

Christianity's Collusion with Whiteness: Divine Embodiment in *The Shack*

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William P. Young, an “ordinary” Christian father of six, was working as a janitor and salesperson for a small company in Oregon when he created quite a splash in the Evangelical community by publishing *The Shack* in 2007 (WindRumors). *The Shack* is the story of a man who finds spiritual healing and forgiveness by spending a weekend in the woods with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, all of whom are embodied as people of color. *The Shack* topped the New York Times trade paperback fiction best-seller list about a year after its publication, and it has sold over ten million copies (Rich, Lodde). Readers have gushed that the story is life-changing and faith-renewing, while many Evangelical leaders criticize the book for theological errors, going so far as to call the story heretical (Challies, Rich). On the surface, *The Shack* seems to be liberatory and ant-racist, but a feminist reading proves it to be otherwise. In this article, I will demonstrate that while both Young and his critics explore and evaluate the raced and gendered embodiment of the Christian God in *The Shack*, they share a deeply problematic religious history of race relations. Using feminist scholarship, critical whiteness theory, and an analysis of Evangelicalism's troubled history of race, I will show that the structures of whiteness are fundamental for American Evangelicalism's culture and theology.

Born in Canada, William P. Young grew up in a missionary family in New Guinea. Young's inspiration for *The Shack* came from his own spiritual struggle, which resulted in part from encountering sexual abuse he underwent as a child, as well as an extramarital affair with his wife's best friend. Spiritually working through these struggles in his personal life inspired him to write a work of fiction for his family and friends that would explain his newfound

understanding of Christianity (Bethune 2008). He originally intended to print only fifteen copies for family and friends, but they responded with such enthusiasm that he eventually created his own publishing company with the help of two friends in order to distribute *The Shack* to a wider audience (Rosenfeld).

The Shack is the story of a middle-aged father of five, Mack, who undergoes tragedy on a family camping trip when his youngest daughter is abducted and murdered. Years after his daughter's death, he is still struggling to forgive God for allowing such an evil act to transpire. One winter evening, Mack receives a note in the mailbox asking him to return to the location of his daughter's death, a shack in the woods of Oregon. Mack travels back to the shack, where he meets God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit for a weekend of healing and learning. He is surprised to find God the Father embodied as a black woman called "Papa," Jesus as an unattractive Middle Eastern Man, and the Holy Spirit as an elusive Asian woman.

The story has been widely criticized for its theological implications; it has also been accused of dispensing universalist, feminist, or New Age ideas (Jacobsen 2011). One of the primary theological critiques of *The Shack* is the physical representation of God. Tim Challies, editor of *discerningreader.com*, writes, "[Young's] portrayal of the Father and the Holy Spirit in human form is sinful and expressly forbidden within the Bible" (12). For support, Challies turns to the Apostle Paul, who says of unrighteous people, "'Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things' (Romans 1:22,23)" (12). Julie Klassen, a Christian fiction editor, also critiques Young's rendition of God, arguing that God's glory is ineffectively portrayed: "The Papa of the Shack is God stripped of His majesty, His glory, His Holiness." Matt Slick, the host of "Faith and Reason Radio," also states that Young's portrayal "lessen[s] God's majesty."

Norman Geisler and Bill Roach go so far as to say “It is only the Devil, the Father of lies, who engages in appearing in forms he is not.” Why are these influential Christian leaders so deeply troubled by Young’s portrayal of God? Not only is the embodiment of God theologically disconcerting for these critics given Paul’s indictment; the particularity of God’s embodiment in *The Shack* as a *black woman* is inherently problematic due to American Christianity’s history of cultural and political investments in whiteness.

The Roots of Evangelicalism

The evangelical tradition has its roots in the Baptist revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries (Bartkowski 2001, 17). Revivals, or large meetings that comprised the “Great Awakenings,” marked periods of increased interest in Christianity, though not necessarily the church. Fervent preachers traveled to campsites, where spiritual conversions were marked by displays of intense emotion (Moore 45). These preachers believed that churches had become too formal, and they took it upon themselves to take the message of Christ directly to the people (Douglas 2005, 137). Evangelical theology emphasized individual salvation through a relationship with Jesus Christ (Douglas 2005, 140). John Bartkowski (2001) remarks, “historical evidence suggests that early Baptist evangelicalism – with its focus on the individual believer’s direct relationship with God and its employment of an ecstatic worship style – posed a direct challenge to secular and non-evangelical mechanisms of social stratification” (18). In other words, women and African Americans were assigned a direct relationship to God, unmediated by a spiritual authority. This direct spiritual connection challenged formalized Protestant structures that privileged only white men’s connection to God. Revival meetings were therefore unfavorably viewed by formal

Protestants as potential sites of social contamination, where men, women, whites, and blacks mixed freely (Moore 47-8).

Despite the seemingly egalitarian structure of revival meetings, their potential for advocating social justice was severely limited by the evangelical focus on individual salvation. Enlightenment thought uplifted the individual and inspired “religious disestablishment,” empowering individuals to be responsible for their own spiritual lives (Douglas 2005, 141). However, the focus on individual salvation made it possible to “virtually ignor[e] the inhuman social conditions to which black people were subjected” (Douglas 2005, 142). The Great Awakenings were responses to what was perceived as widespread evil in America: drinking alcohol and engaging in sexual sin or other lewd behavior (Douglas 2005, 137). Far from being considered a sign of “evil times”, the institution of slavery was even supported by revivalists because it enabled the conversion of Africans to Christianity (Douglas 2005, 142). Instead of condemning slavery, revivalists preached against sins of the body, and historically, African Americans have been defined by their bodies.

Wadsworth (2008) asserts that race and religion do not operate independently of one another; rather religion is a powerful discourse that has given meaning to race. In other words, it is not by coincidence that evangelicalism enabled existing racial hierarchies to go unchallenged. She writes, “American categories of race and religion were constructed in relationship to one another” (Reconciling Fractures 312). Christianity and whiteness became co-constitutive in colonial America. The present notion of race was first created for economic reasons in colonial America: “The white race was established as a legal and economic category in colonial and then in U.S. law and policy as a way of co-opting the European-American portion of the labor force...so that enslavement of a subset of the total labor force – the African American portion –

could proceed unhampered” (McWhorter 2009, 73). In order to control a rowdy labor force that originally consisted of Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans, power and servitude became coded through race. Africans had no ties to governments that could protect their rights and no knowledge of the landscape and were therefore the easiest to control (McWhorter 2009, 69). In the early 1700s, the religious category “Christian” was deployed as a justification for superiority rather than whiteness; those laborers who were not Christians were legally forced into lifelong service (McWhorter 2009, 74, 70). As Mills demonstrates, ‘race’ eventually replaced religion as a differentiating marker because religious difference is mutable and can be overcome by conversion (Mills 1997, 23). Despite the shift away from using religion as a discriminatory marker, Christianity was later used by some opportunistic Southern white Americans to justify the practice of slavery.

Situating the Reader in The Shack as the Neutral, Liberal Subject

The reader is asked to identify with Mack’s struggles with faith in a world overridden by evil. Therefore, when Mack is reunited with his faith through dialogue with God, the reader will also come to a greater understanding of God and renew his commitment to his faith, serving the evangelical purpose of this text. Given the racial particularities of American Christianity’s history, I argue that Mack’s race and gender are important for the reader’s placement in the text. Mack is identified as a Midwestern farm boy from an Irish-American family (Young 2007, 7). He is therefore a quintessential white American. Furthermore, he is described as exceptionally smart: “In a world of talkers, Mack is a thinker and doer...he usually makes uncomfortable sense in a world where most folks would rather just hear what they are used to hearing” (Young 2007, 9). Within the first ten pages of the text, the reader is introduced to a rational, white, male,

Christian main character. The remainder of the story is framed by the characteristically neutral white/male perspective. Mack's whiteness allows for his subject position to seem neutral, universal, or even irrelevant.

Critical whiteness theorists demonstrate that the slippery notion of whiteness bears both political and cultural implications. Lipsitz (1998) writes, "As an unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (1). Because American culture has historically privileged whiteness politically, economically, and socially, whiteness is viewed as the norm. White people seem unraced; they are simply people. Anyone who is not white is particular, different, and usually punished for their diversion from the norm. Because white people seem to be just people, they can claim to speak for all people: "because we are seen as white, we characteristically see ourselves and believe ourselves seen as unmarked, unspecific, universal" (Dyer 1997, 45). Whiteness seems neutral and unbiased.

The political philosophy that complements the seeming neutrality of whiteness is liberalism. Classical liberalism, rooted in the social contract theories of Western philosophy, is the political notion that the individual is entitled to rights. The liberal subject is widely understood to exist independently of race, sex, or class. However, rights-based discourse has been historically constructed around the white, middle-class, Christian, property-owning male (Winnubst 2006, 25). Raced, gendered, and classed individuals have fought for rights with group-based identity claims. Because white people seem unraced, they appear to be individuals without a group affiliation. The language of liberal individualism is therefore used to justify group-based policies that benefit whites (Lipsitz 1998, 21). The claim to neutrality, or the claim that whites exist as individuals without a racial affiliation, is politically salient for whiteness,

enabling structures of white supremacy to stay intact. Whites appear to gain achievements through merit, despite the reality that political and economic structures are organized to privilege whiteness.

However, whiteness does not operate uniformly without regard to a person's class, gender, or sexual orientation. Lipsitz (1998) writes, "whiteness never works in isolation; it functions as part of a broader dynamic grid created through intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality" (72). Whiteness is aligned with particular expressions of masculinity, patriarchy, and heterosexuality (Lipsitz 1998, 72). The co-configuration of whiteness and patriarchy is illustrated by the evangelical construction of the family. Though Evangelicalism originated as a more socially egalitarian expression of Christian faith, evangelical values eventually converged with patriarchal Victorian ideals as evangelical Christianity entered the mainstream (Bartkowski 2001, 20). The evangelical philosophy about gender, sex, and power can be located in the multitude of literature about marriage and the family: "the family is considered by religious conservatives to be the most important of social institutions" (Lienesch 1993, 52). The most popular evangelical literature about the family espouses traditional gender roles (Bartkowski 2001, 5). Men and women are understood to be essentially different: "while men are rational, women are emotional, intuitive, and nurturing" (65). Because men are understood to be more rational, it is deemed natural that they be the leaders of their families. The value placed on rationality in Enlightenment thought, a concept that is both raced white and gendered male, is reflected evangelical family values.

After receiving a note from God in his mailbox, Mack hesitates to act because he rationalizes that this kind of communication with the divine is totally implausible. Young (2007) racializes rationality as white, writing, "It seemed that direct communication with God was

something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while Westerners' access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia" (66). In other words, white people use the minds of their elite to access God, a disembodied form of interaction, while uncivilized (read: black) people communicate with God directly through bodily interaction. Mack decides to return to the shack even though he would normally consider a physical note from God to be completely irrational: "Perhaps there is suprarationality: reason beyond the normal definitions of fact or data-based logic; something that only makes sense if you can see a bigger picture of reality. Maybe that is where faith fits in" (Young 2007, 67). This concept of hyper-rational faith aligns with Enlightenment discourse around Christianity as the rational religion. Furthermore, Mack does not depart from gender norms; he stays rational, thereby remaining a reliable character for reader identification.

The Enlightenment's epistemological shift from God to Man caused Christianity to relocate the presence of the divine within (white) men (Dyer 1997, 16). The period of the Enlightenment did not impair the authority of Christianity as long as Christianity was framed as a rational religion (Douglas 2005, 121). John Locke, the father of liberalism, also "essentially epitomized the 'rational' Christianity that emerged during the Enlightenment" (Douglas 2005, 121). The posing of Christianity as rational provided the justification for unconverted Africans being irrational and therefore bestial (Mills 1997, 22).

Because both the social contract and modern Christianity were influenced by similar Enlightenment discourses, they operate simultaneously to maintain structures of whiteness and patriarchy. Kelly Brown Douglas (2005) explains how the influence of the Enlightenment on American Christianity reifies the association between whiteness and Christianity (110-1). She writes, "Christianity's alliance with Platonic/Stoic thought was the primary troubling alliance

that laid the foundation for a terrorizing Christian legacy in relation to black bodies” (xv). Platonic and Stoic thought enforced a dualism that honored the mind and demonized the body (Douglas 2005, xv). Whites tended to assume that Africans lacked the ability to reason and were vulnerable to the unbounded passion and desires of their bodies (Douglas 2005, 117). Douglas (2005) writes, “according to Enlightenment spirit it follows that white people should rule over black people – mind over body/reason over passion” (118). Platonic discourses multiplied in order to explain the inferiority of African Americans and thereby justify the institution of slavery.

Embodying God as Black and Female

Richard Dyer (1997) writes about the symbolic connotations of the colors white and black. The color white is used to connote purity, holiness, and goodness, while black is often used to mark evil, darkness, or filth (Dyer 1997, 63). The symbolic attachments to these colors frequently transfer to groups of people raced as “white” or “black” (Dyer 1997, 68). Therefore, whiteness is associated with the realm of the divine; white represents light, joy, peace, and truth (Dyer 1997, 73). Dyer (1997) writes, “white people’s whiteness enables them to inhabit without visual contradiction the highest point in the Enlightenment’s understanding of human development, that of the subject without properties; the beauty of their skin, just because it is nothing ‘particular and positive’, is the beauty of this intellectual ideal” (71). Whiteness connotes both intellectual and spiritual enlightenment (Dyer 1997, 110). Furthermore, whiteness represents the pinnacle of human achievement; all men strive to reach this level of pureness and knowledge that is attributed to white men already due to the color/colorlessness of their skin (Dyer 1997, 152).

The slippage between symbolic connotations of the colors white and black and attribution of characteristics to entire populations based on skin tone uplifts “white” people and condemns “black” people, who are associated with sin and evil. Stoic and Platonic thought both espoused “antisexual/antibody attitudes” (Douglas 2005, 27). Striving for holiness required transcending the desires of one’s own body: “The body was essentially condemned for being the source of the very sexual desires that ostensibly tainted humanity and thus separated humans from God” (28). White culture’s sexualization of black bodies allowed all black bodies to be associated with evil. This enabled the widespread lynching of blacks, many of which were attributed to the sexual threat they posed. By lynching these bodies, white, Southern, Christians felt as though they were casting out evil from their Christian communities (Douglas 2005, 66). The blackness of black bodies was the unspoken proof needed for Christians in a culture that uplifts whiteness as transcendent and holy to support the slave trade, lynch black folks, and to later support Jim Crow laws and oppose the Civil Rights Movement.

The association of the black body with sex and sin creates an interesting theological conundrum for Young, who portrays God in *The Shack* as a black woman. Mack travels to the shack, where he is surprised to find that God is embodied as “a large beaming African-American woman” (Young 2007, 82). She greets him at the front door, causing him to “instinctively” flinch backward (Young 2007, 82). Young (2007) writes, “With speed that belied her size, she crossed the distance between them and engulfed him in her arms, lifting him clear off his feet and spinning him around like a little child. And all the while she was shouting his name” (82). The way Mack “instinctively” flinches backward upon encountering this black woman mirrors some of the visceral reactions that evangelical critics seem also to have. Bill Ritchie, the senior pastor of a megachurch in Vancouver, who reportedly later warmed up to this character, said that

initially, “I was so stunned by the presentation of Papa that I couldn’t deal with it” (Rich). Chuck Colson, a commentator on Christian cultural projects, writes that the representation seems “frankly... ridiculous.” Mark Driscoll, the popular pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, tells his congregation, “If you haven’t [read *The Shack*], don’t.” Narrating the premise of *The Shack*, he tells his congregation that God is portrayed as an “African American woman named Papa. I’m not even making this up.” Pastor Bob Botsford of Horizon Christian Fellowship in Sante Fe tells his congregation, *The Shack* “describe[s] God as an African American woman... well, it’s just crazy.” The initial reaction these critics are having seems to be one of disgust: “a ‘strong repugnance, aversion, or repulsion excited by that which is loathsome or offensive’” (Oxford Dictionary, as cited by Hancock 2004, 9).

Ange-Marie Hancock (2004) writes about the role of disgust in public policies that benefit minorities. She argues that “women who exist at the intersection of marginalized race, class, and gender identities” elicit a reaction of disgust from the American public (2). In *The Shack*, Young represents “Papa” in a particular raced, classed, and gendered way that evokes the stereotype of the mammy. After experiencing the initial emotional reaction of disgust, critics seek a rational explanation for their distaste, often turning to the subject of disgust “for evidence to justify such a reaction” (Hancock 2004, 9).

The critics of *The Shack* turn to possible other explanations for their initial reactions, and many seek theological justifications. Bob Botsford cobbles this explanation together: Young “describes God in an entirely different way than how scripture would describe God that would be a departure and a distortion from a true perspective that is based on biblical truth.” Colson writes that those who “caught glimpses” of God in the Bible “were overcome with despair at their own unworthiness in the light of His glory.” Mack hardly falls to his knees at the sight of this black

woman. Meanwhile, Norman Geisler writes, “According to *The Shack*, God is revealed in ways contrary to His nature. The Father is revealed as a black woman and having a body when He is neither.” Given the history of American Christianity’s collusion with whiteness, these Christian leaders are experiencing visceral responses to a portrayal of God that undermines white patriarchy. Additionally, I will argue that gendered structures of whiteness are so integral to the culture of American Christianity that they have folded into Evangelical theology. Blackness and femaleness pose particular problems for the notion of spiritual transcendence in a culture that privileges whiteness and maleness.

Transcendence of the body is imperative for Christian theology, which reinstates the white male as the subject of Christianity (Dyer 1997, 24-5). The incarnation of God as a man in the figure of Jesus Christ, who transcends his body by also being fully spirit, poses a particular challenge for those who are defined by their bodies rather than by mind or spirit. Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth century theologian, was of the opinion that “Christ had to be incarnated as a male because only males possess full humanity” (Ruether 2009, 94). St. Augustine defended the notion that men are fully human because they possess both body and mind. The relationship between men and women is that of mind over body (Ruether 2009, 93). Jesus’ moral authority derives from his ability to overcome his human flesh, yet women and people of color are essentially embodied (Nelson 1978, 12). Women are defined by their bodies and their capacity for motherhood (Dyer 1997, 27). Furthermore, women’s bodies are innately sinful, because original sin is often attributed to Eve (Ruether 2009, 94).

Blackness is also defined by the body: “the black body in particular is seen as paradigmatically *a body*” (Mills 1997, 51). In addition, blackness is likened to moral depravity and hypersexuality, the antithesis of rationality (Mills 1997, 46; Douglas 2005, 123). Black

women's bodies are threatening to white masculinity because of their sexual provocation. This concept is documented as early as the fourth and fifth centuries CE when monks in the Egyptian desert indicated that the Ethiopian, or black, woman was a sexual threat to the monastic life (Byron 2002, 102). The notion of sexual threat continues today in the myths of the black male rapist and the homosexual predator (McWhorter 2009, 142). Douglas (2005) writes, "platonized Christianity demonizes the body and sexuality, thereby implying the demonization of sexualized people" (123). In other words, bodies of women, people of color, and queers are deemed innately sinful as a result of the mind/body dichotomy. The body and sexuality are suspected of obstructing the purity of a white, masculine spiritual life (Nelson 1978, 19).

Just as the social contract is dependent on an abstracted subject that is independent of the body, Christianity relies on the overcoming of the body by the spirit or the mind. The figure of Jesus Christ reinforces the supposed neutrality of the liberal subject. Christianity claims that the figure of Jesus is an example for all humans despite the particularity of his body, which is the same body that is the "neutral" subject of the social contract (Mills 1997, 53). The emphasis on God's incarnation as a human minimizes the race and sex of Jesus' body. Just as Jesus is celebrated as human rather than male, white people are commonly understood to be humans without a race: "There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity" (Dyer 1997, 2). Whiteness proclaims to transcend race and thereby transcend bodies, demonstrating its pure spiritual nature (Dyer 1997, 24-5). Meanwhile, Jesus is said to have lived a pure spiritual life that transcended bodily desires, thereby exemplifying whiteness. Though historically Jesus was not "white" per se, he has been whitened in the Western practice of Christianity (Dyer 1997, 17). Renaissance images portrayed him as blonde and blue-eyed (Dyer 1997, 68).

The Shack: *Trapped in Tropes*

The question, then, is: does Young successfully undermine these systems of whiteness and patriarchy in his rendering of the black female God? First and foremost, Young deploys the racial trope of the mammy in his description of “Papa,” or God. After introducing God as a big, boisterous, black woman, who embraces Mack enthusiastically as if he were a “little child,” Young proceeds to write that the black woman God smells like Mack’s mother (82, 83). Ruether (2009) demonstrates that white supremacist culture manifests in multiple and sometimes contradictory portrayals of “others.” Black bodies have been characterized as sexually dangerous if not properly controlled. “But, on the other hand, when properly humble and submissive, the elderly black male becomes the Uncle Tom, who, with his wife, Mammy, loves and nurtures the white child in preference to their own children” (Ruether 2009, 102). Mack is hurting, so he requires a nurturing mammy-God.

The Shack could be included in a genre of literature in which a white character spends time with people of color in another culture or community in order to be spiritually revived so that he or she can successfully solve all his or her personal problems upon returning to the white world. African American characters are used “as sources of inspiration and forgiveness for whites” (Lipsitz 1998, 118). In this construction, blacks are seen as somehow more authentic due to the notion that they are primitive and close to nature: “with African Americans relegated to primitive, natural, and mystical domains, the consumption of black culture solves the alienations and identity problems of European Americans” (Lipsitz 1998, 119). This is a one-way relationship, in which a white character gains something from a character of color in order to be more successful in the white community. Dyer (1997) notes, “many whites... have considered that blacks were more spiritual and had, as later generations would say, more soul. It

is not spirituality or soul that is held to distinguish whites, but what we might call ‘spirit’: get up and go, aspiration, awareness of the highest reaches of intellectual comprehension and aesthetic refinement” (23). The white spirit is able to transcend the body, while the black soul is not (Dyer 1997, 23). Young (2007) keeps the soul of the black female God deeply rooted in the mammy’s body: “In a few seconds this woman had breached pretty much every social propriety behind which he had so safely entrenched himself” (83). This presentation of God is not transcendent; rather she is fully marked by blackness and a lack of spiritual refinement.

Papa immediately enters the kitchen upon Mack’s arrival in order to prepare a celebratory meal, all the while speaking in a colloquial dialect (Young 2007, 88). Before Mack follows Papa into the kitchen, he appeals to the only other male character, Jesus: “Am I going crazy? Am I supposed to believe that God is a big black woman with a questionable sense of humor?” (Young 2007, 88-9). This question explicitly appeals to the racist inclinations of the presumably white reader. The reader is given permission to agree with the impossibility of divine embodiment as black and female; Papa is identified as “some odd characterization of God” (Young 2007, 92). The embodiment of God as a black woman can only be an inauthentic characterization, for both Mack and the reader know that God is transcendent. God cannot possibly be black or female. In the kitchen, Mack is disrespectful to Papa: “I think it’d be easier to have this conversation if you weren’t wearing a dress” (Young 2007, 93). Mack’s male entitlement enables him to be rude to his very own creator, yet racism and sexism are never seriously discussed in *The Shack*. Papa responds to Mack: “To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure... would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes” (Young 2007, 93). Coded in the notion of religious stereotypes is race and gender. Embodying God as

something other than white and male does not just challenge religious stereotypes, it challenges racism and sexism.

An Evangelical Approach to Racism

The only message that Mack receives during his visit to the shack that might apply to the broader issues of racism and sexism is not to judge preemptively (Young 158-9). Simplifying the structural issue of racism to a problem of stereotypes and individual judgments is reflective of the broader evangelical approach to race. Evangelicals tend to attribute the problem of racism to interpersonal conflicts and prejudiced individuals (Tranby and Hartmann 2008, 343). Therefore, racism can be overcome by developing better cross-racial relationships between individuals. Racism is not viewed as a structural problem that requires government interference (Reconciliation 368). This interpersonal approach inevitably leads to racist stereotypes: “it is not accidental that evangelical ideals lead into negative racial stereotypes; these ideals actually need such stereotypes and prejudices to explain, justify, and legitimate the social inequalities they almost inevitably produce” (Tranby and Hartmann 2008, 346). Because evangelicalism is rooted in individualist notions of salvation and a personal relationship with Christ, evangelical values align with the individualist tenets of liberal capitalism. Ascribing to the American belief of equal opportunity, “they tend to see racial inequality as separate from systemic structures and policies, to hold blacks accountable for their problems, and to believe that, if blacks are subordinated, it is because they suffer from relational dysfunction and a lack of responsibility” (Bridging 8). Because a structural analysis of racism is outside the evangelical framework, evangelicals then have no other choice but to blame black Americans for their own subordination.

Defenders of liberalism reject the suggestion that the system is centered on the white male subject and ascribe to the idea that America is in fact a meritocracy. The result is what scholars might call “laissez-faire racism” or “neoracism” (Bobo as cited in Tranby and Hartmann 2008, 342; Lipsitz 1998, 5). By denying the privileges of whiteness, blacks are then blamed for their own suffering, resulting in racist stereotypes that further perpetuate systems of inequality. Neoracism and the investment in white privilege unify the Christian Right with fiscal conservatives (Lipsitz 1998, 15-6). The purportedly “neutral” subject of the liberal social contract has the same qualities as the “neutral” subject in American Christianity. White patriarchy is reinstated in the Christian faith due to its individualist values. The white male liberal subject is enabled through a system that invisibly supports his interests and blames others for their subordination.

Neoracism is more subtle and difficult to pinpoint than more explicit forms of racism that motivate one person to cause harm to another. One way that neoracism operates is through “the equation of whiteness with American civic identity” (Tranby and Hartmann 2008, 347). Tranby and Hartmann (2008) write, “many of the key values of the liberal American civic identity—freedom, individualism, independence, equality of opportunity, etc.—derive from the blending of evangelical Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy” (343). The combination of Christianity and Enlightenment values resulted in evangelicalism being regarded as the “quintessential American faith” (Douglas 2005, 134). Therefore, evangelicals’ defense of American culture is the result of an investment in white identity and privilege (Tranby and Hartmann 2008, 348). “Because the norms and values that form the evangelical idea of ‘American-ness’ are implicitly white, the demands for increased recognition for minority groups is perceived as a threat to these

values and norms (Tranby and Hartmann 2008, 348). Young's portrayal of God as black and female undermines evangelicals' cultural and national investments in whiteness.

The equation of whiteness with American-ness, rooted in religious conceptualizations of Manifest Destiny, has historically had very poor results for people of color, who have been historically subjected to slavery, political exclusion, and even genocide (Reconciliation Fractures 321). Christ's spiritual transcendence is replicated in nationalist narratives about "manifest destiny": "US exceptionalism hangs on a narrative of transcendence" (Puar 2007, 8). The US is somehow spiritually enlightened through its embrace of Christianity as a sort of national religion, which speaks to America's exceptionalism and the nation's sacred mission (Puar 2007, 8). This notion of exceptionalism can also be derived from the biblical concept of an elect people: "North Americans continued to promote racist themes of a unique election of an 'Anglo-Saxon' American people as God's elect, associated both with superior political institutions (democracy) and with superior moral-religious traditions" (Ruether 2009, 100). The discourse shifted from identifying those who accept Christ as the chosen people to identifying the chosen people as white. The notion of spiritual transcendence, which is tied to white masculinity, is used to demonstrate the greatness of Christ and the Christian faith, and therefore the American nation.

Throughout the novel, God is referred to as "Papa" or by using the male pronoun. A possible queer reading of gender is spoiled when God appears to Mack as a white father for the climax of the narrative, when Mack finds his daughter's remains. "This morning you're going to need a father," says God (Young 2007, 219). The reader is relieved that God has revealed his true nature. The black woman's body was utilized by a white male God as an educational tool; the diversity of the trinity was not authentic. The divine multiculturalism in *The Shack* served only to benefit the white reader, for it is void of any real comment on inequality. Ultimately,

God proves his transcendence through his white masculinity, and Young reinforces the very stereotypes he proclaims to challenge.

Conclusion

Although Young ultimately reifies structures of whiteness and patriarchy in the end, simply embodying God as a black woman initially is enough to expose the anxieties of the evangelical community regarding race, gender, and power. Mark Driscoll tells his congregation, “It’s goddess worship. If God the father is really God the mother, that changes everything!” Driscoll implies here that there is an inherent connection between the way the Christian God has been constructed and masculinity. The imagined nature of God is that of a great patriarch. The fear that *The Shack* “changes everything” is the fear that *The Shack* undermines the structures of whiteness and patriarchy, on which the evangelical tradition is dependent.

William P. Young had a long history of Christianity’s collusion with whiteness to contend with upon embarking on this project. I have argued that theological critiques of *The Shack* are fundamentally rooted in the role of whiteness in bodily transcendence. As long as the mind and the spirit are attributed to white masculinity and all others are relegated to the realm of the body and sexual desire, evangelicalism will continue to reify structures of whiteness, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and national exceptionalism. Douglas (2005) writes, “inasmuch as evangelical Protestant traditions substantially embrace Platonized theology they will continue to be predisposed to troubling connections with unjust power” (Douglas 2005, 146). William P. Young ultimately failed to significantly challenge these structures in his work, for he offered the white male character a Mammy-God when he needed to be nurtured and a transcendent white Father-God when he needed to be guided. The diversity in *The Shack* served as a prop for

structures of whiteness, allowing the reader to feel as though Christianity is an inclusive faith without genuinely taking up its history of cooperation with patriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialism.

As racism becomes less acceptable in society at large, evangelicals take up issues of racial reconciliation in their own communities (Reconciling Fractures, 329). Alliances have been forged between black and white Christians regarding the conservative family values agenda; however, white evangelicals seem to expect that blacks will assimilate into the culture of white evangelicalism without changing in any way their political trajectory (Reconciliation 367). Mills (1997) writes, “Whereas before it was denied that nonwhites *were* equal persons, it is now pretended that non-whites *are* equal abstract persons who can be fully included in the polity merely by extending the scope of the moral operator, without any fundamental change in the arrangements that have resulted from the previous system of explicit de jure racial privilege” (75). By asking black Christians to support the structures of white patriarchy, whiteness is reified and structural racism goes unchallenged. *The Shack* colludes with systems of racial privilege by ultimately failing to undermine them.

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