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Between Selfies and Colonialism: The Effect of White Evangelical Outreach on Multi-Ethnic Young Adults within the Los Angeles Region

Abstract: This article is an exploratory look into the experiences of five ethnic-minority youth from the Los Angeles region who experienced and engaged with White Evangelical outreach organizations (WEOO) and short term mission (STM) groups over the period of five years. This article employs their qualitative narratives and examines the effects that race, gender, and racism had on them. Added narrative from emerging ethnic-minority adults is also applied in this article to discuss those impacts, albeit on a specific region of the country, of (STMs) which have become increasingly well-known over the past decade. The purpose of this article is to examine and explore the effects of WEOOs and STMs on the populations they are intending to serve. From the research findings, I will illustrate 1) subtle racism, microaggression, and patriarchy from WEOOs and 2) allow the narrative of ethnic-minority experiences to chronicle their experience in these types of organizations. Lastly, this article will briefly propose alternatives and insights from the data gathered.

Keywords: Short-term missions, colonialism, White racism, religious mission trips, racism

A particular outreach organization exhibited itself as a "community leader"; an organization that was "for youth in the city" and "creating relationships across cultures." The organization had been in the city for a decade, had city-wide support, major funders, and stated that all its money went to "urban needs." The youth that this organization served came from under- resourced schools and most were from single-parent families. Moreover, the crime rate where this organization was located was in a "crime zone", according to the city's "crime tracker." The leaders of this organization operated out of their home and one of them was a former educator in the public school system that still had many connections to high-ranking administrators. It was an outreach organization that was holistic, connected in the community, and had the trust of the community. However, under this veil of a seemingly perfectionist work, one needed only to ask a student who attended this organization, what her or his perceptions were of it and the answers were astoundingly contrary to the public persona of this organization: "I've never really ever felt welcomed here as a Black person, "stated one young woman.[1] "They have plastic all over their furniture so that we don't get their

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[1] In the spirit of full disclosure, I was an employee at this organization and these responses were taken from the young people who were under my care at the time I was at this particular organization. They gave me the insight to investigate further as to what the cause might be and the underlying racial significance. I am also of ethnic-minority descent as an African American and Mexican American, and I have experienced the racialized effects of several White Evangelical outreach organizations throughout my career as both an employee and student.

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nice stuff dirty. What's up with that" exclaimed another young woman. One young man asserted, "I never feel at home with them; like there is always a straight arm every time I enter their property." To add insult to racial injury, the family had added a type of "outhouse" bathroom addition to their home so that the students would not enter and use their personal bathroom. They had built an additional meeting room to their house, as well, however the furniture was covered in both plastic and sheets and the students were made to stand if they could not fit on the four-person couch. Moreover, the organization's underlying missiological outreach statement contained connotations which could be interpreted as having "authority" over the students they served.[2]

This type of passive racism, micro-aggression, and patriarchal attitudes toward on students is not uncommon among many White Evangelical outreach organizations centered in or around urban/ city geographic regions.[3] Thus, these types of issues add to high racial tensions in the U.S.[4] The rise in White evangelical outreach organizations into urban and city areas has increased significantly in the 21st century.[5] While the notion of outreach and evangelism is central to a Christian evangelical theology, sensitivity toward issues of race and ethnicity is not. Moreover, the issue of systemic racism is typically overlooked and not regarded as substantial in training or preparation for such events.[6] Therefore, the concepts of Whiteness, power, patriarchy, and privilege are often, passively and directly, projected onto the people groups these outreach organizations encounter. While there have been numerous studies examining the personal impact of short term missions and the response to issues such as justice, poverty, and ethnocentrism[7], there is a dearth in research into the consequences that racism of White evangelical organizations has upon multi-ethnic youth. Accordingly, this article takes up an exploration of the experiences of young adults who have both encountered and been a part of White evangelical outreach organizations (WEOO).[8]

This article employs the experiences of five ethnic-minority youth from the Los Angeles region who experienced and engaged with WEOOs and short term mission (STM) groups over the period of five years. Added narrative from emerging ethnic-minority adults is also applied in this article[9] to discuss the affect, albeit on a specific region of the country, of (STMs) which have become ever popular over the last decade.[10] The purpose of this article is to examine and explore the effects of WEOOs and STMs on the populations

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2 What made this issue even more dangerous was that the leaders blamed the students for the turn in numbers; it was "their issue" and "problem." Critical inquiry and reflection on the organization's structure was not a priority. This was something similar to what I have found among other White short-term missionaries when they reflected upon the "numbers of those saved." The problem tended to rest solely on the person, and not the methodology, theology, or missional practice. For example, see Howell, "Mission to Nowhere," 207; Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler, "The Effect of Religious Short-Term Mission Trips on Youth Civic Engagement."

3 For an examination of this, see Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*; Perry, "Social Capital, Race, and Personal Fundraising in Evangelical Outreach Ministries"; Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

4 The scope of this article does not allow me to expand on the issues surrounding religion and critical race theory. However, I strongly recommend seeing for further research: Brooks, *Racial Justice in the Age of Obama*; Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*; Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*; Singleton, *White Religion and Black Humanity*. These authors bring to life the underlying racial element to this research and article.

5 See Howell, *Short-Term Mission*.

6 Jeffry, "Beyond Good Intentions."

7 Prominent studies on short-term missions, their language, and societal effect are: Howell and Dorr, "Evangelical Pilgrimage"; Jeffry, "Beyond Good Intentions"; McFarland and Thomas, "Bowling Young"; Priest and Priest, "'They See Everything, and Understand Nothing'"; Priest et al., "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement"; Ver Beek, "The Impact of Short-Term Missions."

8 This was determined by examining senior leadership in the organization—those who make policy and create the organization's culture—and if those in that position were a majority White or of Euro-American descent, then it was considered a WEOO. Whites, however, do dominate in the evangelical outreach field. See Perry, "Racial Habitus, Moral Conflict, and White Moral Hegemony within Interracial Evangelical Organizations."

9 This is based on my research that began when interviewing Hip Hoppers about their perspectives about Christians and "Church." See Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*.

10 Howell and Dorr, "Evangelical Pilgrimage"; Trinitapoli and Vaisey, "The Transformative Role of Religious Experience"; Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler, "The Effect of Religious Short-Term Mission Trips on Youth Civic Engagement."

they are intending to serve. From the research findings, I will illustrate 1) subtle racism[11], microaggression, and patriarchy from WEOOs and 2) allow the narrative of ethnic-minority experiences to chronicle their experience in these types of organizations. [12] Lastly, this article will briefly examine alternatives and insights from the data gathered.

The Research

The research for this article is founded on work which began in 2005 while I was completing my doctorate at Fuller Seminary and working as a youth worker on the Northwest sector of Pasadena, CA. At that time, there were at least a dozen or more WEOO's bringing their youth groups to the "'hood" to do "mission work" among the "poor kids" of our community. Therefore, I began to document the experience and narrative of those being "ministered to," the "'hood kids," as one short-term missionary kid would later come to say. In this research, I focused on five urban[13] former students/ protégé of mine between the years 2005-2010. Three female and two males reflected the gender mix and Mexican American, African American, Caribbean, and a mixture of Euro American comprised the ethnic makeup of this group. The interviews were conducted bi-monthly for two hours from 2005-2007 and then five times a year for two hours. The interviews and research began in later summer 2005. Semi-structured interviews were utilized from 2005-2007. From the fall of 2007 to 2010, active interviews were used in-group settings as all but one of the students had graduated from high school, and each interview took three hours. All the students were living in a gentrified urban/ suburban "donut" and attended a predominantly White/ Euro-American affluent church which had once been located in a primarily White/ Euro-American community in Southern California. Each of the students started attending the church in early middle school and continued throughout their early college years. I chose these students primarily for five reasons: 1) they were the most outspoken on issues of race, class, and gender in the group, 2) they each represented an ethnic minority group, 3) they were each leaders among their respective peers, 4) each had some type of leadership position in their late high school years, and 5) they represented the feelings of many ethnic minorities who did not have the same access which the respondents did to senior leadership.[14] My wife and I also worked/ volunteered for this ministry organization and had access to detailed information about training and background context.[15]

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11 I use this term to describe a form of racism that is non-direct, belittling, typically non-verbally communicated, and non-intentional.

12 I make the case that with the influx of gentrification in many urban cities in America, students from ethnic minorities (predominantly Black and Latino) are making their presence known in what has been a traditionally White youth ministry setting in the suburbs. To examine this further, see: Webber, "The Post-City Age." With the mixture of these students in traditional youth ministry settings, the growing issues of racism, lack of intercultural communication skills, deficiency in diversity competencies and a sheer lack of multi-cultural perspectives is creating a major rift in not just youth groups, but the wider Christian church itself. This increases and already large racial gap between ethnic groups, and adds to the continuing chasm with those who are *unchurched* and those who are *churched*. In turn, Churches in the suburban context are either on the brink of a multi-ethnic influx or already there, and the once-White, suburban, affluent church context will need to engage these rising demographic, cultural, and ethnic changes but in a fashion that is non-patriarchal and from a non-privileged position. This might include engaging with issues such as the multi-ethnic Christ, the worth of Black life, lament from an ethnic-minority context, and embracing the growing racial divide among many churches. See Emerson, *Divided by Faith*.

13 While the term "urban" is becoming vaguer by the year and a growing debate about how the term is applied and to whom and in which context, I will limit the use of the word to those who live in and/ or engage with the issues of poverty, gang violence, single parenthood, low income housing, lack of adequate education, systemic dysfunction, and violent contexts within families, communities, neighboring spaces, educational constructs, and/ or community surroundings. While this definition can also present its racial, gender, and class challenges, it provides the necessary framework for this article and research.

14 The interviews began with the question "Tell me about your experience in X ministry organization" and then led to deeper probing questions as respondents gave their answers.

15 Please note that all of the names have been changed in this article to protect the identity of the participants. Further, any identifying names and/ or attributes to the ministry organization have been removed as well. What follows is not an exhaustive breadth of their experience; rather, using grounded theory, themes and patterns will be highlighted to connect their experiences to the broader issue of what Rah describes as "Western Cultural Captivity" among White/ Euro American evangelical churches. See Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 27-44.

The use and engagement of ten additional informants was utilized to clarify findings and to correlate data summations. These were performed between 2007-2012 using unstructured interviews, each lasting ninety minutes. These interviews are used throughout the article to support the findings. Grounded theory analysis was used during coding to arrive at themes, narrative patterns, and the connections with race and ethnicity.

The Narrative & Voice of Young Adults

Sally was a young African American woman who was raised by her grandmother. She started attending the ministry that she was a part of since she was thirteen. She states:

> I thought it was cool at first. Everyone came at me like they wanted to get to know me. So, I was like, cool. They showed me love and treated me real nice. I never noticed, initially, the mess that was going on behind the scenes.

Sally was a model student and was responsible for bringing in the other three students for this research. She also became a mouthpiece for this ministry and recruited great numbers to the youth group. Once again she says:

> I was like, damn, they serving us food and treating people nice. So, I'm gonna bring in my friends. I know, knew, a lot of people. So if I'm experiencing something good, then I'm gonna tell other people about that….[pauses] [looks away] I'm not sure if I'd do that again knowing what I know now.

Sally worked her way into the leadership of this ministry and became the "model minority" for the organization in videos and fundraising events.[16] Sally was also in several leadership programs both in the community and within the organization. At one point, at least 45% of her schedule comprised "leadership training" and was often being prepped for "senior leadership."[17] None of the other students in the group were given as much attention and far too often the attention caused tension among other younger students. As Pedro, a younger freshman who had grown up with parents who were ministers, stated, "She's not the only one that's a leader. You know? I can lead too!" This was a shared sentiment among several other younger students in the organization.

The tension was kept passive and impassive among the inner group (Bob, Dave, Ann, and Kim) for the duration of high school. However, when the group graduated from high school and several of the young women started living together, this tension, now in the form of frustration and anger, revealed itself. The group had a falling out, of sort, a year before I wrapped up my research. While they eventually were able to work things out, the core of the arguments from the other members in the group were rooted in the favoritism which they felt that Sally had received throughout, and were revealed in comments and discourse such as, "they always liked you," "you could never do anything wrong, even when you were wrong," "we

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16 This is a common practice for well-intentioned, yet interculturally unaware White/ Euro-American leaders to do with ethnic minority students. One is typically all that is utilized and the story becomes focused on a gospelized version of the "American Dream" which in turn morphs into a pathway for other urban youth to follow, thereby creating a form of tokenism.

17 Local leadership develop is crucial working with youth and young adults in any setting; it is the life-blood of a good youth ministry setting. I am not criticizing the leader development; on the contrary, I would praise it. However, Sally was singled out merely because she 1) "spoke well," 2) came off as "together," and 3) articulated her thoughts well which, in turn, demonstrated to leadership teams that she was "leadership material." No other young person in the group was given as much attention as Sally in terms of "leadership potential," as it was often referred to, and was constantly made a "table piece," as she told me, at fundraising events. The use of ethnic-minority youth at fundraising events is what I term the *Pookie Story Effect*. In this sense, only the extreme parts of the story are used to sell and generate income without any regard to the well-being or personhood of the individual. Pookie is an urban name given to those whose story is a 'rags-to-riches' and one rooted in ghetto memes of poverty, welfare moms, and baby-mamma-drama that many modern-day fundraising events tend to focus on.

know you; they [meaning the White people] don't."[18] Sally felt that the tension and conflict, "... could have been dealt with much better," and because, as she later told me, there was a lack of cultural and ethnic knowledge from the WEOO and STM alike, simplistic responses were given to Sally and her friends such as "we'll be praying for you all," or "allow God to work it out." At times, those made things worse, albeit not immediately, but did create theological conundrums for Sally in many regards.

Sally was in no doubt a very strong leader, which, made her stand out for other WEOOs coming into her neighborhood. Because her personality was bold, she was often photographed and made a spokesperson for the others. There were also cases of her being modeled as if she was an object. She said to this,

> You know...there were times when I felt like I was like being sold at like an auction. They didn't even want to know my name, really, they just wanted to either touch me, ask me a bunch of questions about Black people, or—which is what made me feel really freakin' weird—just have me like a silent doll...I can't really explain; it's like they didn't even want me to talk.

Sally was part of the centerpieces of this group and often turned to for direction and leadership by the others. She was also seen as a "success story" by several of the STM's who came through her community. A "success" form what was unannounced, as she would later tell me, but because she was "well spoken" and often an "easy" Black woman to be around, as she explained to me:

> There were moments—I mean, nobody told me this outright, but it was sure felt—that I was like, a damn, I'm the safe Black person [laughing] I'm really that person. Really? Really? Me? But, yup. That was me. [Shakes head and looks down]

Dave was a large African American male who dominated the room with his booming voice. Yet, he was a "teddy bear," as Sally referred to him, and had/ has a heart for missions. He brought in thirty of his friends over the four years he attended this ministry. He tells us:

> Yeah man...those years were a trip. I always felt like I was a painting in some art gallery. The people would look and stare at me, never really connect, keep their distance, and love it when I performed for them. I never really fit in, but...[pauses] where else was I gonna go? My mom and dad could care less and that was the only place I found a space to be loved.

In this particular interview, Dave relays the tension he felt between the good that was being done in the ministry and the racism he was feeling. This is often an enigmatic feeling which arises in many ethnic minority youths in these situations.[19] There is "good" happening in the midst of a tough situation, but the feeling of acceptance and being a "part" of something is contrasted and sometimes greater. Dave, who had lost his father and had a difficult time growing up, searched for community. So, when STM's came for the summer and developed a relationship with him, he enjoyed the fellowship. But as he would put it, "The racism just got too much at times, and it wasn't even like they were calling me nigger or anything, just like, small stuff." What he is referring to is, of course, microaggression, which, in many regards can be worse than extreme racism itself.[20] Dave was perplexed with these relationships on many occasions. On the one hand, he had some friends—though temporary—yet on the other, he had to deal with, and engage with, racist tendencies, comments, and actions that left him, "angry" and "confused"; as he relayed to me.

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18 This is not an issue that finds itself solely in urban and/ or WEOO contexts. Anytime one person is given precedence over another, there is always the propensity for tension and resentment on all ends of relationships. However, in the urban multi-ethnic context, it is extremely important to know, understand, comprehend, and be sensitive to the concept of face for multi-ethnic/ post-civil rights young people. Face, and social capital, are about pride and respect. Often, when these are misunderstood, or undervalued which is often the case, issues like this while contentious, can be disastrous and create an even greater wedge not just between the youth and the organization, but also between the young person and the community, the young person and their family, and ultimately, the young person and their ability to navigate social relationships back in their own community. This could lead to detrimental consequences and create a dependence on the WEOO.
19 As seen from other interviews I have conducted around the country on this issue; also see Lupton, *Toxic Charity*.
20 For more on microaggressive effects, see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*; Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*; Wise, *White Like Me*.

As Dave would later come to tell me in subsequent years:

> I'm not sure if I can really say we were friends. I mean, they were cool and, we actually had some good times. But the thing about race kept coming up in these little ways. And, if I'd ever bring it up to them, they'd be like 'no Dave, no man, that's you; we're not racist at all.' So it got hard trying to talk about things that affected me, racially speaking...

Because of Dave's large stature, he often put White males on the subtle defense or on caution. His voice would often reverberate in small or large rooms causing him to be noticed quickly; that would add to the way Dave felt around Whites. This too, would be a factor when Dave negotiated relationships among WEOOs.

Dave was able to use work and his hobby of playing video games to buffer some of the negative side effects he experienced. For instance, simply being Black and large gave reason for harassment from police and, more than often, security guards, which in turn, when Dave would share with the WEOO or STMs, was written off or belittled. Dave would not often push back and would retreat to his games or into silence. He told me that often he would be in a rage, but, he knew he needed to "control himself" otherwise things would get ugly. He would often refer to the Incredible Hulk and say, "You won't like me when I'm angry!" Most of the students who came with the STMs used Dave as a "buddy" and a place to take selfies with. All the while, Dave was extremely aware of what was happening and the impact of those selfies. "All they want to see is the big Black man and say they have a Black friend. I mean...is that all I'm good for?" Dave would often tell me of the anger he felt because of this, but, would hide it well.

Kim was one of Sally's recruits and attended the youth ministry for only three years. She lived about an hour-and-a-half commute away, south, via public transportation—and developmentally came into her own later in life.[21] She was also a type of leader in that she organized and created small groups around the issues of race and ethnicity. Kim says:

> It was hard as hell to be at that church. I was always looked at as the 'dumb' one. You know? I hated that shit. I couldn't take it anymore, shoot. I left. [Laughs] you know? Them White folks didn't know what the hell to do with me. I ain't sayin' that I didn't see a version of God, but...shoot...at what price? You know? I started telling my friends to avoid that place like the plague. I told em that we can find God on our own. I'm with Tupac on that one...[pauses]

Kim was part Caribbean and White/ Euro-American. After graduating from high school, she entered college, eventually ending up on the Dean's List. Yet, while she was at this ministry organization, she was perceived as the angry Black woman.[22] Youth workers evaded her and used Sally as their communication bridge to her. Once again, this is a character typology that is often seen in these types of WEOOs and STM settings. She goes on to say:

> I love God. Period. There is no taking that away from me. But, I feel like I can't really find God when I'm told to worship and sing 'this way' [gestures] or 'that way.' I don't think God is like that. I think God is a God of variety. And I never felt at home in that church....[shakes her head]

Kim was much more critical of groups and of the church ministry she was a part of. Kim, in the final year of interviews, revealed to me that at times she was on hard financial times and needed the aide of the WEOO that she belonged to at the time. She felt like she had to survive and in order to do that, had to take on "racist attitudes and racism" in order to live. This is often the position many socio-economically disadvantaged ethnic-minorities find themselves in. They are in need or can use some sort of help, but the baggage that is

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21 This was one of the chief mitigating factors that worked against Kim. Any form of disability was likened unto a full license for pity shrouded in theological premise that could prove to be infuriating for those on the receiving end. This was the case for Kim and she resented anyone asking her anything about her development.

22 The concept of the 'angry Black woman' is a multi-layered one and one that deserves much more attention than this article can give. Because of its new emergence in scholarship, most STM's and White led urban youth ministries do not fully comprehend that caricature of Black women and how they, in turn, have perpetuated that same caricature within their own organizations. For a more comprehensive look into how the 'angry Black woman' issue and faith intersect with gender and race, I would suggest Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*; Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*

accompanied with that "help" such as microaggressive behavior and racist ideologies, comes at a high cost, and in some cases, a loss of identity altogether. Kim would add:

> There were times I just had to take it because I needed some help. And you know, it wasn't like them White people were *trying* to be racist, but...they couldn't help it. But it still hurt and made me feel like I was just some poor Black girl who would always be in need of White people.

Kim was not "easily moved" by either a simple 1-2-3 process of salvation or of Christianity. She questioned faith, God, the Gospels, and even heaven. This made her, among some of the STMs, a "project." In one instance, one young team sat with her and attempted to argue with her for about two hours. Kim later told me that event just showed her that religion was both "dumb" and "all about proving what is right and wrong so that they [meaning Whites] could be right." Kim often challenged simplistic notions of Christianity and the myth that blessings are equal to accomplishment, monetary success, and a life with few problems. Two younger youth pastors, in her senior year of high school, attempted to "convince" Kim of "God's love for her." This was disastrous and led to a sequence of events that eventually pushed Kim away from the church and her having a very negative view of anyone calling themselves a "missionary" or "Christian." Kim continued in college and eventually completed a master's degree in counseling. Kim, in her final interviews, told me, "all I needed was someone to believe in me. I found that in people who weren't in no damn church." Kim found solidarity in what one might label as the "secular." Kim, while keeping some contact with the rest of the group, did not feel the same camaraderie that the others did. While relationships after high school and youth groups tend to change drastically, for Kim, it was more of a move for independence and creation of her own self-identity outside of what a WEOO or agency said it *should* be.

Ann was part Black and part Mexican American. Ann was extremely quiet and even attempting to interview her proved difficult in her early teen years. Ann was good friends with Sally and had a strong bond with her. The two were almost inseparable. Ann would often be overlooked and her quiet nature would be misinterpreted as her being depressed, socially awkward, bi-polar, and/ or traumatized, as some in the WEOO would state.[23] To this Ann said,

> I'm not depressed! I ain't sick neither! Just because I'm quiet don't mean I have problems. It just mean I'm quiet. I like to check things out before I make a move. You know me too. I don't like to talk; I'll just sit in the back and see who's saying what. I wanna see what people are about. Once you get to know me though, you can't shut me up.

As Ann opened up more in the latter years, she revealed that when people tried to make her talk, she would make it a point to not talk or to just give simple quick responses. She despised STM's and regarded them as "fake, tired (meaning out of date and/ or irrelevant), and exploitive." The urban youth ministry she was a part of was "ok" at the time, simply because it did provide a safe place for her to just live and be away from a hectic household.[24] Ann's silence proved to be a factor in how she was "ministered to" and it was indicative of her responses that would later come. In a rare moment, she opened up:

> I hate anyone making me do anything. But, even more someone making me talk. Them White folks always thought less of me cause' I didn't talk when they wanted me too. Look, I pray, I know who God is, have a relationship with Him and everything. Why I need to talk all about it? Tell me that. I hate it, oh, I hate it, when someone trying to 'minister to me' [uses air quotes]. I can smell them from a mile way. They always come to me with like, 'hi miss Ann, how you doing?' and I'm like, 'Get the f**k away from me now...in my mind though! But, my face will tell it all. Who like being 'ministered too?' All they gon' do is go back and use it for some damn newsletter anyways or try to prove to they friends how they led some little Black girl to God. Look, I ain't havin' it and I know a lot of other kids feel that way too. Get to know me first. Then, we can talk, later, about God. What make you think you know all about God and I don't? You think you the only one God speak to? And I have to learn from you? What can you learn from me? I think I could be teaching them White leaders a thing to. But

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23 Typically, during meetings or in passing when Ann would be around.

24 There is good happening within these organizations. It is not all "evil" or "bad" and often, ethnic-minority students find some solace and worth within some of those mission agencies. Yet, on some levels, other interviewees suggested that these types of organizations should cease immediately and if others are created, they should be much more inclusive and ethnically representative.

see, what would be too much for them. Shoot. Y'all ain't the only people that God talk too White folks! God talk to me too. He just do it silently [giggling] cause' God know me and know what I like, being quiet!

Ann was not alone in her silence. Many urban multi-ethnic young people and emerging adults can appear silent, aloof, out of sorts, and socially inaudible. And while youth workers need to be aware and vigilant to the symptoms of depression, anomie, social withdrawal, PTSD, and other mental issues, the starting point of a relationship cannot be that of the worker helping or with an assumption toward the negative. Ann, and other students like her, know more than they let on and, often, have a much more complex and informed position because of their silence and observations. Ann's demeanor is not an anomaly and is much more common in urban and multi-ethnic settings. Students in those contexts are reserved and desire to get to know someone first, rather than speak and talk.[25]

Ann would later go on to college. She continued with her faith and attended the regular church service, as she grew older. Ann's would tell me she had a "strong faith," although she did question and doubt the ultimate "power of God" when tragedy struck—a common thread however among many students, urban, rural, or suburban. Ann was a family woman and desired a family, child, and house. She wanted to settle down at some point—even though she did not live a life of high social activity. Ann's faith in God later took a turn toward a more complex *nitty-gritty character*[26] which involved the integration into self and outlook of much that was suppressed or unrecognized in her earlier part of life; self-certainty and conscious awareness to reality was also much higher and allowed Ann to have a much broader and complex faith. Ann had developed an acute sense of who God was, and is. for her own life. Her faith, however, contained elements of popular culture, music, and forms of art that most would deem as "non-Christian" but, nevertheless, spoke God to her in those elements. This was something that caught my attention for the engagement of finding God within the sacred, secular, and profane.

Lastly, *Bob* was first generation Mexican American. His parents had brought him to the U.S. when he was ten and did not have his citizenship papers; he has come to be known as what is labeled *undocumented*. Bob still attends this church ministry and received ridicule from parts of his family who were devout Catholics. He, at one point, was part of a group which consisted of twelve other students who were in similar situations like Bob (e.g. 1st Generation Mexican American and undocumented). He was the only one of his friends that remained and held leadership positions[27] in the organization until an audit came; he was let go. Bob tells us:

> This ministry is like my second home. There are some really good people here. But here's the deal, I'm like a freakin' fine piece of China to these people here. I was cool with them until I started asking for stuff that made them feel uncomfortable; like a job that paid; like helping me with my citizenship; like using me for more than just a film clip or good story in the main service.

Bob's statement here connects with what I have observed as *contented ministry praxis*—ministry that is simplistic until a more complex issue interrupts that simplicity. Bob was part of larger, more controversial issue, in Southern California: the journey toward citizenship. What made things more volatile was that this ministry was, politically conservative and often members of the church made comments such as:[28]

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25 It is one of the reasons why a traditional youth ministry approach with up-front engagement, high-energy games, and extroverted activities needs to be re-examined for relevance in urban post-industrial contexts. For some, a more introverted approach might be warranted and needed.

26 I argue that nit-grit hood theology is necessary for post-soul contexts; a faith that is much more robust and complex than simplistic "faith in God" and/ or "faith in the unseen." It comprises the day-to-day and a much more pragmatic approach to theology and religion. See Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*, 145-49.

27 It is important to note that these leadership positions were merely peer oriented. Meaning, the White/ Euro-American leaders still held power and control and students such as Sally and Bob were only able to "lead" their peers. Rarely were they asked to enter into decision-making meetings and/ or policy making.

28 Actual quotes derived from meetings, newsletters, and sermons.

"These people need to go back to Mexico."

"I'm not giving up my job for them."

"Our country needs to return back to being American."

"These people are ruining our country."

Bob responded by:

> So, what...I'm not good enough to sit next to you in the Kingdom? But I'm good enough to clean your dishes, mow your lawn, and take care of your kids, right? As long as I'm serving you [meaning White people] I'm ok. But the minute I want rights you've had all along, now I'm the enemy. What 'America' are we going back to? My people owned this land before you all stole it from us!

Bob was asked to not comment on the comments made about him in a particular newsletter openly. He was asked to just "take the higher road" and work toward "reconciliation" rather than "stoop to their level." Bob told me:

> Man...ok, so I don't have a voice now? They can talk all that smack and I'm the one who is told to 'act right.' What's that about man? I don't see much God in that.

Bob's anger was justifiable. At that time, the politicized issue of amnesty was being debated widely and because the issue of immigration was ethnically and racially charged, the group that felt the heat the most were the Latina/o. Bob watched, with intensity, the debates and political candidates either dodge or oppose the issues surrounding immigrants. Bob was the most politically and socially aware student in the group. Bob's set of friends, who at first started to participate in the research but later decided to opt out, also had a robust bend toward politics.

Bob had wanted to vote in the 2008 election, but because he was not a citizen he could not. Bob was almost an anomaly for some WEOO workers.[29] On the one hand, they saw a human being with life, potential, and vigor, yet on the other, they saw an "illegal alien" and someone who had the potential, as two workers from an WEOO explained, to "mooch off the economy."[30] Bob direly wanted to vote someone in who could help. While Christian leaders did not typically directly tell him their opinions regarding immigration, he could feel them—much like Ann did when WEOO leaders attempted to minister to her. Bob told me,

> Look, I'm human. I'm not some 'alien' from outer space. I am human just like these other people. I wanna live just like the next person. But they make this issue of immigration like we are some evil people trying to take something from them. Who the hell wants to be cleaning tables and mopping floors? But I don't see no White folks lining up to do that work. So whose job am I taking...Mexicans are your problem now? How about the land you took from us? Can I talk about that now? It just don't make sense. And they want me to worship a God that supports me leaving the America? I don't know man...don't make sense to me.

Bob struggled with his faith to comprehend a God that was being shown to him as Republican, conservative, and very White. These all stood in opposition to his being and personhood. He was conflicted and because his faith development was still evolving, he was not able to grasp the full scope and diversity of Christianity. From observation, WEOOs presented only their perspective and version of Christianity—stressing it as "truth" and standard of Christian theology,[31] therefore marginalizing or even denying the existence of

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29 Many WEOOs tend to have a conservative base of supporters and subscribe to a conservative and even fundamentalist view of the Christian bible.

30 This was told to me in passing as a group of protesters passed the neighborhood we were in. At this time, California was in the heat of political, ideological, and theological debate regarding Latina/o immigration. I have attempted to keep the gender and race anonymous here as not to reveal too much information of the individuals who held a significance role in Christian culture (e.g. authors, speakers).

31 See Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 127-40.

other narratives that might prove of worth to people like Bob - narratives that move away from a western confinement of Christianity.

Struggling to maintain steady employment—a common feature for those who are undocumented as many employers who would hire an undocumented person, are often themselves involved in the underground economy in some manner—Bob turned to activism and advocacy. He wanted to lead and help others who were in similar situations. And while Bob was not noticed as a leader as quickly as Sally, he weathered the time and made it into leadership. Bob did question the existence of God and what Christianity meant in the scope of being Mexican and Chicano. It was not until he could develop a contextualized version of Christianity—seeing a Brown Jesus and reading from authors such as Justo Gonzalez and Gustavo Gutierrez—that Bob could connect with a contextualized version of Christianity. The latter parts of his years in the local urban youth ministry were "rough," as he put it. "They were a time when I questioned everything about God because I didn't know God from my own land." Social and political activism helped shaped Bob's critical sense to life and God. And while he still has many questions about Christianity, he was able to find a place at the table for himself. He now desires to help others to do the same.[32]

Let us now turn to the significance of these narratives and the implications for from the research.

Multifaceted Inferences

While these stories represent a certain demographic and locality in the U.S., they do present some problematic and troubling scenarios for missiologists and Christian faith-based organizations alike. These types of stories, over the past few years, have become increasingly common in many urban and multi-ethnic enclaves around the U.S. as more WEOOs and STMs have had an uptick in "local outreach."[33] The impact, therefore, of WEOOs and STMs, is significant and poses deeper critical interrogation. Therefore, I have found five themes that emerge from this research:

1. Ethnic minority youth tend to be treated as objects.
2. Ethnic minority youth are personified into the American Dream meta-narrative of achievement, accomplishment, and success. Those that do not fit in such a model or do not follow it, are often overlooked and labeled as "tough".
3. Anger and frustration are looked upon as "ungodly" and "sinful".
4. Diversity and racial competencies are not valued for senior leadership training and those topics are often only given an average of one hour at the very end of training events.
5. Asians, fair skinned Latinas/os, and model African American youth are valued.

These themes can present challenges and hurdles for WEOOs as they have the strong possibility of forcing the issue of race and racism into the organizations curriculum. Moreover, while Bob was the only one of this group who continued with this WEOO, the overall sentiment was that of disdain and subtle apathy toward organized church and religion. Kim left church altogether and considers herself "spiritual" but not "religious."[34] Kim, after her junior year, did not keep in contact with her former youth group. As a result, she was quickly labeled "angry" and even a "backslider" when she left.

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32 This was a difficult premise for the WEOO. Continually, its representatives made efforts to discourage Bob from "thinking this way" or from learning more about contextual pursuits to Christianity. In all transparency, I was Bob's mentor for several years and aided in helping create a strong community of caring multi-ethnic adults who could mentor Bob. I do regard that if it had not been for this effort, Bob would have succumbed to the pressure of the White leaders' rhetoric, such as "sinful" or "lost", being applied to him. Bob's faith was tested, but, more importantly, how many other young ethnic-minority youth, who have dared to question White Jesus, have been overwhelmed with sin-talk such as this? How many more contextualized texts might we have if the mind of critical thinkers was developed within their own context?

33 Howell and Dorr, "Evangelical Pilgrimage," 237.

34 Very similar findings to that of Dean, *Almost Christian*, and Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, Herzog, *Lost in Transition*, as they look at emerging adults and their spirituality. However, in this case, this would be a variant as Kim was an open Christian, but felt the ministry she was a part of left a bad impression on her spiritual journey.

Bob, too, was labeled angry, but was able to corale that anger while in front of White/ Euro-American leaders of the ministry. The leaders then deemed him "better" and he was able to be a part of the ministry as long as he was, as Bob told me, docile and calm. While Dave was frustrated and irritated with the racial intolerance of this ministry, he remained passive and quiet in the group. He was also a good joke teller which gave him an advantage as the "funny Black guy" which, as he would come to tell me, "...made the White folk feel comfortable."

The leadership of the local WEOO attended multi-ethnic and diversity-focused conferences such as Urban Youth Workers Institute and Christian Community Development Association which held workshops and sessions on racial reconciliation. Yet, even with this training, inferences arose that had effect on ethnic minorities in these areas.[35] These were:

–   Once a consensus of racial, cultural, and diversity knowledge was reached, the leader felt as though they had "arrived" and issues of race and racial reconciliation were halted.
–   If the critique about White/ Euro-American privilege and power was too strong or "angry" in the training, the material was written off as "too secular" or worse, "sinful".[36]
–   Tolerance of the attainment of employment as the sole reason to take the training — in other words the leader would attend racial competency training just to say "I went" and the attitude of the leader was never changed.
–   Ethnic minorities are good "stories" for financial and social purposes.

These themes were confirmed by Sally, Bob, Kim, Ann, and Dave. Further, they affirmed that engagement with these main themes were crucial in order to overcome paternalism and racial intolerance in White/ Euro-American-led youth ministry organizations. Sally stated:

> I mean, I just don't see how this can be overcome unless someone in key positions of leadership are able to put down their damn pride. Otherwise, we, the Black and Mexican folk, are just left out. Shoot, we probably need to get our own organizations up and running. They just ignorant [speaking of her leaders in the youth ministry group]. They don't understand me at all. I'm good and cool for a damn story or to raise money for your new chapel. But do you really know me? Do you really know where I'm coming from? Nope. You know what I'm sayin'?

Sally, one of the more outspoken youth, was able to navigate some of these issues fairly well. Partly because she had helped raise funds, participated in video clips that promoted the ministry, and, as she relayed to me, "...knew when to tell them folk the truth and when to lie and make them feel good. It did not, however, always yield good results; she was part of a yearlong contentious ministry wide dispute between a very wealthy and powerful White/ Euro-American donor of the ministry and a group of ethnic minority students who were living with them.

In addition, the cultural and ethnic unawareness of WEOOs creates a wider racial gap and I would add, that there is also a disgruntlement with the religion of Christianity among urban ethnic-minorities who encounter these WEOOs and STMs because it is viewed as a White religion and one that is disconnected from other races.[37] This is especially evident in the current racial tensions among White Evangelicals voting for Donald Trump[38]—who is seen as a fascist and racist persona among many Black millennials—and the

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35 It was also noted that ethnocentric views among youth who attended short-term mission trips, was not significantly changed as a result of experiencing different cultures and ethnic groups. Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler, "The Effect of Religious Short-Term Mission Trips on Youth Civic Engagement," 783-84.

36 Similar to what Tim Wise refers to as "White Denial" of racism, White privilege and White power domination in social structures. It is easy to ignore it, if you do not have to live it or deal with it on a daily basis, thus the issue of privilege. Wise, *Between Barack and a Hard Place*.

37 This is an increasing worldview and one that is fodder for movements such as The Black Youth Project and Black Lives Matter to further distance themselves from the religion of Christianity which is perceived to be both historically racist and carry a colonialist approach in their view of Blackness. Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou discusses this plainly when he asserts the question of "Whose God?" in regards to faith, spirituality, at the intersections of race. Sekou, *Gods, Gays, & Guns : Essays on Religion and the Future of Democracy*, 28-46.

38 Found in the PRRI report of the American Values Survey; Jones, Cox, Cooper, and Lienesch, *The Divide over America's Future*, 20-26.

concerns about police brutality from the Black community. which includes the lack of respect for Black bodies.[39]. I will now examine five summations from the data about the effects of passive racism.

Summations of the Effects of Passive Racism

Before discussing both the immediate and broader implications of this research, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, because the sample of ethnic minority young people is small, generalizing the findings to the whole of Evangelical Outreach Mission (EOM) workers in the United States must be done with caution. Second, qualitative data for this study, even though performed over a period, were limited to the essay-style narrative responses; a more quantitative study could reveal more complex findings on racism, microaggression, and White hegemony. Future studies on this topic should utilize these more-rigorous quantitative methods. Additionally, future quantitative-oriented studies should seek an equally large sample of EOM workers with a greater oversample for minorities, particularly Latinos and Asian Americans.

From the research, I would then add that there are five summations on the effects of passive racism that can be inferred from the data. They are:

6. **The issue of race and ethnicity are important even if it is not an issue in your group.** Many responses I received from workers in WEOOs is that race is of no significance or that the problems of racism are only exacerbated when we talk about the issue and give it energy. This tends to be rooted in a privileged position, which is derived from relatively historical non-oppressive conditions. Race was a key factor in all the interviewees and continues to remain a substantial factor in the embracement of Christianity by emerging ethnic-minority millennials.

7. **Belittlement.** This was ever-present in almost all the interactions between the WEOOs and ethnic minority young adults interviewed. While there are organizations that spend time training on their approach to language and the use of non-verbal connotation, the overwhelming response and theme from these interviewees was that of feeling belittled in the "name of Christ." Language is powerful and most of the effect of language comes from non-verbal connotation. A look, a touch, the way someone positions themselves, tone, inflection, eye contact (or the lack thereof), all connote meaning. In some cases, they connoted a sense of superiority, as relayed to me by Bob, and Sally. One young man, 19, told me that the White male missionaries always felt to be moving onto the next big conquest in the "name of God," and that often White STMs, along with some ethnic-minorities who had adopted White culture, saw them, the "urban community" as pitiful and "lost." Language such as "at risk" or "lost" only reinforces this perspective and, from the perspective of ethnic-minorities, suggests a paternalist presence.

8. **Microaggression.** As noted in the responses, microaggression combined with belittlement, offers a social brew of intolerance and an attitude of despising given in passive form. Microaggression only makes matters worse and creates a strong disdain not just for White Christians, but for Christianity as well. Three other ethnic-minority emerging adults relayed to me their antipathy for Christianity because of having been involved with White urban ministries. They were all unsure of their faith and questioned whether or not a God even existed. As one older African American woman who had worked for (and later resigned from) an STM told me, "If a God does exist that allows White people to rule and be in control, I'm not so sure I want anything to do with that kind of God." WEOOs are in dire need of doing the difficult, hard, yet important work of deconstructing their pre-conceived racial notions.

9. **Christianity & salvation in exchange for your ethnic soul.** This theme emerged quite prevalently among many conscious ethnic-minorities I have interviewed. In other words, if you are going to become

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39 This is noted profoundly in Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 50-89.

a Christian, then you must give up your culture and ethnic heritage,[40] because it is not compatible with White Evangelical Christianity, which is currently the dominant form of Christianity in the U.S.[41] This is a result of the concentration of power and control of the Christian marketplace among White evangelicals—a hegemony constituting morality and values.[42] This hegemonic construct, in turn, produces material and curriculum, that is, White based.[43] This, then, suggests to ethnic-minorities desiring to be a) Christian and b) identified to their racial and ethnic heritage, that they must then adopt a White Christian cultural mantra to be a "true Christian." Going back to the non-verbal discourse, this is rarely expressed verbally, but, through subtle and microaggressive connotations. This would suggest a counterproductive ideology in which ethnic-minority young adults could find difficult to embrace, thereby causing dissonance.

10. **White satisfaction amidst ethnic-minority rage.** The level of anger cultivated, in several cases, rage toward White people who worked in, and for, WEOO's. Many WEOO workers who came into the urban community left with a high sense of satisfaction, self-fulfillment, and greater sense of doing "God's work."[44] Thus, this was interpreted by the young people as they themselves being "projects" and/ or "newsletter stories" which then created a sense of anger within the ethnic-minorities. The anger only worsened among many ethnic-minority youths who, as already mentioned, felt belittled, used as a newsletter story, selfie or ignored altogether. For the leaders in WEOOs, there was a sense of betterment for the greater good which tended to emerge. In other words, yes, race *may* be a factor, but, we are doing the best job for these kids because, after all, who else is going to do it? The feeling of this type of ethos was reflected in all the narratives cited here (Sally, Bob, Ann, Dave, and Kim). This might suggest what Perry defines as the racial habitus of White EOM's keeping maintenance of White domination within and throughout the organization.[45]

Conclusions

This article has focused on examining and exploring the narratives of five young ethnic-minority experiences who were a part of WEOOs in the Los Angeles region and had experienced STMs in their community. Using this data, this article then surmised a broader generalization of those effects to begin deconstructing the potential racial harm upon ethnic-minority populations. This article demonstrates the complexities of domestic "missions" and WEOOs doing work in a post-industrial context. This article stands to make the argument that in a post-industrial era, STMs need to be re-examined, reconstructed and possibly closed to meet the changing demographics, cultural contexts, and racial elements within city/ urban areas.

These narratives from ethnic-minority students, as I would argue, represent a larger growing body of ethnic-minority students who are involved in WEOOs. As the demographics of the U.S. change, the growing populations of ethnic-minorities will continue to affect both WEOOs and STMs. Furthermore, these narratives are only glimpse of the possible damage done by well-intentioned, yet interculturally-challenged White Evangelicals. More importantly, as the late Native American scholar and activist Richard Twiss reminds

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40 This is also supported by other scholars who have researched White Christian organizations. See Weisinger and Salipante, "A Grounded Theory for Building Ethnically Bridging Social Capital in Voluntary Organizations"; McClatchy, "Building a Multi-Cultural Organization in Texas"; Bradley, *Black Scholars in White Space*; Bradley, *Aliens in the Promised Land*; Perry, "Diversity, Donations, and Disadvantage"; Perry, "Racial Habitus, Moral Conflict, and White Moral Hegemony within Interracial Evangelical Organizations"; McGlathery and Griffin, "'Becoming Conservative, Becoming White?'."

41 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*; Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*; Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*

42 Samuel Perry asserts this notion of White Christian hegemony which, "... refers to a form of domination maintained non-coercively through the instillation of the dominant group's values within the minority group and small concessions made by the dominant group without significantly altering the underlying systems of inequality." Perry, "Racial Habitus, Moral Conflict, and White Moral Hegemony within Interracial Evangelical Organizations," 90.

43 For a broader exploration of how this affects faith based organizations, see Hodge and Otaola, "Reconciling the Divide."

44 This was documented from the numerous leadership meetings, both pre-and post, I attended with the STM teams that came through the area. There were also meetings that the STM students had which expressed these tones as well.

45 Perry, "Racial Habitus, Moral Conflict, and White Moral Hegemony within Interracial Evangelical Organizations," 90-91.

us, "Christianity is not a White religion…and…cannot be reduced to a systemized set of propositional truth statements."[46] More research in this area is needed on a broader scale to explore the effects of racism, microagression, and patriarchy on the populations of ethnic-minorities from WEOOs and STMs.

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46 Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*, 59, 64.

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