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## Discourses of whiteness and blackness: an ethnographic study of three young children learning to be white

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In blatant, but nuanced and often invisible ways, racism continues to exist globally, nationally and locally, implicating us all. The insidious nature of racism is deeply rooted in the lives of young children. In order to interrupt and reverse those practices, we must know how race is constructed during the early years. This study looked closely at the lives of three white children to identify and examine discourses in their worlds that unveiled how they learned to be raced.

**Keywords:** race; racism; whiteness; ethnography; early childhood; education; home and community research contexts

Ella (six-year-old white child): Are they going to kick us out?

Author: Who?

Ella: The African Americans at the church.

Author: Why would they kick us out?

Ella: Because of all the bad things we did to them!

The data excerpt above were collected during a conversation I had with my daughter on our way to a small, rural African-American church – Two Mile Creek Baptist – in South Carolina, a Southern state in the USA. This conversation ultimately led me to years of study on issues of race and racism in early childhood. Ella was, in a sophisticated way, connecting past and present realities. She knew she was white. She knew that whites had done bad things to persons of colour a long time ago; she figured that people of colour were still upset about it and therefore, really did not really want whites, including us, hanging around in a predominately African-American place of worship on a Sunday morning. In school, she learned a sanitized version of forced desegregation and the civil rights movement, leading her to believe the ‘bad things’ were in the past; however, the world in which she lived told a different story – a story of hyper segregation where gross imbalances of power and access to resources between persons of colour and whites are displayed clearly in day-to-day realities. She seemed to understand that we were deliberately crossing those boundaries that morning and it made her nervous. Looking back, I now realise my response undermined her ability to think about race and racism in complex ways; I performed a discourse in whiteness that reinforced the powerful lessons

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she was learning about what it means to be and act white: ‘Of course not, Ella’, I said, ‘That was a long time ago and things are different now’.

I open with the story of Ella and me because of the widely documented concern for the nuanced, sometimes silent and often invisible ways that racism continues to exist globally, nationally and locally, implicating us all in conjunction with my belief that there is much we have yet to explore about how these nuances occur in the lives of young children. The role of educators, parents, commercial entities, religious and political institutions, and policy-makers in maintaining a racially stratified society is not something that suddenly manifests in adulthood (Thandeka 2007; Sullivan 2003). Rather racism in its implicit forms (i.e. beyond explicit demonstrations of racist behaviour) is insidious (Jensen 2005) as it is taught and learned in the lives of children. As a result, these childhood norms can become internalised adult ideologies (Sullivan 2003, 2006) if they are not questioned, challenged and changed which can be done *if* their germination is understood. This study was grounded in the body of literature that suggests that one way to begin challenging racism is to understand how whiteness becomes normalised in our everyday lives. Thus, in referring to whiteness, I draw upon the work of prominent scholars (i.e. Lensmire 2008; Thandeka 1999) who describe whiteness as a normalised way of being, a normalisation that occurs through the on-going oppression of persons of colour globally, nationally and locally. Paralleling this conceptualisation of whiteness, I refer to blackness as a racial existence shared by persons of colour that is predicated upon the inequitable consequences of living in a racist regime. When I use the terms ‘race’ or ‘racial’, I am referring to the social construct of race, or the meanings we assign to racial differences (Frankenburg 1993).

### Research purpose and questions

The purpose of this study was to look closely at the lives of three children to identify and examine what and how they learn from performance discourses in their social and cultural worlds about what it means to be white. To accomplish this, I used critical ethnography methodologies to gather data over a 9-month period of time in the lives of my son (aged 6 years) and two daughters (aged 7 and 10 years), guided by two questions:

- 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?
- How do languages provide tools for these children to construct, deconstruct, normalise and/or resist whiteness?

This work is significant in three interconnecting ways. Firstly, it has the potential to fill gaps in the literature about children’s ability to understand race and racism in general. While much work in early childhood education points to young children as capable and complex thinkers in their own right (Dyson 2003; Paley 1997; Gregory, Long, and Volk 2004), recognition of young children as capable of constructing understandings about race is largely unexamined in the field of education and in the field of critical race studies. Secondly, although whiteness studies have grown in number over the past few decades across multiple disciplines, there are still relatively few in the field of education as they relate to and involve young children (Rogers and Mosley 2006). Studies of race in early education often centre on teaching anti-racism and culturally relevant pedagogy (Cowhey 2006; Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2006) which are similar to, but distinct from, how white children come to know themselves as white. Finally, the studies of young children’s construction of race and studies that *do* exist have been conducted

primarily in school settings (Aboud 2003; Ausdale and Feagin 2001; Rogers and Mosley 2006). While there are many studies that focus on children's learning outside of school (Corsaro 2004; Long 2004; Martens 1996; Valdés 1996; Volk 2004), few of those focus on young children's construction of understanding about race (Ausdale and Feagin 2001).

Reflections by adults on the ways they learned to be raced as children are common in the field of critical race and whiteness studies (Frankenburg 1993; Helms 1992; Thandeka 2007), yet little research examines how those understandings are constructed *in process*. An exception to this is Carter's (2010) study in which she found, through group interviews, ethnographic field notes and surveys, how students' 'cultural flexibility' (1562), or ability to move across cultural boundaries in mixed race schools was indicative of efforts to 'realize the visions of social integration' (1567). Additionally, Lewis' (2003) study in three different schools reveals how racism is reproduced and challenged through curricula and mediated by adults. However, more attention is needed to the ways younger children can likewise challenge racist practices.

Examining racism from the microcosm of one family's discourse is one way of interrogating the cultural reification of implicit bias and racialised norms in early childhood. Working within the economic and finance systems that both created and structured racism in the USA (racism that has been informed by and has also inspired other oppressive regimes across the globe (Black 2012; Woodward 2001), it is important to examine how these forces of power are mirrored and recreated in the most mundane spaces of everyday life, particularly in the learning lives of young children. While research into the history of how human beings became raced demonstrates the conceptualisation of race as necessary to ensuring the wealth of dominant social groups (Roediger 2007; Smith 2007), little had been done to look at how this ideology of superiority continues to be perpetuated in early childhood. This is important because whiteness works through its covertness and it works despite the fact that America has become less white from a colour spectrum. Indeed, white supremacy can be maintained with a small group of people and it can also be maintained by those who are not white.

While efforts of people of colour and white people to challenge racist ideology over the last 300 in the USA are humanising waves of resistance, race remains the *number one indicator of well-being* across all institutions – health, education, law, etc. For example, In the USA, black babies are twice as likely as white babies to die before their first birthday, black youth are twice as likely as white youth to drop out of school and twice as likely as whites to be fuelled into the school to prison pipeline (Children's Defense Fund, 2014). These current statistics are not without historical antecedents. While a detailed analysis of the ways that racism structured the inequality of the USA, and the ways that neo-liberalism have maintained it (in spite of progress that has been made), are beyond the scope of this article, it is important to understand that historical legal policies have condoned, embedded and perpetuated racism in American society across the past two centuries; for example, the 1790 Naturalization Law specified that only free white immigrants were eligible for citizenship, the 1934 Federal Housing manuals and practices codified the channelling of funds to white neighbourhoods, and the liberal reforms (i.e. affirmative action) of the second half of the twentieth century worked against efforts for true Civil Rights reform benefiting more whites than people of colour. In sum, in spite of clear progress that has been made through civil rights movements, racism in US politics, economics and educational structures has persisted across time (Roediger 2007; Smith 2007) Thus, for a comprehensive approach to dismantling racism, it is important that these structural factors are acknowledged as they cradle our most intimate cultural, familial interactions.

### Theoretical underpinnings

I draw upon a compilation of ideas from critical race theory, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and discursive theories of whiteness, examined in a framework of race as culturally, socially and historically constructed, to describe the assumptions that guided my approach to this study. First, my thinking is influenced by Ladson-Billings' (1998) description of critical race theory as encompassing the following ideas: (1) racism is a fixture of American life; (2) experiential knowledge is valued, (3) legal policies have often worked against efforts for true Civil Rights reforms and (4) whites, not persons of colour, have benefited from liberal reforms.

CDA views language as social practice (Fairclough 2001; Wodak and Meyer 2009) organised around three tenets: (1) language is a part of society, not external to it; (2) language is a social process in that it encompasses knowledge about particular representations of social worlds, values, beliefs and assumptions; and (3) language is conditioned by other non-linguistic forms of society. Like all critical theories, the primary aim of CDA is to enable human beings to emancipate themselves from oppression by revealing structures of power and by unveiling ideologies (Fairclough 2001).

I also align my beliefs with Rogers and Mosley (2006), who, drawing on the theories of van Dijk (1987) argued that discursive theories of whiteness focus on how 'racism is perpetuated in subtle, symbolic, and discursive ways – through talk and everyday text' (Rogers and Mosley 2006, 467). Thus, my work includes attention to the nuanced ways we use language to shape our ideological orientations and worldview. I grounded this study in the belief that, by calling attention to the features of implicit racism by examining discourses of whiteness, we might begin to better understand how to rewrite common scripts of racism that are often transmitted via cultural discourse from and among generations.

### Methodologies

In studying language through critical discourse, we must understand that racism is not an abstract system of social inequality, but surfaces through every day interactions. In relying in part on the cultural ways that whiteness can be understood within a larger system of oppression, critical ethnography can inform studies of race and young children, leading to an awareness and self-critique of white researchers, teacher educators and parents that can question dominant, racialised practices. Long-term immersion with participants in their cultural worlds and careful attention to how knowledge is constructed in fluid and contextual ways are hallmarks of ethnography. At the heart of *critical* ethnography is the intention to confront the reproduction of power: critical ethnographers believe there is real oppression to be found and that finding strategies for alleviating it should be included in methodologies (Lather 1986). When considering whiteness as a focus of critical ethnography, it is important to state that although whites have been centred for decades in almost every aspect of our society, focus is rarely given to the racialised nature of being white. Too often, whites feel that race and racism have little to do with themselves and underestimate their role as racial actors within larger systems that normalise whiteness and produce systems that secure white supremacy.

Primary participants in this study were my three young children: Ella (aged 9 years), Olivia (aged 6 and 7 years during the study) and Max (aged 5 years). I chose to study my own children because (1) at the time of the study, they fell within or near the American National Association for the Education of Young Children's definition of what it means to be a young child in America (birth through aged 8 years) (<http://www.naeyc.org>); (2) they

self-identified as being white; and (3) they were growing up in a mostly white community. I concentrated on my own children because I had access to unfiltered, intimate, familial moments that would be difficult for an outsider to obtain. I drew inspiration in terms of the advantages of my role from other parent researchers (Bissex 1980; Long 2004) whose positions as insiders in the worlds of their children profoundly strengthened the knowledge base in their respective fields of study.

Although it can be argued that any study lacks objectivity because it is ultimately conducted, analysed, interpreted and articulated to others by human beings who can never be completely objective, it is nonetheless important that I address my own subjectivity: I am the mother of my research participants. This is an enormous position of power and privilege. To minimise the effects of my own power, I interacted with my children in ways that were consistent with the way my parental interactions even if I were not completing a study while recognising that, as in *all* studies, my involvement necessarily shaped the design of and, to some extent, the participants' responses to it. However, although their lives are driven by adults, children do not lack agency to address and construct social concepts by their own lived experiences. Knowing this, I entered this study with the underlying belief that my children are intelligent, social beings who are meaning makers who have a great deal to teach me.

I situated my data collection in the children's home and community environments and events: nightly baths, meals, rides in the car, extra-curricular activities, etc. These settings were important because they were spaces where my children engaged socially with others outside of formal school moving in and out of their roles as learners and teachers by interacting with siblings, parents, grandparents, friends, Sunday schoolteachers, ballet and gym teachers, etc.

The primary sources of data were (1) audio and videotaped i-phone recordings, (2) ethnographic field notes, (3) photographed artefacts and (4) my researcher's journal. I also took field notes and asked informal interview questions. I transcribed data directly in NVivo 10 using its transcription tools. During the transcription process, preliminary themes were generated and coded. Following the completion of all data collection, I read and reread the data and wrote notes and reflections about what I believed to be initial categories (patterns and anomalies to those patterns). Using NVivo 10's analysis tools, I analysed data by running word frequency queries, tree diagrams and coloured coded node (or category) strips. As new relationships were formed in the data, categories were collapsed or expanded until I felt I had exhausted the data and sufficiently organised the findings. In this article, I highlight findings that specifically came from audio-recorded conversations.

## Findings

I collected data for approximately 9 months; in all of that time, I captured less than 10 explicit, in-depth conversations about race. Yet, as I began to analyse data, I realised that it was not necessary for my children to have explicit conversations about skin colour and the social implications of racial difference for them to receive, construct, appropriate and/or interrupt racialised discourse messages. Every time the mail came; every time they watched cartoons, rode in our car in and out of affluent, middle class, and low-income neighbourhoods, went to a store or doctor's office; and/or when they studied ballet, jazz, or guitar, they learned that whites are racially dominant and privileged. The findings presented here (one of three major findings in the study) demonstrate how, in the worlds of my children, messages of whiteness as the norm were prolific yet camouflaged

by banality. They were so interwoven into the backdrop of our lives that they were easily indistinguishable to the untrained eye. In fact, training our eyes to become aware of racial hegemony became an important part of this study and something I discuss in detail in other work (Miller 2012). Findings also illustrate how messages of *whiteness as normalised* were sustained by the simultaneous systematic oppression and degradation of blackness. These messages are described here as discourses: discourses of whiteness and discourses of blackness. Although I describe them separately for clarity, I found they were intertwined throughout the course of the study. In our lives, discourses about whiteness and blackness overlapped in constant, rhythmic and almost indistinguishable ways, their racialisation barely noticeable to us at all.

### **Discourses of whiteness**

In the following section, I introduce some of the discourses of whiteness, followed by an examination of how the children appropriated those discourses to construct whiteness for themselves. Readers may wonder what my role was in interrupting discourses that privileged whiteness. I have intentionally tried to present data that describe the discourses themselves to foreground the finding that messages of whiteness permeating the children's lives. My own interruption (or lack thereof) was another important finding (that further demonstrates the complexity of learning to be raced); it is described in detail in other work (Miller 2012).

### ***Discourses of over-representation***

Within the hundreds of examples of texts and images in my children's worlds explored through this study, white people were *everywhere*. Thus, discourses of over-representation became foundational in weaving a story of racial dominance for my children. The images generally came into our home through the mail or through the children's home/school folders sent home by their teachers, but sometimes they were purchased by the children or me as magazines and journals, admittedly without much of an awareness of how over-populated our home already was with white people. Although the children did not actively handle all of the materials that came into our home, even small glimpses of images and texts accumulated over time, contributed hugely to a backdrop of white people as dominant, central, positive, normal.

### ***White people driving a capitalist society***

Each week, stacks of catalogues from companies such as *wishworks*, *Land's End*, *Pottery Barn Kids*, *Mini-Boden*, *Justice*, and *tea* were inserted into our mail flap. The dominant images of fashion and clothing that bombarded our world were of smiling, well-dressed, white people. In fact, out of a total number of 423 images randomly gathered from one of each of the catalogues we received most often, 380, or 89.8% were of white models while only 43, or 10.2% of the total pictured models of colour. The assumption seems clear that the companies chose an abundance of white models because they wanted to appeal to targeted market that is white and middle to upper-middle class: white people buy more products so they are represented more in advertisements. However, the disproportionate number of white people to persons of colour in these catalogues can hardly be accepted as benign marketing. It sends a strong message of white supremacy, through the

over-representation of white people in catalogue ads. This was a message my children were receiving, however subliminally it might have been, every day.

### *White people as foremost in the educational process*

Each of my children's teachers sent home a daily school-to-home folder placed in the children's bookbags. Inside the folders were worksheets, reminders, field trip permission forms, PTO fundraisers. Families were expected to read the papers and send the folders back to school. In general, the collective message of this paperwork oozed whiteness. Not only were images of white people all over these papers but text on daily worksheets usually reflected names associated with European Americans – Nancy, Sue and Sally. It is important to mention this use of names as it reflects the well-documented attempts to 'white-ify' people of colour through the assigning and promotion of 'white' names. This is told over and over again in America throughout history and particularly in schools where teachers have often renamed children to suit the teachers' comfort and convenience (e.g. changing Latonya to Tonya or Juan Carlos to Juan or Mariana to Mary Ann (Kinloch 2007; Souto-Manning 2011)).

In addition to the many worksheet artefacts, monthly *Scholastic* book order forms were placed in children's folders regularly. Overwhelmingly, the books that were advertised featured white characters. An analysis of the book covers illustrated on the *Scholastic* fliers that came home in Max's folder from September to April, revealed a total of 600 human characters pictured on the fliers. Of those 600 characters, 531 or 89% of were white. White characters also dominated the book sets highlighted in the *Scholastic* fliers. For example, Junie B. Jones, Mrs. Frizzle, Captain Underpants, Fancy Nancy and Amelia Bedelia were often highlighted as beloved characters. White singers such as Justin Bieber and white actors like Daniel Radcliffe were featured in books that reflected popular culture. *Not one* of the eight *Scholastic* book orders that Max brought home from September through April featured a book about a person of colour with the exception of the popular character, Dora the Explorer, who, while designed to represent Latino culture, was presented in caricature form.

### *White people as generic*

During the study, Max received his first Lego® set. After that, it was hard to tear him away from Legos® as his toy of choice. When visiting my mother's house one weekend, he found my brother's 21-year-old Lego® set and played with it for hours. His goal, as he put it, was 'to build a whole Lego® city'. In his entire collection of Lego® people, not one featured brown or black skin. Rather, each Lego® person was painted yellow. The hair on the Lego® people was orangish-yellow, brown or reddish brown; it was always straight. According to Diaz (2008), author of *Everything you always wanted to know about Legos*, Lego® people were 'given the iconic yellow skin tone to reflect the non-specific and transcendental quality of a child's imagination' (Trivia section, Para. 9); however, despite the intentions of the makers of Legos® to create non-specifically raced people, Max did not hold race-neutral observations of his Legos®. He considered the yellow paint to represent white skin. In an informal interview, I mentioned to Max that all of the Legos® he had collected over the previous 6 months were yellow. It took Max a few minutes to understand that I was referring to their skin colour so I asked him, 'So what color are they? Are they white? Are they brown?' Max responded, 'They're actually supposed to be um white'. The conversation continued:



Author: If this Lego® were to come alive right now, what color skin would it have?

Max: Yellow [laughing, then pausing]. OK, white.

Author: If the Legos® were to become real boys, what color would they be?

Max: Yellow! Just kidding, they'd be white!

The example of Max and his Legos® illustrates how the discourses of over-representation were so prolific during my study, they were even present in toys intended to promote race neutrality. Because my son interpreted the supposedly race neutral toys as white, they were another example of how ubiquitously whiteness existed in our world.

### **Discourses of omission**

If white people were grossly over-represented in the textual and visual materials that proliferated the texts that came into our home, a simultaneous omission of persons of colour and perspectives of persons of colour was also dominant. To illustrate how glaring these omissions were, I highlight omissions of persons of colour and non-dominant perspectives found in one of many data sources: the children's school curricula.

#### ***In school curricula***

In her fourth grade history curriculum, 9-year-old Ella studied typically highlighted moments in American history: colonialism, slavery, westward expansion, the Civil War, etc. These events were studied largely through weekly magazines titled *USA Studies Weekly: A Weekly Magazine for Young Students of U.S. History* (American Legacy Publishing 2012) and *South Carolina Studies Weekly: A Weekly Newspaper for Young Students of South Carolina History* (American Legacy Publishing 2012). Ella told us that she enjoyed the magazines because they 'explained things in ways that kids could understand'.

Consistent with the literature that documents the Eurocentric perspective of the stories American students are told about American history (Loewen 2007), the stories Ella read in the texts she used to research school projects were developed from a white dominant (presented as neutral) and often romanticised perspective that grossly omitted other viewpoints. For example, one of the newspapers on Antebellum South Carolina contained an article about economic growth during this time period and opened with the following two sentences: 'Money! Money! Money! The 1800s in South Carolina were years of great wealth known as the ante-bellum times. Many South Carolinians became rich plantation owners by growing and selling cotton' (American Legacy Publishing 2012, Week 1, 1). These two sentences believe the facts that only a small percentage of white, wealthy men actually made money by growing cotton. In addition, women, non-wealthy white men and people of colour were excluded from this system of privilege; as were African slaves who drove the Southern economy by forced labour without any hope of benefiting economically. This example goes beyond what Leonardo (2002) calls a 'pedagogy of amnesia' (34) when students are encouraged to think of national events and icons as benign 'products of their social milieu [in which] racist practices occupies the fringes of our history memory' (34). In the case of these texts, and consequently, in the lives of my children, the sins of the past were not merely forgotten, they were never presented to begin with.

### Discourses of re-appropriation

The fact that everywhere my children turned, white people were represented over and over again as normalised is not surprising when considered within a framework of critical theory. It is a classic case of racial hegemony in which white superiority is perpetuated as normal through every day discourse. However, the questions that guided my study were not so much about how hegemony works, but how those normalised racial messages were then used by my children to construct their understandings of whiteness. The visual images and the dominant cultural messages of whiteness as norm provided a medium which were, in turn, re-appropriated and reconstructed as my children grew into these demonstrations of whiteness. In other words, the discourses of over-representation and exclusion provided the fodder for the children's reinforcement of themselves as racially dominant creating a new discourse of whiteness, the discourse of re-appropriation.

#### *Drawing only white characters*

In the hundreds of pieces of artwork I collected from Ella, Olivia and Max during this study, their drawings of people were prolific. *Exclusively*, they drew white people. While Ella drew pictures of cultural icons that were popular during the time of the study, family and friends in her life, and people who existed in her imagination, although, in reality many were persons of colour, she represented them all as white. During one period of time, she drew countless characters from the trilogy, *The Hunger Games* (Collins 2008), a book received as a gift and one we read together. In one of her many drawings of the protagonist Katniss Everdeen, it was apparent that Ella imagined Katniss to be white despite the ambiguity of the book's author on that point. In the text, Collins (2008) describes Katniss as having olive skin and dark hair and as different in appearance from her mother and sister who were described as having blond hair and blue eyes. Ella's imagining of Katniss as white was confirmed after I took her to see the movie based on the book. After seeing the film, the following conversation occurred:

- Author: Was Katniss the way you imagined her to be after you saw her in the movie?  
 Ella: No, not really.  
 Author: How so?  
 Ella: I thought she would have blond hair.  
 Author: Did you always think she would be white?  
 Ella: Yes, it [the book] would have told us if she were not white.

Ella's comment, '[The book] would have told us if she were not white' is an automatic default into whiteness. Because whiteness was so normalised, so over-represented in her life, because persons of colour were so prolifically omitted from the discourses in her worlds, and because she was accustomed to descriptors used such as 'Black girl' or 'African-American child' when persons of colour were discussed (but not when white persons were indicated), Ella assumed that there would be a warning if the author deviated from what she perceived as normalcy of whiteness – an example of my children re-appropriating the discourses around them and making them a part of their own discourses.

#### *White(d)-out*

The children also re-appropriated white normalcy messages by assigning white skin to characters in their drawings and stories even when the real-life scenes they depicted

included persons of colour. For example, Ella danced at a jazz school that I chose, in part, because it of its diverse group of dancers and instructors. Approximately, 50% of the dancers in this school were students of colour and 50% were white dancers. Dance students of colour were often highlighted and celebrated in leading roles in performance pieces. In December of each year, the studio performed a jazz/hip-hop version of *The Nutcracker* ballet called *The Two Claras*, infused with contemporary popular music drawing on jazz and hip-hop, choreographed and directed by a woman of colour. Despite the fact that Ella had danced with this studio for several years at the time of this study, her drawings of *The Two Claras* only depicted white dancers. Once again, Ella successfully re-appropriated the pervasive nature of whiteness in her life to *white-out* the dancers of colour. In fact, it could be stated that the children also white(d) out variations of skin colour differences among people whom they referred to as white showing that whiteness worked so deeply that the children were blinded to gradations of white skin colour.

The fact that my children whited out blackness in their drawings is even more important when considered in conjunction with the fact that they were certainly not oblivious to racial difference. In fact, they pointed out and inquired about racial difference a lot. Over and over, my children asked about those differences. For example, at one point, I told the children we needed to go to my friend Jill's house. Olivia asked, 'Does Jill have brown skin or white skin?' These and dozens of other comments like them made throughout the study indicated that the children used race as a tool to differentiate among people. Yet, when they wrote or drew or illustrated our lives, characters of colour were completely white(d) out.

As I sought to better understand the dominant discourses that shape three young white children's construction of race, it became quite clear that discourses of whiteness were at work normalising white people as a dominant presence, by strongly associating white people with goodness, access and over-representation. With this backdrop, the children began to, in subtle ways, express that dominance through their own messages by re-appropriating interpretations that promote their racial dominance. When there were no counter-narratives to challenge this construction, the undeniable consequence was that blackness was constructed as the opposing force.

### **Discourses of blackness**

I have demonstrated the pervasive normalisation of whiteness in my children's lives, but notions of blackness were also normalised and reflected as frequently as whiteness. However, blackness was not associated with goodness or dominance or wealth. Just the opposite: discourses of blackness were associated with token symbolism, fear, pity and discomfort. Baldwin (1984) wrote that it is precisely this kind of degradation that made America fertile ground for whiteness to develop when our nation was founded: 'America became white – the people who, as they claim, "settled" the country became white – because of the necessity of denying the Black presence' (178). In other words, white Americans can look at persons of colour and know that *they are who they are because of who they are not*. In the following section, I address how, in my children's lives, these discourses of blackness worked in conjunction with discourses of whiteness to construct narratives of white supremacy.

### **Discourses of token symbolism**

Throughout the course of the study, my children encountered iconic representations of persons of colour who were often glorified because of what they did to support the efforts

of white Americans during conquest or who were reduced by American mythology to represent a kind of feel-goodness about racial tension. This occurred in the majority of stories that were told/read from school curricula in particular. For example, Ella studied the story of Sacagawea, a Shoshone princess, whose was heralded in school curricula as supporting the efforts of Lewis and Clark in the 1804 western exploration. The *USA Studies Weekly* (American Legacy Publishing 2011) magazine explained the relationship between Sacagawea and Lewis and Clark like this:

Lewis and Clark met many American Indian tribes during their expedition. They always tried to be peaceful and generous. Some tribes were not friendly back ... Sacajawea knew many American Indian languages. Sacagawea was also very helpful during the expedition. She was an extremely valuable member of the expedition. (2)

In this text, Sacagawea is celebrated mostly because of how she helped the 'peaceful and generous' American explorers (American Legacy Publishing 2011, 2). Likewise, images of Martin Luther King that were given to Max to cut out, colour, put in order, and then staple together to create a book were accompanied by text that oversimplified Dr King's message of non-violence and activism, while still keeping it on the periphery of the curriculum. These safe heroes presented as token symbols of the contributions of persons of colour were perpetuated over and over; while the children did not encounter persons of colour who took on more oppositional positions of dealing with white power, such as John Brown, Malcolm X or Nikki Giovanni.

These symbols were important in the construction of whiteness for my children. Token persons of colour who were viewed as helping out the efforts of white people or working towards a national cause of adopted ideals served as important frames of reference in developing the a false white consciousness. If the stories of these national icons could be embellished, reduced and reframed to glorify white achievement and belittle the tragedies of consequence that came from white conquest, then white people – adults and children alike – do not have to feel so bad about being white.

### ***Discourses of negative emotion***

While much important work has circulated that stresses the material advantages of white privilege (Wildman and Davis 1997), the emotional and psychological discord that persons from dominant groups wrestle with as a consequence of their supremacy is also important to explore. Ella, Olivia and Max, in constructing their white identities, felt or imagined a mix of discomfort, distance, fear and pity towards persons of colour formed within discourses of blackness. So, demonizing, pitying, differencing and distancing the Other all worked in conjunction with glorifying, exalting, reframing and normalising whiteness. When positive emotions associated with being white are juxtaposed with the negative emotions associated with white views of blackness, the duality between whiteness and blackness can be more completely understood in the development of a white identity. The discourses of these negative emotions, described below, erupted frequently in this study.

### ***Feelings of discomfort and distancing mechanisms***

There were times when Ella, Olivia and Max expressed discomfort about being in places where there were persons of colour. In one of many examples, one night, Ella's dance school invited families to sit in on her dance lesson. The girls were lined up at the ballet barre, ready to start class when Olivia, Max and I came in. All of the other girls were

African-American and all of the families were African-American. Max clutched onto my leg as we went to find a place to sit down and told me that he wanted to leave because 'There's too much brown people in here'. Likewise, on an earlier occasion to visit an orthopaedist after Max had broken his arm, he distanced himself from the African-American male nurse who came to examine Max's cast. Max exclaimed to the nurse, 'Hey, man, why are you black all over?' Throughout the course of his recovery, Max interacted with a number of white X-ray technicians, a white nurse practitioner, and a white orthopaedist without asking any similar questions about why they were white. This white-as-normal, black-as-different dichotomy was one way of distancing himself from people who are not white.

### ***Fear of African-American males***

Discomfort sometimes gave way to downright open fear, rage and hostility towards people of colour. During the study, I took Ella and her best friend and neighbour Christine on an outing to celebrate Ella's 10th birthday. The girls began to talk about memories they shared as neighbours and friends, including times when groups of African-American boys came to our white dominant neighbourhood. These memories were recounted within a discourse of fear reinforced by their recollection of the reactions of neighbourhood parents. Christine remembered a time when she witnessed a group of African-American boys take a [white neighbour's] baseball bat from his yard:

I was like in my house. I was going outside to see what Ella [was doing] and if she was home or not and so um I saw these boys coming. I was like, 'Mom, um some boys stole [a white neighbor's] baseball bat' and she was like 'What???' and like she ran down the stairs outside and she found the boys and she like talked to them. I was just like standing there outside and then this big boy, a big brother, came out and so he was being all nice at first. He was like, 'Yes ma'am, we'll stop' and so um they walked on but a little boy [in the group] was playing in [another neighbor's] sprinklers so my mom she was like, 'Hey, don't play in the [neighbor's] sprinklers'. And then the big brother got mad at her, at my mom, and they started insulting her and then my dad just got out of the bathroom and he came out and he's like, and he said something about, like, I *think* [with emphasis] he said I'm going to go, I'm going to take you out down the river and drown you. And, because he wasn't he wasn't trying to be mean; he was just trying to make them stop and get out of our neighborhood.

Ella and Christine both agreed that the parents who responded to the situation were not out of line. They felt that the white adults in the situation were simply trying to protect them when in fact, they were evoking an unspoken code of white dominance, distinction and demarcation between their white families and persons of colour. When the African-American child deferred to the white supremacist order by saying, 'Yes, ma'am, we'll stop', the order was maintained. But, when the boys challenged the order by 'playing in the sprinklers', and 'insulting' a white parent, Christine, *thought* she remembered her father telling the boys they would be taken to the river and drowned. Despite the fact that stealing a baseball bat left unattended in a front yard, playing in the sprinklers, or talking back to an adult hardly warrant murder, Ella and Christine maintained that the boys were the ones to be feared, that the boys had crossed racial boundaries by coming into the neighbourhood, that the boys had acted out of line. In other words, the girls felt that the boys had threatened the safety and security of whiteness unto which they felt entitled.

### ***Pity and good will***

During this study, Ella, Max and Olivia also used and were taught to use pity with respect to blackness, another discourse of negative emotion. Some of these were directly taught to them through lessons at church or school. For example, once, a children's sermon was given which described the church's efforts to sell coffee beans to support a mission trip to El Salvador. While race was not mentioned, one night a few months later while I was giving Max and Olivia a bath, they sang a refrain from a church song heard frequently: *And now, let the weak say I am, strong; let the poor say I am rich; because he's given Jesus Christ, his son.* A few minutes later, Max told me: 'Did you know that our church is doing a really good thing? They are giving money to poor people'. I asked Max who poor people were and Max told me, 'They are the Indians!' He later explained that 'they live in Africa'. Connecting this conversation to the children's sermon, it is clear that, at least for 5-year-old Max, vague links and broad generalisations were made to construct a discourse of pity for people of colour, juxtaposed with a white discourse of good-will. Max categorised people of colour across countries, continents and people – El Salvador, Africa, South America and Native American Indians – as poor, distancing them geographically from himself.

Likewise, one afternoon during the study, Ella protested the particular route I travelled on our way home from dance. Not understanding her protest and frustrated by her complaints, I asked her to 'let me do the driving'. Ella finally expounded on her comments and explained that the problem with the route I took was that it took us by too many African-Americans walking on the side of the road. Unlike in the earlier discussion of Olivia's fear of *strangers*, Ella's interactions seemed framed within a discourse of pity:

- 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.

In this example, Ella felt uncomfortable because she constructed feelings of sorrow and pity with regard to their perceptions of the lives of Others. I gave her little background to widen their scope of understanding that oppression works systemically, that, typically, persons do not wake up one morning without cars or without money – people are born into and exist within systems that create inequitable access to income, healthcare, nutrition, transportation which all lead to experiencing particular qualities of life.

### **Discussion and implications**

The findings presented in this paper demonstrate how messages of whiteness as the norm through discourses of both whiteness and blackness were insidious and so embedded in our daily lives that I wonder, had I not been collecting data for a study about racial construction, would I have even noticed they were there? Messages about *whiteness as normalised* came through in dominant discourses of over-representation, omission and re-appropriation. They were, quite literally, *everywhere* sustained by simultaneous messages that conveyed systematic oppression and degradation of blackness through token symbolism and negative emotions. These discourses of whiteness and blackness were backbone of 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. As the world passed messages to us about hegemonic whiteness, we used those messages to construct our own microcosm of larger society, thus reflecting back to the world whiteness as norm.

At the heart of critical ethnography is the intention to confront the reproduction of power through collective engagement. Like other critical ethnographers, I believe that finding strategies for alleviating oppression should be part and parcel of my research. Yet, I do not have, as a result of this study, a to-do list to guide for white people to eliminate racism in the lives of young children. My findings lead me to believe that what needs to change are not merely the symptoms of racism but the early onset of racism itself in the lives of young children who later reinforce white supremacy through their unquestioned socialisation into it. Thus, my suggestions for strategies (questions, opportunities and interruptions) come out of thinking towards new theories of race wherein situating race historically is crucial to supporting the rebirth of a white consciousness.

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. One place this re-education can start in these contexts is through small study groups centred on race and racism and engaged in by teachers and administrators in schools, university faculty and in places of worship. Yancy (2012) argued that whites may need to utilise 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 they are not immune to racism. 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 benefited or marginalized by whiteness through this [curriculum, test, lesson, program, etc.]’.

When race and racism are more deeply understood in relation to their historical and social constructs, we have more choices in how we approach various interactions in our lives. Instead of asking if particular interactions are about race, as is common in our modern-day world, we can assume that *every* interaction is racially laden and thus, begin to search for the ways racism is at work. These interactions need not be sought out. By simply taking snapshots of daily life, we can make personal choices using our worlds as the basis for racial inquiry/questioning as we interact with children in varied contexts. For example, school assignments, picture books, curricula and daily mail all provide structures from which teachers, teacher educators and others who work with children can begin to ask important questions about race and racism.

An important implication from my study is that children should not be excluded from the explicit conversations we have as adults working towards 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. Therefore, I believe it is imperative that we do not lock ourselves into narrow views of developmental stages of appropriateness when 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. I found that, the more regular and contextualised our conversations about race became, the more comfortable they became, and the more we engaged in them. The bottom line is that, without childhood discussions of race because of the over-riding assumption by many white people that young children will not understand or that they should be shielded from it until they have reached a particular maturational age, children will figure out on their own how they are racially located.

## Conclusion

I opened this study by sharing my entire self into this study of three white children as they learned race and racism. After taking Ella to Two Mile Creek Baptist church, she, in her sophisticated 6-year-old way, articulated her fear that we would be kicked out of the church because we were white. Ella had not yet learned to bury her fear in denial veiled in white supremacy. Despite the fact that she looked to me, her white mother, for answers, *she* was the one who acted with honesty and courage to name her racial fears. On the other hand, *I* tried to cover my supremacy by locating racism as a thing of the past when I said, 'Of course not, Ella. That was a long time ago and things are different now'.

Jensen (2005) wrote that, when it comes to confronting whiteness, 'If any white person wants to take seriously an honest struggle with whiteness, it doesn't lead directly to some land of love and harmony. In my experience, it is a long, difficult road' (94). My long and difficult road into examining issues of race and racism has not ended. In fact, this study prompts me to continue to rely on the young teachers in my life – my children and other young children – as I engage in future ethnographic research that deepens my understanding how to do better (as a scholar, mother, teacher, teacher educator and citizen) in the quest for anti-racism.

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