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Challenging White Jesus: Addressing Effects of Race in the Undergraduate Bible Classroom

Abstract: This paper examines both the presence of and the potential for opposition to white normativity in Christian undergraduate education. Research on a cohort of first year undergraduate students demonstrates the durability of race as a factor in students' experiences and outcomes in required Bible courses. After interpreting these findings in light of literature on race, biblical studies, and higher education, we suggest strategic pedagogical interventions aimed at more active resistance to the prevailing winds of white normativity.

Introduction: Jesus, Race, and Christian Higher Education

The most reproduced image of Jesus in United States history—the well-known and practically paradigmatic image—is white. Warner Salaman's 1941 painting *Head of Christ* remains, for many in the West, the most recognized image of Jesus. Even in the midst of the explosion of liberation theologies, important challenges to the white presentations of Jesus during the Civil Rights period and beyond, and explicit recognition that Jesus was not and could not have been white, fair skinned, blue eyed Jesus prevails in the 21st century cultural imagination. So suggests Edward Blum, whose 2012 book, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, traces the white racialization of Jesus in the American context. For a great many people, the default, formative image of Jesus is a white man, whether they encountered that image on the television show *South Park* or in Sunday school.

The white Jesus of the cultural imagination represents one of many powerful covert operations of white normativity within religious education generally, and within Christian undergraduate education specifically. In keeping with national trends, racial and ethnic diversity is rapidly increasing at institutions of Christian higher education affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), though the pace of diversification lags a bit behind national trends (Jolivet and Longman, 2018; Menajares, 2017). While the demographic shifts toward greater diversity have been welcome, professionals of various kinds in such institutions recognize the need for institutional change and self-examination. The 2017 volume, *Diversity Matters* represents one substantial effort in this direction, addressing the challenges faced by non-White professionals working in these predominantly white contexts, the particular responsibilities of white educators to their students, pedagogical and institutional necessities, and the theological commitments that should and do animate these efforts (Longman, 2017). The need for this conversation is great; as Tabatha Jones-Jolivet puts it, this variety of Christian institutions of undergraduate education are often not just “Predominantly White Institutions”, but “Dominantly White Institutions” or DWI's (Jolivet and Longman, 2018, employing the language of Collins and Jun, 2017). That the kinds of issues named in conversations specific to Christian higher education echo broader trends in higher education overall testifies to the pervasiveness of the problem.

The way forward for Christian institutions, who may endeavor to support the learning of all students but which struggle to do so in the face of systemic injustice (or, more theologically stated, institutional sin), “can be clarified by focusing on the historical legacy of white supremacy and racism that plagues our institutions” (Jolivet and Longman, 2018, pg. 124). In response to that mandate, we decided to investigate the nature and extent to which white normativity shapes student experience, focusing our analysis on introductory Bible courses.¹ Such courses frequently comprise part of the general education curriculum in Christian higher education, and so involve a wide swath of students. Bible courses cover material that most students claim as personally important and theologically authoritative, during an important developmental stage at which students are considering and integrating new understandings (Gurin, et al., 2003, pg. 13). The academic study of the Bible in a confessional context resides at the nexus of some critical issues discussed so far—cultural conceptions of Jesus as white, ecclesial backgrounds, the broader context of undergraduate Christian higher education, and the broader educational context in the United States. Furthermore, introductory New Testament courses within Christian undergraduate education, like seminary courses of a similar kind (Byron, 2012), present a powerful and necessary location for resisting white supremacy.

In what follows, we provide close analysis of data collected as part of a broader descriptive inquiry into the spiritual lives of first year college students enrolled in a two semester introductory New Testament course sequence at a Christian liberal arts institution. The results of our analysis indicate that white normativity functions as a persistent factor in these courses. Other scholars then help to situate these findings within broader conversations on race, religion, and academic experiences. The reality of white normativity in such classrooms and religious spaces demand pedagogical intervention. Thus we claim that educators employing contextually attuned and reflectively engaged pedagogy can both enact and foster resistance to white normativity by relocating Jesus, reframing expertise, and persistently re-evaluating themselves, their course structures and processes, and their institutions.

While we will deal with data drawn from only one institution, given the prevalence of such courses at Christian undergraduate institutions we believe the findings have broader applicability and can inform discussions about resisting white normativity. A biblical scholar (John) and a practical theologian (Amanda), we teach classes of this kind, and so we approach this conversation as both practitioners and researchers. As white instructors in contexts like this, we assume the radical insufficiency of good intentions and remain committed to the constant project of unlearning and renouncing the racism that places us in a position of racial privilege and distorts our own imaginations. Consequently, we assume that our teaching practice must be continually critiqued and revised, lest our classrooms reconstitute the damaging racial dynamics that can define higher education at DWI’s. For that reason, we hope that the findings discussed here and the suggested trajectories pedagogical interventions will inform the necessary reflexive and self-critical practices of white instructors in a variety of contexts.

Description of the Research

Using data from a broader inquiry into the spiritual lives of students across their first year at a Christian undergraduate institution, we tested our working theory that race/ethnicity was a

¹ We follow Cornell and LeMon (2016) in defining as those courses that take a set of biblical books, rather than a single biblical book, as their subject matter.

persistent factor in student experience and outcomes in a standard two-semester sequence of introductory Bible courses. We paired data from a survey with demographic information (e.g.: sex, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation) and academic information (e.g.: grades, Pell grant eligibility) from the institution.² We conducted bivariate analyses of the data in order to determine whether such factors are correlated with higher grades in introductory Bible courses and correlated with scores on other measures enabled by the survey, including engagement in Christian practices, prior engagement with the Bible, faith integration, and Christian moral boundary measures.

Data collection occurred during the first and final weeks of student's enrollment in a standard New Testament course sequence. 845 students completed the fall semester survey in a Gospels class required for all incoming freshmen, a participation rate of 89.42%. Most of the following analysis attends specifically to these 845 participants in their enrollment in this fall semester course on the Gospels. 766 students completed the spring semester survey while enrolled in a second New Testament course surveying Acts - Revelation, a participation rate of 90.76%. The spring course is also required; a majority of first year students took it during their second semester on campus, but a portion of them did not. Thus, the two surveys yielded a pool of 561 participants, who took both fall and spring semester surveys and thus permit paired and comparative analysis.³ Since the racial/ethnic composition of this cohort of research participants only provides large enough populations of Black, Hispanic, and White participants for statistical analysis, we will attend primarily to these groups. At times, we will also consider White students as a group compared to all other students.

Given the incredible complexity of race as a social reality and its various intersections with other powerful social, political, and economic forces, a few important caveats are necessary here. We recognize that race is neither an isolated factor nor a predictive factor in and of itself and at no point suggest reductive causal relationships between it and any other measure. Race is one factor among many that impact student grades and at times provides a particular nexus for the types of experiences (academic, ecclesial, educational, relational, socio-economic, etc.) that students bring to university campuses and courses. We focus attention here because race is significantly correlated with students responses on the survey and outcomes in the courses in view, correlations which we believe merit attention. Within the limits of this paper, we will not have space to discuss at length the intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status, all of which impact course outcomes and student experience significantly. Nor will we be able to adequately explore the convergences of race and religious upbringing, though religious upbringing also matters with respect to a student's prior exposure to the Bible. Thus, while this

² Institutional data on race is collected using the IPEDS system, which necessarily forces students with multi-racial/multi-ethnic identities to choose. The 2017 IPEDS categories are titled "race/ethnicity." In an effort to be more readable, we will occasionally use the shorthand "race" even when referring to what IPEDS properly terms "race/ethnicity." The system also capitalizes the groups identified through IPEDS data. Here we will follow suit when referencing a particular racial/ethnic group (e.g. race/ethnicity and Black, Hispanic, White).

³ The difference between the 766 and 561 is made up of students who had not successfully completed, had not previously enrolled, or were hoping to improve a previous grade in the second semester course.

discussion will consider race as a factor in such courses, we recognize that this provides important but still partial information about a complex intersectional reality.

Race and Educational Outcomes

We first evaluated the factors correlated with final grade. Of the factors highly correlated with a student’s grade in the Gospels course, the most prominent is whether or not a student is enrolled in the honors program. Honors students received A’s at a high rate: 73%. The fall semester honors cohort was overwhelmingly White. Out of the 141 honors students who participated, 117 (83%) were White, 18 (12.8%) were Hispanic, and 1 (.7%) was Black. This distribution is quite skewed from both the racial/ethnic demographics of the overall entering class and of the fall research cohort. Among the fall participants, 566 (63.5%) are White, 148 (16.6%) are Hispanic, and 99 (11.1%) are Black. Based on both of the above facts, we will consider the non-honors population here (686 participants).

The grade distribution for these 686 participants is skewed, with about 75% of students receiving an A or B. In the analysis and tables that follow, grades are represented numerically according to a traditional GPA calculation and the data is summarized in table 1 (Grade Statistics) and table 2 (Grade Distributions). When we compare grades from Black, Hispanic, and White student cohorts against each other and against the overall averages, we see that Black and Hispanic students receive lower than average grades while White students receive above average grades (see table 1).

Table 1

Grade Statistics	Median	Mean	50th percentile	25th percentile
All	3.00	3.10	3.00	3.00
Black	3.00	2.77	3.00	2.00
Hispanic	3.00	3.05	3.00	3.00
White	3.50	3.20	3.50	3.00

The gap in grades is widest between Black and White students. Further, while the overall failure rate was low, Black participants were over three times as likely to fail the course as their White peers and Hispanic students were about twice as likely (see table 2).⁴ Thus, not only do the higher grades favor White participants, but Black and Hispanic students are more likely to fail.

⁴ All of these facts are confirmed by ANOVA and Tukey post hoc analysis. The means for non-White participants and White participants are 2.96 (*sd* = 1.158) and 3.20 (*sd* = 1.005), respectively. The differences among the means are statistically significant at the .01 level ($F [1, 1.144] = 9.092, p = .005$). Though the differences among all IPEDS categories is not statistically significant ($F [6,679] = 2.099, p = .051$), a Tukey post hoc test shows that grades for Black participants in the Gospels course are statistically significantly lower than those for White participants (2.77 ± 1.237 min and $3.20 \pm 1.0005, p = .010$).

Table 2

Grade Distributions	4 (A)	3 (B)	2 (C)	1 (D)	0 (F)
Overall	318 (46.4%)	211 (30.8%)	94 (13.7%)	36 (5.2%)	27 (3.9%)
Black	31 (34.4%)	29 (32.2%)	15 (16.7%)	8 (8.9%)	7 (7.8%)
Hispanic	51 (42.9%)	40 (33.6%)	17 (14.3%)	5 (4.2%)	6 (5%)
White	204 (50%)	120 (29.4%)	56 (13.7%)	17 (4.2%)	11 (2.7%)

These facts about grades in the Gospels course indicate a substantial advantage for the White cohort and a substantial disadvantage for both the Black and Hispanic cohorts, with the Black cohort experiencing a greater disadvantage. This disadvantage has consequences into the next semester, as students who fail the first course are unable to continue to the next one. Such an initial experience, where White students more readily excel and Black and Hispanic students are more likely to fail, can influence a student’s entire experience at the university and of Christianity, especially considering the predominantly white nature of this university. It is also possible that the precipitous drop-off in participation among Black students in the spring survey reflects the experience of this disadvantage as one of the multiple ways white normativity on this campus affects Black students.

Systemic injustice in US education broadly provides further context for these findings. These two required courses depend on student ability to read and comprehend material independently, yet broader, pre-college assessments of these academic areas suggest that non-white students are disproportionately affected by systemic inequities in K-12 education. For example, the NAEP has reported that Black and Hispanic students lag behind White students in reading comprehension scores on standardized tests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2103).⁵ Scores on reading comprehension exams from high school seniors in 2015 exhibit these gaps. The mean of White student scores was 295, the mean of Black student scores was 266, and that of Hispanic student scores was 276 (see table 3).⁶

⁵ This data is from a retrospective report published after the 2012 test results were processed. In 2012, the gaps between Black student scores and White student scores, as well as between Hispanic students scores and White student scores, had narrowed since 1971, but had widened since 2008. Any newer retrospective has yet to be published.

⁶ For more on the scoring and to see the available data, visit <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>.

Table 3

Race/ethnicity used to report trends, school-reported	Average scale score	below Basic	at Basic	at Proficient	at Advanced
White	295	21	33	38	9
Black	266	48	36	15	1
Hispanic	276	37	38	23	2
Asian/Pacific Islander	297	21	32	38	10
American Indian/Alaska Native	279	35	36	25	3
Two or more races	295	21	33	36	9

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2015 Reading Assessment.

This trend may also be observed in reading assessments in Texas, where the majority of participants completed secondary education. The 2012-2013 STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) scores show the cohort’s scores when they completed 8th grade. While 88% of Black and Hispanic students performed at a satisfactory level in reading, 96% of White students performed at a satisfactory level (Texas Education Agency, 2013). Even this data may be deceptive as the STAAR is administered in multiple rounds over the year, with these final percentages based on the final round of testing. The relative percentage of each cohort requiring retesting to achieve the satisfactory rating is much higher among Black and Hispanic students.

An intersectional perspective is also mandatory, given, for instance, the nature of how race and socio-economic status interlock. Students who receive Pell grants have lower graduation rates (Turk, 2017). The percentage of Black and Hispanic research participants on Pell grants is almost triple and more than double, respectively, that of White participants. Further, White participants only make up 44.2% of the total Pell grant recipients in the study. Future research will explore these intersectional phenomena in more detail.

Race and Prior Engagement with the Scriptures

While grades are intended to indicate a student’s success in an academic endeavor, the place where each student begins with respect to the markers of success in that course can differ significantly. Since we saw that race makes a difference in the grades students received, we began to wonder about where each group of participants started with respect to the course material. Given that these courses consider sustained, close reading of New Testament biblical texts to be a central skill and component of the course, we evaluated the rates and modes with which students report having engaged with the Bible prior to their arrival in these classrooms.

We were curious whether differences persisted across different racial/ethnic groups, working from the theory that the nature of students' prior engagement with the Bible (both mode of reading and frequency of reading) would prepare students differently for the kind of sustained reading that the courses assume and practice.

The entering cohort of participants showed wide divergence by racial/ethnic categories in the ways they have read the Bible before entering this classroom (see table 4). For example, while Black students have the highest reported rate of reading verses or selected passages of the Bible, they showed much lower rates than White students of having read an entire book of the Bible, the entire OT, or the entire NT. Similarly, Hispanic students showed lower rates on each of these markers. These differences have bearing on course experiences, because they suggest that students have been formed in different modes of Bible reading. In particular, the method(s) of reading that Black and Hispanic students may have been formed to expect differ from those of the White, Western, and male method(s) of reading the Bible in an academic setting, whether exemplified by the professors or peers.

Table 4

Exposure to the Bible	Read vss or passages	Read an entire book of the Bible	Read the entire OT	Read the entire NT
All	94.7%	49.3%	14.3%	19.2%
Black	97.8%	35.2%	11%	12.1%
Hispanic	90.8%	35.8%	10%	10.8%
White	96.8%	57.2%	15.9%	23%

This theory is partially corroborated by the work of Shelton and Emerson (2012), who combined in-depth interviews with rigorous statistical analysis of two nationally representative surveys in order to compare Black and White Protestants on various areas of Christian faith. While the participants in our research are a more restricted set (ie: all first year college students), Shelton and Emerson's findings provide broader context for the differences between the prior engagement with the Bible by Black and White participants our survey shows. They report "racial group membership color-codes the frequency with which believers read the Bible," with Black Protestants being twice as likely to have read their Bible in the past year (p. 100). As stated above, the first year student survey indicated that Black students reported having read verses or sections of the Bible at a rate higher than any other racial group. Shelton and Emerson suggest, however, that on the whole, Black and White Protestants have different commitments regarding an *academic vs. experiential* model of Christian faith (p. 68). The interviewees in Shelton and Emerson's research, all Black religious leaders, posited that the community's experience of slavery and oppression generates these differences: an orientation toward survival and practical needs because neither could be taken for granted, a historical lack of access to higher education, and a broad lack of seminary training for clergy (p. 73). The researchers found that the academic and experiential distinction also shaped how survey respondents viewed the Bible. In their analysis, Black Protestants were far more likely to hold to a literal view of creation, specifically, or engage in a more immediate or literal reading of the Bible generally. While, in our survey, Black students were not more likely to say that "Christians should believe

that God created the world in seven literal days” than were White and Hispanic students, these broader findings do suggest that the students surveyed may come from homes, churches, and religious communities that engaged in quite different hermeneutical strategies than do their White professors in these college classes.

This divergence in religious sensibilities may have some important applicability to this research. We would posit that prioritization of biblical content knowledge – the possession of biblical facts, propositions, and assertions—presents another instantiation of Emerson and Shelton’s “academic” vs. “experiential” religious disposition. In these courses, which build and assess students knowledge about the New Testament literature, prior content knowledge inevitably plays a large role. To the extent that certain modes of reading might better support such an academic acquisition of “biblical facts”, and also given that prior knowledge of material is one predictor of success in reading comprehension (Elleman, 2017; Vaughn, Martinez, Wanzek, et. al., 2017), the differences in reading practice and exposure advantage students practiced in reading according to the standards of white normativity, thus creating an additional potential barrier some students. To take one concrete example—our analysis showed that whether a student could correctly answer one basic Bible knowledge question had predictive power in terms of their final grade. If a student knew that Abraham appears prior to Miriam, David, and Joshua, they were more likely to get a higher grade in the course.⁷ Though Black participants answered the question correctly at a higher rate than Hispanic participants, both groups were lower than White participants (see table 5).

Table 5

Percent of students answering “Which character appears first in the Bible?”	Abraham	Miriam, David, Joshua, or I don’t know
All	67.44%	32.56%
Black	62.63%	37.37%
Hispanic	58.96%	41.04%
White	70.88%	29.12%

Thus, these courses might not only reflect and operate within an “academic” approach to faith that fits more comfortably with white religious cultures, but such courses may also uncritically

⁷ Students completed a twenty-one question Bible content section of the survey. They were provided four options and the option of “I don’t know.” For the purposes of this discussion, “I don’t know” is counted as incorrect. The question under discussion here is: “Which of the following people appears first in the Bible?” Answer choices are Miriam, Abraham, David, Joshua, and I don’t know. A statistically significant linear regression was found showing that the final grade in the course relates to whether or not a student could correctly answer which of four characters appears first in the Bible ($F(1,684) = 26.633, p = .000$).

assume the outcomes of being raised in that culture, wherein White students appear to be advantaged.⁸

Summary of the Findings

So, what do these findings tell us? First, the findings confirm our strong suspicion, based on both anecdotal evidence and significant broader higher education discussions, that race is a factor in student experience and outcomes in these introductory New Testament courses. White students receive higher grades in these courses than do Black and Hispanic students. Second, the research shows us that students from the three primary racial/ethnic groups (White, Black, and Hispanic) report very different levels of prior exposure to the practices of reading most common within academic Bible courses. Thus, in our assessment, racial injustice is present in these classes in the form of inequities in college preparation, and white normativity is present in the form of institutional culture, assumed modes of engagement with the scriptures, and in the (still predominantly white) professorial perspectives offered. In this context, it seems that the “invisible knapsack” of white privilege may well include increased prior exposure to certain modes of reading common to the ecclesial and academic cultures of their professors (McIntosh, 2002). Each of the above factors witnesses to the need for active resistance to White normativity particularly in this type of introductory level Bible course.

Pedagogical Implications

The challenge of addressing and counter-acting white normativity in these contexts falls to all university stakeholders – faculty, student support staff, administrators, students (including, perhaps especially, white faculty, students, staff, and administrators whose Christian convictions should lead them to address the white supremacy in which they are implicated). Our suggestions here focus entirely on the responsibilities of faculty, but at no point do we mean to elevate the work of faculty over the critical work of administrators, staff, and student support staff in these efforts; instead, we assume that there must be a cooperation of co-curricular and curricular elements of campus life for students of color to have the kind of access and ownership that support student success in the undergraduate context (Jolivet and Longman, 2018). Such systemic inequities require urgent and comprehensive attention, much of which necessitates administrative action—for instance, the tremendous need for DWI’s to hire and support more non-White faculty, staff, and administrators can only be addressed at broader structural level. Even so, there are critical opportunities to resist white normativity at the classroom level that merit careful attention. We offer three trajectories for pedagogical intervention, concretely instantiated within introductory Bible classes: reframing expertise, re-locating Jesus, re-evaluating self, classroom, and institution.

First, such courses provide a ground-level opportunity to dislocate Jesus from cultural assumptions that situate him as a white, American savior and relocate Jesus into an appropriate historical context. As Blum contends, many people—including the students arriving on our campuses—harbor an implicit image of Jesus that is white. There is real danger that assumptions of Jesus’s primary alignment with (white) American interests rather than with others might

⁸ This data also indicates the need for more robust examination of the ways race itself plays out for our Black students in particular, since they correctly answered the question at higher rates than Hispanic students, yet still achieved lower grades on average.

flourish if not explicitly countered. Such white domestication/commodification of Jesus obscures the radically counter-cultural message of the Gospel. Jesus as 1st century Palestinian Jew in the Gospels regularly challenges varied forms of political, social, economic, and religious power when they serve to advance their own interests at the expense of others. Religious educators have an important opportunity here to expose the myth of white American Jesus in light of the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus as friend of the oppressed and vulnerable. Evans and Shearer provide one way of thinking about this task in their suggested practice of principled relocation, "pedagogical interventions that purposefully disorient white students to the assumptions about race and racism into which they have been socialized." (Evans and Shearer, 2017, p. 12). While these authors are referring to direct and personal discussions about race, a similar pedagogical intervention could unsettle the ways that students have been socialized and spiritually formed into a relationship with White American Jesus. Historical and literary forms of biblical scholarship can be a significant help in this task.

Feminist and minority biblical scholars have shown the potential but also limited use of these historical and literary methods in biblical scholarship. While they can help properly re-situate Jesus and Christianity, Brian Blount and others have shown that these methods are necessarily Eurocentric and patriarchal (Blount 2004, esp. 2-7). Uncritically assumed and employed, such methodologies can contribute to the elision of race and the reader in biblical analysis (Byron 2012, 109). Furthermore, and more directly related to the discussion here, in Segovia's analysis, historical critical and literary approaches to the New Testament also tend to generate patriarchal, Eurocentric, top-down pedagogies that are all ill-fit with the kind of liberative and interactive pedagogies religious educators champion (Segovia, 1998). Despite these issues, the scholars whose critiques are described here nonetheless retain a specific role for historical approaches to the New Testament; that role can contribute to resistance to white normativity in the study of the New Testament. First, attention to the historical context helps to center students in the Jewishness of Jesus, critical in light of inherited anti-Semitism in some modern receptions of Jesus at both popular and scholarly levels. Second, locating Jesus in the first century Judea under Roman occupation reinforces the critical theological point that the gospel is written from the bottom up, not the top down, such that white students (and professors!) may find themselves as the apparent recipients of Jesus' prophetic critiques more often than his blessings. The principled dis-location of Jesus can, in this way, subsequently lead to the principled dis-location of some readers.

Second, professors in such courses can resist white normativity by reframing expertise. Hospitality metaphors, a common theological framework for conceptualizing cultural diversity in the classroom (Gallagher, 2007; Jennings, 2017), provide one framework for accomplishing this. In the context of undergraduate introductory Bible courses, we would suggest the following specific manifestations of hospitality. First, we see a need for interpersonal hospitality, since the quality of interpersonal relationships between majority culture professors and non-majority culture students disproportionately impacts the success of students of color (Tuitt, 2003, p. 244-245). Such relationships need to arise at the professor's invitation but on the student's terms, in a spirit of mutuality and an ethic of care with (not for) students of color (Jolivet, 2018, p. 127).

There is an additional need for intentional ecclesial hospitality, by which we mean pervasive and intentional welcome of the church (or un-churched) backgrounds that students bring into the classroom. Almeda Wright refers to the "chasm" that is generally fixed between theological education and minority communities, created by "not simply a lack of diversity in

courses, but the internalization of dominant cultural values and knowledge” to the detriment of the values received from one’s community (Wright, 2017, p. 73). While she situates her critique within African American Christian education, it seems safe to assume that the chasm between white academics and African American students would only be larger. In order to the bridge that chasm, “scholars and clergy must pay attention to what is central within the religious communities and to begin with these central components in our educational efforts” (p. 77). Hospitable welcome of diverse student ecclesial backgrounds takes various forms: learning from students about their ecclesial contexts, recognizing where pedagogical choices (like a choice of Bible translation) might depart from ecclesial practices/teachings, creating space for diversity of experience and theological priorities, providing concrete opportunities for students to integrate new information with their personal histories and church communities. In so doing, professors might better “honor the traditions of the communities and... invite them into the process of knowledge construction—such that we are not simply changing the content of information imparted but the way that learning and knowing take place” (p.77-78).

A continued renegotiating of the guest/host dynamics of power and expertise in the classroom, of which hospitality to ecclesial communities is one kind, provides the final manifestation of Christian hospitality in light of white normativity. Hospitality to the kinds of expertise that students’ possess is obviously a critical piece of this, so that we enter into a space in which students are hosts and “we who teach are guests who again and again enter the worlds of our students . . . in honor and love.” (Jennings, 2017, p. 64). Jennings, however, also points to other areas wherein the reframing of hospitality resists white normativity; he indicates, for instance, the persistence of a white image of the imagined “educated person” (p. 62). As white educators in dominantly white contexts, our embodiment supports rather than resists that white supremacist construct, though other features of our identities (e.g. gender) also shape our negotiation of those spaces.⁹ In order to countermand that reality, we take seriously the political and formative nature of embodiment as part of reconfiguring hospitality dynamics in our classrooms (Perkinson, 2004, p.231). This public rearrangement of hospitality roles takes a number of small but cumulative forms, as any hospitality “must find its way *more tangibly* into the pedagogy of the academy” (Jennings, 2017, p. 64; emphasis original). First, we regularly and publicly situate ourselves as the guests of scholars from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In those efforts, we typically include photos of the scholars of color who are “hosting” our class discussion, in an effort to shift latent perceptions of who holds expertise. Second, we will sometimes physically de-center our presence in the classroom, situating ourselves as co-investigators with our students and recipients of the wisdom and work of other scholars . This is not an abdication of authority or responsibility, but an attempt to embody and creatively instantiate the fluidity of guest/host roles that characterize the Gospel accounts.

Third, the interventions that we have tentatively explored here must arise from and depend on the educator’s close attention and thoughtful re-evaluation of his or her own self, classroom, and institution. White educators face a particular exigency here, as our social location blinds us to institutional realities that are inescapably apparent to our colleagues and students. Resistance to white supremacy in religious education cannot happen in theory—it must happen in practice. It must happen somewhere, with a particular group of someones gathered for some

⁹ The precise dynamics of this negotiation depend on each educator’s careful assessment of the ways their social location intersects with the dynamics of their institution and context.

purpose. A religious educator's own particular context—church, parachurch, seminary, school of religion, undergraduate university, and so on—possesses distinctive opportunities and resources, powers and prejudices, objectives and measures, histories and affiliations, limitations and constraints. In the face of that kind of particularity, religious educators must find ways of attending very carefully to the dynamics, outcomes, and experiences that pertain to their own students and stakeholders.

For the particular context of learning that we have named and explored, attention at the level of both curriculum and pedagogy is vital. Cochran-Smith (2003) suggests that we must examine “what kind of message or story about race and racism is being told, what assumptions are being made, what identity perspectives and points of view are implicit, and what is valued or devalued” in a given curriculum (p. 107). Analysis along that line should, necessarily, include attention to the implicit and the null curriculum (Eisner, 1979). The null curriculum (what is not taught) in an introductory Bible class conveys institutional and professorial priorities as effectively as the explicit curriculum. Thus, if Greek and Roman materials are considered as important backgrounds to the New Testament, but broader aspects of the ancient Mediterranean world such as North Africa are excluded, something powerful, even if unintended, is communicated (Byron, 2012). This is particularly true given the legacy of ancient Greek culture being appropriated and adopted as “white American culture.” In terms of pedagogy, some research shows that a lack of pedagogical variety, especially when the dominant mode of pedagogy is top-down and patriarchal in its orientation, may disadvantage some minority student groups more than others (Kumashiro, 2003). The pedagogies employed must invite students into the co-construction of knowledge (Tuitt, 2003; Wright, 2017).

This paper arises from one such attempt at honest, self-critical, and careful attention to the dynamics related to race that operate in and around a particular context of learning, aimed at a concrete revision of course components, and in order to better serve the liberating, equipping, and empowering ends of Christian higher education for all students. This work is provisional, and it must continue and expand. In particular, we hope to see the continued expansion of this kind of research into other aspects of Christian undergraduate education, as well as other contexts. There is great need for longitudinal studies measuring the ongoing value and limitations of learning in these contexts. Educators in every context, and white educators in particular, must constantly engage in the work of critical self-evaluation, providing mechanisms for students to provide honest feedback about their experiences and inviting students into the common project of critically and creatively engaging the resources of the Christian tradition for participation in God's good redemptive and liberating work.

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