

Race as the Benu

A Reborn Consciousness for Teachers of our Youngest Children

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IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MYTHOLOGY, WE MEET THE STORY OF THE BENU BIRD who represents the soul of the sun god, Re (Veggi & Davidson, 1994). The benu lives for centuries and some stories tell us that when it is old and tired and ready to die, it builds itself a nest of cinnamon twigs and sets the nest and itself on fire. In the ashes of its former self, a new bird emerges, a signal of the invincible strength of the spirit to renew itself. In this article, I use insights gained from an ethnographic study of three young children and the messages they received about being white in their day to day worlds to add an early childhood focus to a century's worth of urging that we, as a nation, need a benu-like rebirth to dismantle racist practices (Baldwin, 1965; Du Bois, 1940; Ellison, 1998). I use the metaphor of the benu to argue that race, as it is known and experienced by many white people, a construct mired with hatred, shame and guilt, should be born again as a construct of love.

This article directly responds to assumptions made in many early childhood arenas that young children cannot understand race or that educational settings for the very young are not appropriate for discussions about race. I argue that early childhood is the *very* place that explorations of the social construct of race should begin. And, for that to happen, we need to start with the teachers who impact or who will impact our nation's youngest children. My argument is derived from an empirical study I conducted to identify dominant discourses that shape young children's constructions of race, particularly what it means to be white. Designed from a concern that many white educators have little awareness of the whiteness they embody and perpetuate (Boutte & Jackson, 2013; Bryan, Wilson, Lewis, & Wills, 2012; Hayes & Juárez, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2000, 2005; Turner-Nash, 2013), I wanted to understand more about how those messages are received and refined in early childhood to better help adults working with young children examine and interrupt the oft-invisible ways that racism is constructed and reconstructed during socialization.

Using critical ethnography methodologies (Carspeken, 1996; Noblit, 2004) and pattern analysis techniques (Grbich, 2007) to gather and examine data over a nine-month period of time, I studied my three young children (ages six, seven, and ten) as they constructed, deconstructed,

normalized and/or resisted messages of whiteness. In referring to whiteness, I refer to the implicit normalizations of the oppression of persons of color as manifested globally, nationally, and locally. Specifically, I asked: *What can I learn about the dominant discourses that shape three young white children's construction of race, particularly what it means to be white?*

In this article, I share an overview of the study's findings; however, I focus primarily on further theorization from those findings. My rationale for this focus is intentional. Over and over, when I discuss the findings of my work, I am asked, "What can be *done*? What can *I* do?" True to the essence of critical research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lather, 1986; Madison, 2005; Noblit, 2004), the purpose of my empirical work is to seek strategies for alleviating oppression. My role as a critical researcher is to not simply report findings but to foreground action as foundational to any research agenda.

Review of Literature

This work was grounded primarily in critical race theory and critical whiteness studies which consider the ways racial oppression is maintained through institutions, material advantages, and cultural practices. Basic tenets of critical race theory that guided the study encompassed Ladson-Billing's (1998) ideas that (a) racism is a fixture of American life, (b) experiential knowledge or "alternative epistemologies" (Bergerson, 2003, p. 55) should be valued, (c) legal policies have often worked against efforts for true Civil Rights reforms, and (d) whites, not persons of color, have benefitted from liberal reforms (such as Affirmative Action). Critical race theory, which grew in popularity and expanded to other disciplines in the 1970s, has the potential to reframe and expand our notions of race in America because it focuses in part on the "continued deconstruction of race so that biological theories of inferiority and hierarchy cannot ever again arise" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 132).

In the plethora of literature on whiteness in the last century, whiteness has been explored from the angle of developmental stages (Hardiman, 2001; Helms, 1990; Miller & Fellows, 2007), psychological ramifications (Du Bois, 1940; Ellison, 1998; King, 1991; Vendantam, 2010), emotional damage (Thandeka, 2007;) and in relation to class (Roediger, 2007), gender (Patton & Schedlock, 2012), sexuality (Bérubé, 2001), and nationality (Horsman, 1997). Whiteness studies have been used prolifically in college classrooms as exposés of personal privilege (McIntosh, 1988) and more recently, they have been critiqued for a lack of emphasis on structural racism (Leonardo, 2005) and a lack of attention to the ways in which whiteness is felt and experienced differently among white people (Lensmire, 2010). While implications from the field of whiteness are wide reaching and at times contradictory, all question dominant notions about race and power in our society and a call for a stronger "loyalty to humanity" (Ignatiev, 1994) through a disconnection with racist ideologies. Furthermore, these studies teach us to *see* race as a social construction (Frankenburg, 1993), while acknowledging that "there is an inherent definitional slipperiness and instability to whiteness, just as there is with all categories of race" (Rasmussen, Klienberg, Nexica, & Wray, 2001, p. 8).

The Study

Conducting this ethnographic study, I was interested in how young children developed their understandings about race, and whiteness in particular. The primary participants who informed those understandings were my three children: Ella (9 years old), Olivia (6 and 7 years old), and Max (5 years). I chose to study my 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; López-Robertson, 2014; Martens, 1996), I had daily and intimate access to their worlds, utterances, and activities.

Research Sites and Data Collection

The study's contexts encompassed my family's day-to-day lives as a middle class, white family in a Southern state often characterized by its historical and contemporaneously overt racial discrimination. However, the concern from which this study was built did not originate in a desire to understand overt racism. I wanted, rather, to know how whiteness is learned in small, usually unnoticed and mundane ways during the early childhood years. I wanted to understand how, beyond explicit racist or anti-racist teachings, my children were learning to be raced.

I situated my data collection in the home and community environments of my three young children recognizing that parent-research is an important contribution to the field of qualitative methodologies and early childhood education "because it deals with core process of intimate, unexpected encounters" (Baghban, 2014, p. 149). As in other parent-child studies and in any qualitative work, the insights gained are not posited as generalizable but as contributions to a growing body of research, in this case by focusing on the largely overlooked emphasis on race in early childhood education.

In my role as parent-researcher, I collected data in many of the places/settings/events in which my children engaged during the course of their day-to-day activities: the car, dance studio, church, family gatherings, etc. The primary methods for data collection were (a) audio and videotaped recordings, (b) ethnographic field notes, (c) photographed artifacts, and (d) my researcher's journal.

Data Analysis

Upon beginning the data analysis phase of my study, I scanned my field notes and artifacts into NVivo 10 ©. I read and reread the data and wrote notes in NVivo about what I believed to be initial categories (patterns and anomalies to those patterns). I downloaded my video and audio files into NVivo 10 as well and transcribed my data directly using NVivo's transcription tools. During the transcription process, preliminary themes were generated and I began constructing and labeling guiding themes using a color coded system. I also relied on other qualitative data analysis traditions such as Glasser and Strauss' constant comparison approach (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000; Grbich, 2007). Using NVivo 10's analysis tool, I analyzed data by running word frequency queries, tree diagrams, and colored coded node strips. As new relationships were formed in the data, categories were collapsed or expanded until I felt I had exhausted the data and sufficiently organized my findings. Borrowing from the advice of Bogdan and Biklen (2007), I speculated ideas about my findings during the entire data collection process by recording notes on the data I was working with and by reflecting on my data in my

researcher's journal. To organize, I generated folders to house preliminary themes I constructed. As those themes grew, I collapsed and re-collapsed preliminary themes until I felt I had exhausted my data and was comfortable that the categories I developed were representative of my findings (Agar, 1996).

Overview of Findings: The Pervasive Nature of Whiteness

More detailed discussions of findings can be found in other work (Miller, 2015; Nash & Miller, 2015), but briefly, findings from this study demonstrate that messages that normalized whiteness came through in a range of dominant discourses in the lives of my family through church and Sunday school, dance classes, magazines and catalogs that came through our mail drop, worksheets and texts from school, the images on packages of food on our shelves, the toys with which my children played, and the very neighborhood in which we lived. Over and over they received messages about the supremacy of whiteness through an over-representation of white people and characters and the exaltation of white people again and again through portrayals of civic, patriotic, and leadership roles in our community. These messages were, quite literally, *everywhere* and they were sustained by simultaneous messages that conveyed systematic oppression and degradation of blackness. Blackness was often portrayed in ways that conjured feelings of superiority, fear, pity, or hatred for my children. For example, pictures of brown-skinned and helpless looking orphans on toy drive fliers that were routinely stuck in our mail helped the children construct notions of blackness. Concurrently, there were also *discourses of omission* wherein the perspectives of persons of color were literally void in school curricula, neighborhood newsletters, daily mail, tv shows, songs on the radio, billboards, advertisements, and church bulletins.

These discourses of whiteness and blackness were the backdrop that led to my children's constructions of race. They were also recycled among those of us in our family and the wider world in which we lived. That is, as the world passed messages to us about hegemonic whiteness, we used those messages to construct our own microcosm of larger society, and thus reflected whiteness back out as the norm. For example, the children could not conceive of racially unnamed toys as anything but white. Max completely rejected the idea that yellow Legos could represent anything other than a white boy. The children were uncomfortable when they were in spaces with predominantly people of color saying things like, "There's too much brown people in here," and they learned to assign race as something that people other than white people had such as when Max asked a black nurse, "Hey, Man, why are you black all over?" but never asked the same question of the countless other white nurses he saw. The children also recycled whiteness by reappropriating it in the characters and plots of their play, in their drawings, and in their stories which *exclusively* centered on white people, *even* when they were representing actual experiences that included people of color.

Hardly a simplistic construction, I also learned that these understandings of race were situated within simultaneous *other* constructions of identity mediated by class, faith, nationalism, patriotism, etc. For example, whiteness overlapped with identifications with middle classness as the children repeatedly explained they were "in the middle" and "not poor" and "not rich." Middle class identification was, however, for the children, a white domain. The children categorized people of color across countries, continents and peoples – El Salvador, Africa, South America and Native American Indians – as people who were poor. Most of these assumptions

were learned in lessons about our church's missionary outreaches. The children also constructed the notion that material acquisition comes from either hard work or God which I unintentionally reinforced nightly when I said things like, "Put your napkin in your lap and thank God for your food." These and other insidious messages led the children to believe that God gives you what you have, rather than fostered an understanding of how racial privilege leads to material acquisition. Racial identity was also muddled as the children constructed an understanding, based on a learned teaching, that race was determined by God. For example, Max explained to me, "God made you white. God made me white. And God made Ella white and 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." In addition, learning to be white was confounded with learning an American identity centered on prideful connections to Western Europe. Images of English castles adorned covers of magazines, provided settings in picture books, backdrops at doctors' offices and were used as a source of inspiration for much child's play. Castle images conjured a glorification and unspoken and accepted bond to Western Europe while ignoring our connection to indigenous America and to other parts of the world. For example, songs the children sang with on the radio celebrated Western European colonization and promoted white supremacy such as Brad Paisely's lyrics in a popular song the children enjoyed: "My great-great-great granddaddy stepped off that ship/I bet he never dreamed we'd have all this."

These identity messages were not tidy – at times they were completely contradictory and often competed with each other for dominance. The children were not, however, merely silent absorbers of these messages. There were times when they pushed back against them. For example, they learned to question the absence of people of color in images of religious figures and popular cultural figures, such as Santa Claus. When looking for the invisibility of non-dominant cultures, they became enraged and at times, this led to actions like writing and posting letters to websites that advocated for more inclusive school curricula. Thus, within the imbricated nature of multiple identity narratives, my children seemed to both reify and reject whiteness. However, I ultimately concluded that despite my attempts at what I saw to be anti-racist parenting, it was not enough to stop the racist discourse that permeated our lives.

A New White Consciousness

Given the insidious nature of learned racist socialization and the pervasive nature of whiteness in my children's lives, I developed the foundational argument in which this article is situated: *to be able to interrupt discourses of whiteness/racism in children's lives, race - as it is socially taught and learned in the lives of white people - must be destroyed and relearned.* In arguing why such a relearning is important I turn to the work of literary scholars and social critics of the 21st century. In her essay, "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison (1993) describes an acute methodology in her search for truth in slave narratives. Given that the narratives she explores were written to be accepted by particular audiences that may not readily consent to the horror of slavery as described by its victim, she reads for recollections beyond the controlled text in order to "rip the veil" from the tidy narratives "whose real proceedings would be far too terrible to relate" (Morrison, 1995, p. 91). She draws distinct dichotomies between fact and truth arguing that "fact can exist without human intelligence but that truth cannot." In essence, Morrison calls for a search of truth that is hidden or denied in our collective narrative as a nation.

Likewise Pierre Nora (1989) believes that stories that hide truth are encrypted into “the histories of dominant cultures and societies [which] have most often bolstered ruling ideologies, philosophies or states that run roughshod over competing ideologies that do not carry commensurate ability to exert coercion and or force” (p.15). To Nora, this constructed history has replaced *real* memories. Our knowledge of constructed history resides only in residual sites of memory, or the artifacts, relics, museums, mottos, monuments, manuals, etc. that reshape and replace real memory. In contrast to sites of memories, critical scholars (Du Bois, 1940, 1994; Ellison, 1998; Morrison, 1993) have long since called for counter histories or counter memories – gesticulations of truth telling - that confront flawed and constructed histories found in these historical sites. These counter memories “can open up subversive spaces within dominant discourses that expand our sense of who we are and possibility create a more whole, more just society in defiance of structural evil” (Townes, 2006, p. 23). Likewise, Townes’ (2006) concept of the fantastic hegemonic imagination reminds us that stereotypes and myths found in history and in sites of memory lend a national (false) consciousness that is not real yet it exists in all of us “in the deep codings we live with and through US society” (p. 21). They are imagined, yet the ideologies they represent are engrained in our culture, reproducing white supremacy generation after generation.

For white people, confronting the colonial ghosts (López, 2005) that rest within the lies and omissions of truths in sites of memory can be painful and shameful and guilt-evoking and fear-evoking. Yet, philosophers of race (e.g., Sullivan, 2012) urge that this need not be a purely negative affair, that whites can both love and be critical of their white identifications (Jupp & Slattery, 2010) at the same time. The metaphor of the benu becomes helpful here. In succumbing to the pain of death by fire that is necessary when we are too old and too tired to live vigorously because we are exhausted by our own lies, we are in search of a better, more complete and humanized self. Lesser (2005), writes: “What stands between that self and us is what burns in the fire. Our illusions, our rigidity, our fear, our blame, our sense of separation: All of these – in varying and combinations – are what must die in order for a more true self to arise” (p. 56).

I situate my work in the interrogation of the deeply engrained messages that are encoded in early childhood in white children. In the aftermath of the destruction of the histories that are typically taught and learned in the lives of young children, a rebirth – a new, clearer, and more humane version of truth – can emerge. As elusive as truth may be, it necessitates that we deconstruct and eradicate systems of evil that form us – nationally and globally – with as much precision as we can. Like Shannon Sullivan (2012), I argue that young people are precisely the people with whom to initiate this work since it is the experiences we have or do not have in childhood that shape our racial identities. As Sullivan writes, “developing racial habits tend to be labile and capable of relatively easy redirection. Once sedimented in adulthood, however, habits (racial and otherwise) are relatively difficult to change” (p. 33). Thus, the work of the early childhood teacher becomes vast and vital: in addition to framing, defining, and developing the racial habitus of children, she must reframe, redefine, and redevelop her own conscious by burning the myths that were taught to her in order to regenerate a racial narrative built upon love. Here, I center my discussion on major implications from the highlighted study in an effort to regenerate a racial narrative of love. I concentrate upon foundational insights that I have come to believe are important in the rebirth of a white racial identity including suggestions for where and how adults might facilitate these new ways of thinking, focusing on those who have a role in the education of young children, and what I believe to be important directions for researchers of whiteness.

Where and How Might this Rebirth Occur?

In what contexts do we rebuild our consciousness? How? My children learned whiteness as superior because the messages they received were rarely interrupted in school, in extracurricular activities, at home, and at church. If a re-birth of white consciousness is to ultimately impact children like my own, then I believe that it must happen in *all* educational contexts, particularly schools, teacher education programs, and faith-based arenas. In these spaces, the history of how human beings came to be raced and the legacy of racism should be introduced to and unpacked with young children, older children, young adults, and the teachers and teacher educators who will work with them in schools and in places of worship. It cannot be haphazard. It cannot depend on a parent here or a teacher there who takes up this work. It is critical that this re-birth is systematically planned, explicit, and specifically focused on the understandings outlined earlier.

While there are many teachers across the country who consider critical issues with their students, critical studies often only examine the aftermath or the results of institutional oppression (Cowhey, 2006; Vasquez, 2008; Wade, 2007). While important, engaging young children in the examination of how things came to be in the first place because of imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, etc., links malleable systems of oppression with the real social realities they produce and reproduce and creates greater possibility for reversing the trajectory of perpetuated oppression. In early childhood contexts, this is of particular importance since research that has been done on young children's racial behaviors suggest that it is about the time we often think young children can interact with social issues (around the ages of eight and nine) that white children are *less* likely to engage in cross-racial understandings that could help them move beyond whiteness (Vendantam, 2010). In order to bring these conversations to light with young children, more opportunities are needed for classroom teachers, faith-based teachers, and teacher educators to read texts beyond the pedagogy of teaching, which all too often center on Western European-based theories. Even when alternate epistemologies are introduced in education courses, they are often done without examination of the structural and historical significance of racism. For example, while efforts are being made in some early childhood teacher education programs to include courses on pedagogies designed to support the achievement of children from multiple racial and cultural backgrounds, pedagogies and explorations of current inequities alone will not eliminate one consciousness for another. Addressing issues of internalized bias is deep work. As mentioned before, relearning consciousness means relearning history. In my study, I noticed how the children's racism was so deep, so unassumed that it was unnoticed. For example, the unconscious racist thoughts were so strong that Ella literally could not conceive that Katniss, the main character of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) could be a person of color even though the book explicitly named her as racially different from her blond haired, blue eyed sister and mother and of resemblance to her "olive skinned" father, adamantly defending her assertion that Katniss was white by stating, "The book would have told us if she was not white." Digging this deep into our consciousness to literally rewrite our racist assumptions requires an examination of resources across the fields of education, sociology, history, law, philosophy, and theology and I will discuss the importance of cross curricular studies in this benu like quest to relearn racism in later sections.

Educating the Educators

Educators cannot teach about the onset of racism if they do not know it themselves. Thus a vicious cycle needs to be stopped and educational contexts inhabited by those who teach teachers and teach children (universities, schools, places of worship) seem a likely place to begin. If early childhood teacher educators and teachers of children can better understand that racism was created not such a long time ago and begin to accept the ramifications of that realization, then hope that racism can be dismantled can operate as a guiding force.

For this to happen, teacher educators of early childhood education must have spaces in their professional lives to dialogue about issues of race and racism. Too often there exists an ethos in colleges and universities that the professors invested in work with our nation's youngest children (often white and middle class) are not bound by racist ideologies, that advanced degrees are symbolic of anti-racism. This is not true. Liberation from racism is not a decree of an advanced educational program or a characteristic of white middle-classness. In advocating for a body of literature named *Trash Crit*, which includes the voices of all lower-class white people in developing anti-racists movements that could be used in classrooms, Sullivan (2014) states:

Middle class white people are not the exclusive site of truth about racial justice ...to assume that they possess the answers to questions about race and white domination and that they know in advance who can make helpful contributions to racial justice movements is to replicate problematic structures of exclusion central to white domination. (p. 58)

This call is situated on a larger plea from scholars like Palmer (1998) who caution against the creation of static caricatures of white pre-service teacher students which may serve to elevate the status of their instructors who look “noble comparison to the barbaric young [while placing] the courses of students’ problems far upstream from the place where our lives converge with theirs” (p. 41). When white scholars can admit our incompetence in dealing with issues of race and racism, we can begin to turn to each other, to scholars of color, and the academic literature to help recognize the blind spots in racist socialization. I do not intend this to mean that whites can save other whites, but rather that, in our racial death, we may not have all of the answers and we may feel uncomfortable but we also will eventually become more humane through our pain. I believe that all teacher educators can take up these questions without falling prey to the stifling and paralyzing effects of guilt and shame.

Similarly, places of worship often carry the same assumption, that leaders in faith-based settings are bias-free. Just as educators in universities and schools must admit their limited understandings in order to grow, so too must those working in faith-based contexts. At the same time, each of these venues must make it clear that embracing an intellectual spirit means ensuring the safety (professional, personal, and physical) of courageous scholars of color and white scholars who are willing to preface critical interrogations of self and practice. In the following sections, I share a few ideas for specific spaces where these critical conversations and this re-birth might be initiated for those who teach the teachers of young children.

Exploring racial questions in small study groups. One place this rebirth can start in these contexts is through small study groups centered on race and racism and engaged in by teachers and administrators in schools, university faculty, and in places of worship. In school-

based settings, district support will be key. Yancy (2012) argued that whites may need to utilize white-only spaces to develop competence with which to engage in discussions of race and racism. I believe it is critical, in these white-only spaces, that white leaders of discussion groups are brave enough to admit, as Jensen (2005) has, that “I am a white person living in a white-supremacist society who still sometimes feels racist feelings in his body, thinks racist thoughts in his head, and acts in subtle (and on occasion, not-so-subtle) racist ways in the world” (p. 72). Thus recognition of racism is a starting point. Then, whites can move to discussions of questions such as, “What does race have to do with [God, Christianity, Early Childhood Education, teacher education, etc.]?” as a powerful leading inquiry. Another powerful beginning is to assume that we are all implicated by racism then asking, “How I am benefitted or marginalized by whiteness through this [curriculum, test, lesson, program, etc.]?” Cassidy (2012) argued that a further approach to interrogating whiteness is to examine photographs of human suffering, prolific in American society, and ask questions that interrogate the white privilege in those photographs, such as:

- Does this image interrupt or reinscribe the stereotypes of people who look like this or share this social position?
- Is this suffering avoidable and how so?
- If a loved one or I were in this photograph, how might I want this image to be different?

While a curriculum for such study groups is not the intention of this article, the few ideas presented above are shared as a starting point.

Doctoral programs. Doctoral programs in colleges of education are often the training ground for future early childhood teacher educators. As such, if we are to transform teacher education to create spaces for the re-education of prospective teachers, serious attention must be paid to the transformation of early childhood doctoral programs. As a beginning point, doctoral students should become familiar with the racial histories left out of our understandings about how we came to be raced. In the process, graduate students should become intimately familiar with the work of scholars from under-represented groups who have, for centuries, argued for a confrontation of whiteness. Too often, the voices of persons of color exist only on the periphery of doctoral programs, their work subjugated to additional or optional reading lists, rather than located in the essential cannon of every discipline. Townes (2006) expressed that these optional reading lists only “rescue the killers” (p. 151), meaning that such lists just reify and provide a place of safety for white scholars and their white students. If early childhood doctoral programs are serious about committing to the overhaul of white supremacy, a starting point could be an examination of required texts. A commitment to maintaining or rejecting white supremacy will likely become painstakingly clear from this one exercise alone. From that point, topics, courses, and the paradigms that are foundational to programs and their practices must be examined for a commitment to exposing reifications of white supremacy, which include a silencing of the voices of scholars and researchers of color.

Educators Using Their Re-Education

As teacher educators, doctoral students, and leaders in faith-based contexts grow through their own re-education, their understandings can only reach the lives of young children if they use their knowledge to transform programs of preservice teacher education, faith-based educational contexts, and schools. Thus, the suggestions in this section build from the premise that the most powerful way to transform a society is to transform the understandings of young children.

Preservice teacher education. Often in early childhood teacher education programs, conversations about race and racism occur in one or two courses *if they occur at all*. Since one of my main theorizations is the insidious nature of messages of whiteness and blackness in the lives of children, and it will take far more than one or two courses for preservice teachers to deconstruct racial consciousness and that those courses must be linked with one another and with all other courses including experiences beyond colleges of education.

Reaching beyond colleges of education. For early childhood teachers to develop understandings necessary to interrupt and reverse racist norms in schools and society, histories of racism need to be foundational – as *beginning* courses – in teacher preparation programs. To do this well, it is essential that thoughtful critical race and whiteness scholars are tapped for their expertise and guidance, particularly critical race theorists and whiteness theorists of color who understand racism in a way white scholars cannot. What this means is that early childhood teacher educators can no longer situate learning to teach in colleges of education alone; it is critical that we build a broader, global understanding of historical constructs by reading and dialoguing about the work of philosophers of race like Du Bois (1940, 1994), Baldwin (1965; 1972), and Ellison (1964) who represent the fields of literary and social criticism, sociology, and history as readily as we read and dialogue about educational philosophers and theorists popular in early childhood teacher education classrooms such as Dewey (1916) and Kozol (2005). Finally, teacher education programs can also deepen their ability to re-educate by requiring students to access connections to current and contemporary writers of race who post blogs reflecting on social issues of blackness and whiteness such as those found at www.racialicious.com (Peterson, 2011). In these ways, pushing our learning beyond colleges of education as *required* elements of an early childhood preservice teacher education degree, we can begin to create systematically organized educational contexts that contribute to rebuilding white consciousness.

Going beyond reading about white privilege. Rather than centering discussions of race and racism on personal white privilege alone (a common practice in many programs of early childhood teacher education), I believe that it is more transformative to think toward an anti-white supremacist early childhood teacher education curricula that examines the societal structures that grant such privileges (Lensmire et al., 2013). While Peggy McIntosh's (1988) epic piece (which outlines a list of privileges McIntosh enjoys because she is white), "White and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies," is a mainstay in many early childhood teacher education programs as the primary piece on white racism, relearning a racial consciousness will take more than merely encouraging white people to confess their privileges (Levine-Rasky, 2002). Leonardo (2005) explains that "Privilege is the daily cognate of structural domination" (p. 48).

Internship placements, coaching teachers, and supervision support. In many schools and universities, diversity is a check-off list that is achieved when early childhood teacher education candidates have been placed in diverse school settings with populations of students unlike themselves. This is an important step in helping students raise familiarity and comfort

with groups outside of their own cultural comfort zones, yet it is not enough. The re-education of prospective early childhood teachers requires a village effort which means that re-education must also take place for any adults involved in preservice programs including coaching teachers and student teaching supervisors in internship placements. Coaching teachers who accept student teachers and supervisors who work with those students all find themselves in a web of racial complexity and complicity every time they enter into a school setting. By collaborating in teams (teacher educators, coaching teachers, student teachers, and supervisors) to understand how the schools in which they are situated are a part of a larger history – a history of oppression and resistance – can lead to broader understandings about teaching being an act that is not isolated from the past in which it was born or the future into which it will evolve. Working within this knowledge, these school-based teams, support by district administrators, can collaboratively ask questions about where white supremacy exists in particular school-based contexts and work together to address the origin of those sites of oppression. For example, simply learning the histories of the communities impacted in order to build the very schools in which those professional sites exist could lead to uncomfortable but necessary conversations about racial power. Upon researching the history of her elementary school for a racial memory assignment in one of my pre-service elementary teacher education courses, one student found that her school was built near a structure that was burned to the ground in the early 1920s while occupied by African Americans, including one African American child. Upon learning this, the student shared, “Regardless of my personal experiences it wasn’t until these very moments when I realized that Alexander County, my home, was founded on something more than Southern Baptist Christianity. It is in these moments when I realized that the origins of my home aren’t as beautiful as the illustration of the home I’ve developed in my mind (James, personal communication, 2015). Simply researching the racial history of her elementary school and hometown led this student to the beginning of a racial re-education for this future teacher.

Obviously, the realities of education today make little room for honest discourse about race, yet when administrators and leaders are serious about addressing these issues, they could restructure professional development days so that these conversations are a priority and that time and funding are set aside to make them happen, creating opportunities for faculty to understand that issues of race and racism are not separate from issues of content and standards.

Considering a liberal arts model. The liberal arts were historically considered the essential bodies of knowledge that one must possess in order to take an active part of civic and public life, particularly service related fields. I can think of no other profession that is designed for the service to others more than the early childhood teaching profession, yet far too often, programs in teacher education require a liberal arts foundation that include courses designed and taught from Western European epistemologies primarily, if a liberal arts foundation is required at all. More and more fast-track teaching degree programs that focus on in-practice training from teachers who may or may not have anti-racist understandings are being used as replacement for programs that emphasize liberal arts understandings as they are connected to formal school and schooling. For a consciousness to be rebuilt, however, it is essential that pre-service teachers learn to critique Western European philosophies from an anti-white supremacist stance and to connect non-Western European philosophies, histories, policies, and perspectives to their potential for transforming an educational system that was designed to privilege white people. As discussed later, this should start in early childhood classrooms, but it must extend to college classrooms as well. One way to start is simply to reject Western European histories as the comparative norm for all other histories and start building new curricula that value and honor the voices and

epistemologies of persons of color. In working collaboratively, early childhood teacher education programs and programs from other disciplines can develop shared objectives that each program can bring to life in unique ways through the readings, engagements, and pedagogies in a myriad of courses across liberal arts disciplines.

The early childhood classroom. Young children have knowledge of and can construct sophisticated views about race and racism and their roles to sustain or interrupt it. Therefore, it is important that early childhood classroom teachers should not shy away from issues of race and racism, fearing that their children will not understand such complex issues; rather, they should introduce and confront them head-on. In fact, it is in early childhood classrooms (in schools and in faith-based settings) that the overhaul of white consciousness should begin. Maturation alone does not bring an awakened consciousness. Only an ongoing study of the history of human beings as raced, engagement in social critique, and learning strategies for taking action against white supremacy have the potential, in my view, to lead to lasting change. Thus, social critique and an introduction to the history and contemporary state of oppression and privilege should not be withheld during the early years. By waiting to discuss issues of race and racism, children receive more and more whiteness messages that only solidify white supremacy in their minds. Furthermore, some early childhood educators claim they do not want to breach topics of race and racism with young children because they want to protect them from uncomfortable topics, yet this is often a mask for the fact that many early childhood educators themselves do not have the comfort levels or strategies to address these issues, nor do they understand how they relate to issues of student academic achievement.

This challenges current dominant views about young children's ability to understand issues of race and perspectives other than their own. Even young children are likely to have already internalized a lifetime of messages about the normalization and supremacy of whiteness; given opportunities, they are capable of not only reproducing but also questioning those messages in important ways. If we are sincere in our desire to change this, there is no other choice than for the development of positive racial identities of young children to be foundational to teaching, learning, and curriculum in early childhood classrooms. An important implication from my study is that children should not be excluded from the explicit conversations we have as adults working toward a new white consciousness. Simply by virtue of the fact that they are exposed to anti-racist discourse among adults, children may be well positioned to explore an anti-racist stance. This questioning stance can happen as easily for a five year old as it can for a nine year old. Therefore, I believe it is imperative that we do not lock ourselves into developmental stages of appropriateness related to discussing and confronting issues of race. What matters more than the maturational age of the child are the conditions in which the child is situated that support or do not support critical conversations about race.

Many young children of color have been exposed to and engage in discussion of race from birth. For many of them, it is not a choice; it is apprenticeship into norms that will allow them to interact within, react to, and understand how to negotiate the racist, white supremacist world around them. In my study, the conversations that led to an interruption of whiteness for my children were also intentional, but my children did not need them to be able to succeed (in the traditional sense of the word), in an unjust world. In other words, they must gain the skills and knowledge necessary to interact with, react to, and *change* a racist, white supremacist world. In addition, while I was purposeful in initiating discussions about race with my children and brought my own intent to interrupt whiteness in many of my responses to them, our racial discussions occurred, not as isolated lessons, but in the context of day-to-day discourse. I found

that, the more regular and contextualized our conversations about race became, the more comfortable they became, and the more we engaged in them. I also learned that rather than hush the children's racial observations (my instinctive response before starting the study), it was more important to use them as discussion starters. For example, the following observation from Ella while we were riding through an African American neighborhood one day started a long-term conversation about the racialization of neighborhoods in our area.

Ella: I don't like seeing the black people on the side of the road, walking.

Author: Why?

Ella: It makes me feel like they don't have homes.

The bottom line is that without childhood discussions of race because of the overriding assumption by many white people that young children will not understand racism or that they should be shielded from it until they have reached a particular maturational age (which is an impossible quest to begin with and clearly a deflection strategy used habitually by white adults who have not examined their own raced existence in ways that move them beyond guilt and shame), children will figure out on their own how they are racially located. To be able to talk about race with young children (or anyone), however – a topic that many white people have been taught not to talk about - requires an active anti-racist/anti-white supremacist stance, one that I believe can only be built through the re-think of the very way race is socially constructed.

Implications for Further Research

I came to some new understandings about myself as a white researcher studying race that I believe could provide insight for other researchers as they confront their roles in not only the research process but in society. I realized, for example, as I began to analyze data that, despite my belief that I was not racist, I perpetuated racism in many ways of which I was not previously aware. I learned through my study, that as a researcher and a human being, it was important for me to move away from thinking in terms of Good White People and Bad White People. Racism is not partisan – *all* whites are implicated in and benefit from white supremacy. Instead of defending a status as Good Whites (especially as Good Liberal Whites)—particularly the Good White who may be viewed as good because she is contributing to the empirical discussion of racism—white people/researchers should accept that they are implicated by being a part of a larger racist regime and think about their actions—decisions they make about what to study, ideologies that frame their work, research designs, and methods of data analysis—as either condoning racism or acting with anti-racist intention.

Conclusion

In this article, I provided an overview of findings from a parent-child study that led to implications for those who work with our nation's youngest children. Using the benu bird as a metaphor for the death and rebirth that needs to happen in relation to race, I argue that without engagement in conversations that consider the social construction of race, our children, through our silence will theorize about race just as my children did based on the messages they receive

from the world around them. If allowed to cement over time, there will be few places for understanding race beyond notions that race, and white supremacy in particular, is a fixed truth. As my children did, they may use messages received from the larger world to link race with God-given traits, socio-economic status, moral leaders, patriotism, etc. The often subliminal but also direct and visible messages received and appropriated by my children lead me to understand vividly a statement made by Lillian Smith (1949), a long time social critic of the Southern United States and white ally with the Civil Rights movement who said: “I do not remember how or when, but by the time I had learned that God is love, that Jesus is His Son and came to give us more abundant life, that all men are brothers with a common Father, I also knew that I was better than a Negro” (as cited in Yancy, 2012, p. 28). My children, like Smith, learned and were reminded every day that they were racially-superior to persons of color despite the fact that I was committed to raising children who would not succumb to whiteness as supreme. I feel certain that just as my three white children received strong messages about their own superiority, their peers of color were receiving converse messages about their place in the world. The experiences of all children remind us of the insidious work of racism that the implications of this work seek to illuminate and that its implications seek to destroy. Early childhood remains the most promising place to do this because young children have an acute sense that our current racialized system is not fair; more than anyone, it is the childrens’ observations that let us know it is time for race, as it is currently known and experienced by many whites, to die and be reborn as something better than it currently is. In the aftermath of a destruction of race as it is currently known and taught, rebirth and renewal is waiting.

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