of the superiority of a white *us* in relation to a weak and unfortunate *us*.

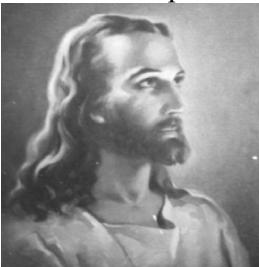
**Figure 3**

*God loves the whole world even people who are different than us*



### **Worshiping White and Passive Versions of God and Jesus: Ideologies of White Superiority**

Recurrent messages of *us* and *them* under the guise of valuing difference came through strongly in discussions and texts in Erin's children's church. The unnamed other who was different was not, presumably, white. This became clear through church materials and experiences of who *was* white. Blum and Harvey (2012) shed light on how children's socialization into whiteness via Christianity is widespread in American Christian contexts: "Deep down in their psyches, many American children learn to associate the divine with the white race. It is a psychological feeling that does not have to become a proven intellectual fact" (para. 12). As Blum and Harvey indicated regarding white children's construction of the divine as white, Erin's children learned to connect Jesus with whiteness as well. In the curricular materials used at church and in the children's own artwork, Jesus was always white and looked like the photo in Figure 4.



Over and over, in these visual representations, Jesus and his disciples looked a lot like Erin's children. In an animated video series, *He is Risen* (Rich, 1988) shown during the whole group Sunday School, Jesus was portrayed as a white man with long brown hair and dark blue eyes.

**Figure 4.** *White Jesus*

His skin was noticeably lighter than the other animated characters in the film, seen most visibly in the scene when Jesus, resurrected, returned in a vision to his disciples and rested his hand upon their darker skin. As Jesus ascended into heaven, he literally whitened on the screen until he was nearly transparent. In the big books in the children library where all children, including Max, attended Children’s Church, *all* of the Biblical characters were white or an ambiguous shade of light brown. Moreover, Jesus and his disciples were pastoral, gentle, and obedient, a model of the ways in which the children of the church were expected to behave.

Olivia described her favorite Biblical story as “the one where Jesus is with all the children. Jesus is sitting down and all the children are by his side and then the parents said, ‘come over here, don’t mess with Jesus’ but then Jesus said, ‘Please let the children play, I don’t want to be alone.’” She asked to have this story read to her dozens of times during the course of the study. In these ways and many more, Erin’s children learned to worship a white Jesus who was passive, gentle, and almost child-like. This can be seen in the way that Jesus, in the preceding story example, did not want to be left alone. Therefore, there is an implicit association of white people as intimately connected to virtue and goodness and passivity.

Given the dominant messages that Jesus was white and gentle, it is not surprising that the children created Jesus in their own drawings and understandings as white and passive. In the materials that required children to color in already outlined characters, the children consistently drew Jesus with white skin or simply did not color the skin, leaving the whiteness of the paper as a racial baseline. In other words, and in contrast to the teachings in many Black American theologies (Cone, 1986/2019; Tisby, 2019, Smith, 1996) that centralize Jesus’ Blackness and his opposition to injustice, Erin’s children learned to know a particular Jesus—a passive Jesus seemingly more concerned about sitting among happy, white children than taking up against any kind of injustice or, further, dying as an expression of God’s self-sacrificial love for fallen people.

## DISCUSSION

Ella, Olivia, and Max all came to know something about love and difference and whiteness in a white Evangelical Christian church, whether they intended to or not. Presumably, this knowledge left a fundamental imprint on these children. Intentional or not implicit and explicit messages conveyed lessons about whiteness to the three children. They were taught that God created their whiteness and intended them to be different from People of Color. They were taught that “we” should love people *even though* they are different from “us.” The passive language implied that it was bad to be different from “us,” but we should love “them” anyway. It is not much of a

stretch to imagine that “us” refers to white people and “them” as people who are not white. Furthermore, this passive love of difference served to smooth over any questions the children might have about the systems or histories that contributed to difference. Finally, the Jesus the children encountered in church was passive, white, and divorced from the sociocultural climate that contextualizes the story of the Gospel. None of Jesus’ radical antiracism or his disruption of oppressive and unjust social structures was present in their learning about Jesus. This view of Jesus serves to affirm a docile, white stance that accepts rather than challenges the status quo—a surprising lesson given that most Christians believe Jesus offered his life instead of acquiescing to an unjust social (and spiritual) order.

### **A Pivot: Education and Teacher Education**

The study described in this manuscript highlights the ways three young, white children explored and constructed racial identities in a white Evangelical Christian church in 2013. The children are now young adults. Ella is in college, the same age as many of the students in Erin, Sam, and Stephen’s classes. In addition, many of our current students grew up in relationship with white Evangelical Christian ideology. While the study’s three children can never represent the close to one million white Evangelical teachers and preservice teachers in America, their stories of being socialized to adopt white Evangelical Christian ideals may provide powerful insights into the potential internal uncertainty evoked when white Evangelical teachers and preservice teachers are confronted with antiracist initiatives in preservice teacher education and professional development for in-service teachers. Our focus in revisiting this study was not primarily on education or teacher education. Nevertheless, we suggest that our theorization of the children’s experiences might highlight ways in which White Evangelical teachers and preservice teachers who shared similar church experiences might carry unspoken values into their own professional lives.

It is important to acknowledge that our discussion from this point forward is theoretical and that more empirical research, such as Olshefski’s (2020) study of how Christianity shaped the teaching of a white Christian teacher, is needed to study the impact of white Evangelical, Christian ideology on anti-racism efforts in teacher education. Nevertheless, we note the challenges this connection between whiteness and Christianity can pose for teacher education as well as the field of education more broadly. More attention is necessary, in particular, on how religious ideology “is necessary if we are to adequately understand the full story behind the perceived threat of critical inquiry” (Olshefski, 2020, p. 109). Our theorization is especially important given the attention in educational fields paid to naming the behaviors of white preservice teachers and teachers when they encounter discussions of race and racism in teacher preparation coursework or in-service

professional development. Their behaviors are described as fragile (Di'Angelo, 2018), fatigued (Flynn, 2016), resistant (Matias, 2013), guilt-ridden (Thompson, 2003), and apathetic (Spanierman & Cabrera, 2015). However, much less attention is given to the *ways* white supremacy as a deeply entrenched cultural practice embedded and learned within spaces such as churches that inform those behaviors—or why religious sites of learning can render treason to whiteness so arduous (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996).

### **Conceptions of Love and Difference**

These lessons gained from revisiting this study are, for us, crucial in theorizing how conceptions of love and difference emerge in education and teacher education, especially for white teachers and preservice teachers who have been informed by the sort of values surfaced above. We worry that the white Evangelical Christian ideology learned by the children in this study 1) disguises whiteness through an overly simple affirmation of difference, 2) patronizes the minoritized, and 3) affirms the superiority of white people. If white Evangelical Christian teachers and preservice teachers were socialized to adopt similar ideologies within their own religious upbringings, it is unsurprising that challenging these logics can become unsettling for them. For example, consider teacher education courses or professional development that address systemic racism head-on and ask preservice teachers and teachers to consider the role whiteness has in maintaining oppression. Consider how antiracist pedagogy insists on moving beyond individual virtues of kindness, pity, and empathy to focus on collective, community-oriented action to confront the racist beliefs and systems that structured society inequitably to begin with. If teachers or preservice teachers were socialized to believe that being a good person (like Jesus) means being passive, nonconfrontational, color-blind, and patronizing to people who are not white, ideological tensions are likely to arise when they are introduced to antiracist pedagogy. Could this ideological collision between antiracist pedagogy and white Evangelical Christianity provide insights into why teachers' and preservice teachers' behaviors are so often described as unhelpful to advancing social justice in education (Di'Angelo, 2018; Flynn, 2016; Matias, 2013; Thompson, 2003; Spanierman & Cabrera, 2015)? When teachers and preservice teachers are asked to confront racism in their classrooms and schools, they may retreat to the comfort of white Evangelical Christian notions of passivity rather than work for racial justice.

The ideological tension between white Evangelical Christian values and antiracism could help explain why Johnson et al. (2019) write that so many white teachers do not truly love Black children—they may claim to love Black children or Black culture, but they stand idle when Black children are not represented in the curriculum or are hurt and killed on the street. If these white teachers grew up with white Evangelical ideologies the ways that Erin's



children did, they may not have a template for revolutionary love since their exposure to loving across difference was taught in a patronizing way. Patronizing affirmations of Blackness by white people does not seriously account for how white supremacy structures social reality and could be an underlying dynamic that results in the outwardly documented difficulties some white preservice teachers and teachers possess in learning about race or antiracism.

We worry that when teachers and preservice teachers are asked to engage in critical, antiracist work, they are being asked to think and believe in abolitionist ways that are fundamentally at odds with the way whiteness colors their understanding of Christianity. These white, Evangelical upbringings, as they did for Erin's children, may have taught them to focus on individual relationships and to disconnect individuals from the social dynamics that shape their lives, including white supremacy. While these teachers and preservice teachers may desire to love Black and Brown students, they may fail to recognize the ways white supremacy undermines that love through. It is important then, in working with teachers and preservice teachers, that we consider the roots of their ideologies, many of which may be grounded in white Evangelical teachings such as those of Erin's children. This is especially true because the ideologies examined here are so fundamental (given that they were shaped in early childhood and in sacred spaces). Challenging such deeply held beliefs requires more than simple pedagogical shifts. We argue that there is a need for teachers and preservice teachers to better understand a larger ideological repertoire of Christian theologies, particularly those informed by Black antiracism. Whereas White Evangelical Christianity has failed to give a more holistic depiction of love and justice, teacher preparation programs can bridge this intellectual gap.

### **Implications for teacher education curriculum**

We draw three broad lessons from this juxtaposition of white Evangelical Christianity and antiracist education. First, explicit and implicit messages of white supremacy must be acknowledged and grappled with. Since explicit and implicit white supremacy is normalized in the United States, it is necessary for white people to name and better understand the messages of Evangelical racism in an effort to engage in meaningful anti-racism, which, as noted above, is more in line with how we understand Jesus' ministry. We worry that many white Evangelical churches are not disentangling their views of Jesus or the Gospel from white supremacy. Consequently, the reification of the Evangelical racism couched in colonial ideology has real consequences for white people and specifically white teachers and preservice teachers. To be clear, we believe it is important that preservice teachers are asked to do *far more* than recognize or confess their white privilege in teacher education. Instead, they must confront the

ideologies that have shaped their lived experiences, including those of their religious teachings, and consider questions such as:

- What did I learn about race, racism, and whiteness from my religious teachings?
- What barriers could the religious belief systems I have been raised with pose in my learning be in relation to those unlike myself?

Next, we recommend those working with teachers and preservice teachers whose religious ideologies could pose a unique challenge to incorporating antiracist stances in education by offering a view of Christianity that has historically and explicitly challenged white supremacy, such as those from Black theologies. We explicitly argue that cross-disciplinary content, such as theology, should have a place in teacher education courses because there are many white preservice teachers seeking to liberate themselves from the logics of white supremacy, as well as those who are unsatisfied with how white Evangelical churches depict God, Jesus, and the Gospel.

There is a long tradition within Black theologies of using the church as space to organize and speak against racial injustice (Smith, 1996). Indeed, James Cone (1986/2019), father of Black Liberation Theology, taught that “the resurrection even means that God’s liberating word is not only for the house of Israel but for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers” (p. 3). Following this logic, it might be that key themes of the Gospel are about liberating people—white as well as people of color—from the principality and power of white supremacy in the United States. Black theologies, collectively, are the embodiment of agentive, affirmative, organized, politicized, relational human action in the face of racism. They offer much for people who are willing to listen and learn about how to relate more humanely with others. This includes learning how to engage students in ways that elevate justice over patronizing love, passivity, and whiteness-as-superior norms.

Finally, we see value in taking seriously the religious views of love and difference that people bring with them into the field of education and teacher education. Religion is not often taken seriously in teacher education or professional development around race with teachers. We are convinced that logics of white Evangelical Christianity are pervasive and shape how white people—all people, truly—come into relationship with racial difference and, at the very least, need to be addressed as we work toward engaging in the struggle against white supremacy. While not all teachers in America identify as Evangelical Christian, we worry that pervasive white Evangelical notions of love and difference shape the feelings of many, including those who do not identify as Christian. It is time to reckon this. In the church, yes, but in American schools and teacher education as well.

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to avoid the pervasive ways white Evangelical ideology has shaped the United States. The data above illustrate how much the notions of love and difference are informed by the link between white supremacy and white Evangelical Christianity. It is important to uproot the foundation that white Evangelical Christianity can lay for white supremacy by turning a critical eye to how some white Evangelical Christian churches influence the ways white supremacy continues to be made and remade in schools.

Recall the opening vignette that Erin shared. A fear of racial difference was being cultivated in the same place where Erin was learning of Jesus' love for all people. This contradiction cannot be overlooked. The love she was taught was color-blind and passive love that allowed white people to continue playing out a violent and superior view of themselves at the expense of People of Color. Where might we begin to reckon with such contradictions? Our argument is that white teachers and white preservice teachers can learn from black theology as a beginning.

Therefore, this manuscript concludes with a description of a portion of a Black preaching event (Northeast SDA, 2020). This event took place in a predominantly Black, Seventh Day Adventist Church, pastored by Evan. Consider the teachings described here compared to lessons that Erin learned through her church experiences of Jesus' color-blind love experienced in the heartbeat of white racial violence.

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Approximately two dozen or so young Black men and women sat in the choir behind the preacher, Dr. Wesley Knight. Dr. Knight told a story about his gifted, artistic, young Black son. This child was in a talent show where as Knight put it, he "owned the stage." The child was overlooked by the white judges in the award ceremony where the first-place prize was given to a white child who sang an off-key rendition of *Do you want to build a snowman?* (Lopez & Lopez, 2013), featured in the popular Disney movie *Frozen*.

Dr. Knight spoke with righteous anger as he called out this injustice in relation to the oppression of the Israelites in Babylon. Dr. Knight drew from theories of antiracism that renounced "conscious or unconscious investments in white supremacy to reconstitute an interracial, improvised democratic future" (Zamalin, 2019, p. 67). Knight explained, "when we stand up to sing the songs that represent who we are, our existence and our experience, they [white people] don't appreciate the unique contribution we make to the American songbook."

Dr. Knight continued that it was not the white child sang the "right" notes, it was that she "sang words that allowed people to feel comfortable where they are, to escape to fantasy world where they didn't have to deal with

the ugliness of racism.” Dr. Knight denounced what he called American assimilation and Evangelical escapism, as he juxtaposes the fantasy land of the color-blind white imagination with the reality of the struggles of Black people because of white oppression. “We don’t have the luxury of talking about snowmen,” he continued, “as Black people, we can’t escape our reality.”

Finally, Dr. Knight belted loudly as the congregation rose to their feet and began to applaud, “No, I don’t want to build a snowman!”

There was nothing passive or color blind in the ways this church approached God or racism. We believe it is here, in these kinds of religious spaces, that white Evangelical Christian teachers and preservice teachers might begin to relearn the religious lessons of their childhoods in ways that are more suited to disentangle justice from patronizing understandings of love.

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*Manuscript submitted: **January 20, 2022***

*Manuscript revised: **July 7, 2022***

*Accepted for publication: **November 1, 2022***