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Seated on the Great White Throne:
Examining the Legacies of Whiteness in Progressive Evangelical Christian Perspectives

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

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DAVIS

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2021

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Chapter One: Introduction- Finding Myself in the Pews

Preface

Christianity serves many purposes for many different kinds of people. For some in the United States, Christianity is a public practice; for others, it is a private one. For some, it is an emotional experience deep within one's inner life. For others, it is a public proclamation shouted from city squares and public rallies. For some, it is experienced through a close reading of scripture found in the bible. For others, it is a sensorial and contemplative manifestation of spirituality that cannot be captured in words. For some, Christianity is a central focal point for family traditions. For others, Christian expressions of faith are new, evolutionary in nature, and cannot be defined by tradition.

It is precisely this malleable treatment of Christianity in the United States that draws my curious eye. From one perspective, Christianity is steadfast and unchanging. From another, individuals and communities experience it in adaptation to a contemporary world. Why and how can one spiritual tradition be so altogether different for so many dissimilar people and communities? According to what measures do communities define their practice as 'Christian'? Who gets to participate in this spiritual community in the first place, and who gets to call themselves a Christian?

Broadly, the work that I have undertaken in this dissertation aims, in part, to understand what are some of the defining cultural touchstones for a Christian community in a contemporary world of evolving social self-consciousness. In this exploration, I have spent time deeply embedding myself within a contemporary Christian community that is in the midst of answering these same questions for itself. At the convergence of traditional practice and contemporary culture, this church community is grappling with what it means to come to terms with a kind of

faith that, while responsive to notions of the past, might not be properly equipped with adequate responsiveness to a changing contemporary environment. Questions about social location, socioeconomics, sexual orientation, and race are all at the forefront of a rearticulation of a religious imagination and spiritual identity for this church body. Anchored in the past and with the experiences that made them Christians in the first place- family tradition, denominational affiliation, community of origin- members of this church community struggle to build a Christian experience that can actually meet the needs of the diverse community in which they hope to draw.

I have observed that, as they learn to align their future dreams of equality and fairness with their contemporary practice, leaders and community members alike are too heavily influenced by past memories and practices to connect the past and present to resolve their experiential tensions. They want a version of Christianity that is socially, politically, and theologically progressive and liberal; a version altogether different from the one afforded to them. I have observed, however, that they are far too connected to the past that they hope to leave, and their roots too entangled with those of their forefathers. In fact, their contemporary roots and those of their communities of origin are actually very much the same.

As previously mentioned, I took an ethnographic approach to this research. I have firsthand experience in what it means to attempt to assign contemporary political, social, and theological meaning to a belief system not inherently designed for a contemporary world. I have been a member of multiple religious communities similar to the one in which I was embedded and the questions that I aim to answer have been circulating in my imagination for many years. The following dissertation begins with an in-depth analysis and exploration of my own journey within this world and the connections to the broader questions I have answered in this body of

work. This auto-ethnographic dissertation serves as both a critical academic investigation and an answer to a personal grappling I have seen and experienced for many years. Like the congregants with whom I developed deep relationships, I too desired a community for myself that reflected my view of the contemporary world. Unlike the community members that I interviewed, however, I could not help but to view myself as an outsider attempting to find a home on the inside and *not* as an insider attempting to make a community for outsiders.

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Introduction

In my youth, Christianity never seemed to serve well all parts of my intersectional identity. In my youth, I needed Christianity to respond to a hierarchy of needs for my family, for my community, and for me. Church messages seemed to tow a steady line of Christ being both above *and* below the political middle- above, because Christ was too vast a figure to limit within conventional political parties; below, because the meekness and humanity of God's son left him up to his knees in the mess of this world, not having the socioeconomic middle class propensities with which to trouble himself. In Albuquerque, NM, where I am from, even less still were there progressive forms of Christianity. It just did not exist and, *if* it did, I did not know where to find it within my locus. As a young Latino with an even younger awareness of his queer identity, I knew that if I desired a religious home for myself that was both affirming of my queerness and still Christ-centered, I would have to leave the city of my birth.

I was one of the lucky ones. I was "out" to my Christian family with practically no trouble at all. The *latinidad* from which I come merits attributions of familism much more than any other part of life so that, when one of us falls left or right of center, an intact unit remains top

priority. Few of my kin, if any, could harm the unit so detrimentally as to be left out or behind. This is not universally true for Latin culture and is something akin to a gift for my life- of which, I do not take for granted. In fact, my family converted to Evangelical Christianity from traditional Roman Catholicism when most of my siblings were older adolescents, meaning that we had an already established family culture that existed outside of this new way of knowing a faith tradition. There was nothing new that we could possibly learn that would jeopardize our notion of collective family. Although, limits were tested on both fronts.

In many ways, the desire for a politically progressive church environment was specifically why I moved to Denver, Colorado, from Albuquerque in 2009. I did not know much but I knew that there had to be a home for me up north. Perhaps attributing more credit than is deserved to Denver, or any metropolis larger than Albuquerque, I was fully invested in the idea that moving to the 'big city' meant inclusive cosmopolitanism would inevitably envelop me. I was following my own North Star toward religious and political freedom- a freedom I had not known and one I desperately desired from previous church communities.

After meandering in and out of a handful of churches that espoused politically and socially progressive beliefs in word but *not* in deed, I began to wonder if I was ever going to find a church where I could serve and participate with all aspects of my life; or, if such a church even existed. Eventually, though, I found myself at an up-and-coming one that would offer me just that. On this hot, summer day, I walked through the church doors, settled into my seat with iced coffee in hand, and, after hearing for the first time in my life, "gay or straight, there is no hate here," I wept. There was not one familiar soul around me yet for the first time in a church space, I felt utterly surrounded by family. My soul was tired from searching. I was relieved. The

duration of my queer and weary journey had finally met a gratifying end that so many likeminded Christians before me had longed to experience.

Seemingly in an instant, I no longer wondered what conversations lurked behind closed meeting doors held by church leaders. I no longer dreaded the questions about when I'd be joined in the pews by a nice girl. I no longer feared having to choose between my private life outside of church and my spiritual one indoors- in fact, for the first time ever, the two could merge. I could bring, and be *seen* in, my wholeness. The ease with which I saw my straight loved ones flow through these worlds while I puttered betwixt and between created in me a deep resentment of which I felt I could finally let go. I was home.

Pursuing a church community that honored and respected my queerness meant that I was prioritizing my queer identity over my Latin one. I was so empowered by my family and culture that, before I knew it, I had left that part entirely by the wayside. In that first year of living in Denver, I was busy filling a spiritual void while inadvertently creating a new one. Not only was I away from my family and my culture, but I was also away from *comunidad* more wholly. The educated classes of Denver with which I interacted were (and still are) predominantly white and, since I was new to the city and joining in these ranks, I began to take stock in those feelings. Something was missing and I could not quite put my finger on it.

I was establishing community in my professional life but it was not until I found my new church home that I began to make a meaningful and deep connection in that second year. It was within the rise of these relationships and their impact on me that I began to recognize an absence. My 'church friends' were certainly filling a void but I was beginning to miss my Latin culture. How they did church was not how my family did church. How they did community was foreign, distant, and unfamiliar. As I will make clear in the following chapters, they simply did

community in socially, politically, and theologically *white* ways. I began to recognize that the moments with which I was deeply unaccustomed were exactly the same moments of familiarity for my white friends. As I will explore in the following chapters, whatever it was that began to repel me was exactly what was attracting them.

In the year leading up to these, I had taken on politically progressive tendencies much more than I did when I lived in New Mexico. Feeling isolated and without likeminded people of color, I wanted my faith practices to encompass more concern and passion for a politically progressive racial approach toward Christianity. This is important because, as I grew in my understanding, I was able to locate and critique how churches that claimed progressive values were or were not speaking similar language. It mattered to me that churches developed a rhetoric around how they merged and overlapped their theological and political notions, not as separate but as inherently one in the same. In one hand, I was learning to hold the feeling of being a racially distant outsider. In the other, though, I learned to gather and hold a sense of comfort regarding the political concern my pastor and community shared toward inclusion. This mattered to me and I had hoped that the tension would resolve itself one day.

In the few years of my connection to that church and the community that I had grown to love, I had established an extended church network. During long weekends away in various cities across the country, I would inevitably receive invitations to attend a church service with a friend I met through this budding collective of progressive evangelicals, which was small but always outwardly jovial and welcoming. Each time I entered a new church, whether in Seattle, Chicago, or even others in Denver, there was always something similar about them. From one Sunday morning experience to the next, the culture that seemed to be built up in each unique space felt

oddly like the one before. There was coffee, moody lighting, contemporary music, a white pastor, and a predominantly white congregation.

Across the country, there was also a national discourse of the rejection of church the way their fathers did it. Sermons were no longer preaching against the sometimes-distant concepts of homosexuality, divorce, alcohol, or other issues that defined Christian social and political location of the generations before them. They were no longer discussing the national political implications of their faith on the world. Rather, their efforts moved into the intentionally local. Sermons were now about personal relationships with Christ and with neighbors. They were about personal divine interpretation and "third ways" of understanding religious concepts (the first way being the traditional way and the second way being the full-on abandonment of religious perspective altogether).

There was a thread being pulled through and around each commonality. What was it about these spaces that felt the same? How, when walking into a progressive, evangelical space, did I *know* that it was a progressive, evangelical space? What were the social, political, and theological signals that pointed white evangelicals to places just like this and me toward this very specific awareness? And most importantly, what was being signaled to white people that was not being signaled to people of color, despite having heard sermon after sermon, across a spectrum of cities, focused expressly on inclusion? These very questions are the ones I hope to answer here.

In pursuit of answers to these questions, I began conducting ethnographic research with a large, urban church in Denver's downtown, from early summer 2019 through late spring, 2020. I chose to conduct my research within an adjacent community I had lived and worshipped because

I knew that Denver served as a nerve center for white, progressive, evangelical churches. It was one of the few metropolitans that had more than one church like it, whereas similar churches across the country served as the city on a hill for politically progressive, Christian-minded people. Additionally, I had visited this church a handful of times in the past and recognized it as a quintessential example of the kind of racial- and gender-inclusiveness I had observed in progressive evangelical churches across the country.

The church, called Mile High Community (MHC), is much like the churches I experienced in the ten years before. Its church mission statement is, “to live as a community who follows Jesus, journeys together, and demonstrates God’s love to all people.” Its *Christianness* is undeniable. Every sermon comes from the bible. The pastors and community members talk about Jesus. They sing about the life, death, and resurrection stories. They have mission teams sending people and money all around the world for Christian causes. The MHC staff is an assemblage of 30-somethings, made up of mostly men, with a handful of women as pastors, musicians, and part time staff.

It’s population is mostly young families, signaling middle to upper class status in dress culture and appearance, and had membership representation from all corners of the city. It operates out of a space not traditionally designed for Christian worship and had none of the traditional high church sensibilities- seemingly a draw for many of the people who previously worshipped on the fringes of traditional expectation compared to the churches of the past out of which they had developed. With walls lined with wood, 30 foot high ceilings, and a large wooden stage with ornate design, it served to provide the moody sentiment progressive evangelicals seem most comfortable. The 500 cushioned chairs form several rows of half circles that face the stage. On a typical Sunday, I joined between 300-400 people in worship.

In order to ground their understanding about how one develops a relationship with a community such as this, one must first and foremost gain a sense of the pastor who leads it. In the version of evangelicalism of which MHC is a part, The church's charismatic leader is often a guidepost and symbolic figurehead. Nathan, who's in his very early 40's, is often quick to share a humorous quip at the beginning of most services. He's medium height, square-jawed, and has a smile that can shift the entire mood of the Sunday morning experience. One would likely find him dressed in a casual, untucked button-down with skinny jeans and boots- seemingly customary attire when one scans the congregation and sees a similar dress throughout. Much like his attire, Nathan is not especially youthful. He isn't overly stylized. He doesn't give the sense of trying too hard. But, much like his attire, he is effortlessly attractive. He is easy to watch and he is easy to approach.

This matters because Nathan, through his demeanor and his presentation, has effectively drawn in individuals who are either much like him or who admire the ways in which he moves in the world. All of those whom I interviewed and had relationships with throughout our year together signal much of the same social indicators that Nathan does. They were similarly styled, approachable, and easy to speak with. All of them were attractive, not for the sake of trying to be, but because it seemed as though attractiveness was a requisite for membership. I was keenly aware of my dress and the way that I also signaled many of these same indicators during every social interaction I had with the MHC community, partly to fit in but partly because this type of community is what I had been used to. Because MHC was a part of the small but expanding network of churches that reach across the country, walking into a typical church service was not unlike walking into any of the other church services I had experienced in the years preceding. There was free coffee, there were greeters, there was a wing designed for childcare, there were

mostly married couples, there were bibles underneath one out of every four seats, there was an alternative pop Christian band that began and ended each service, and there were mostly white people.

The most consistent observation I made over my time with this congregation, and the connection that can most solidly be made across my progressive evangelical church experiences is that on every Sunday I was in attendance, I observed that the MHC community was at least ninety percent white or white-passing, both among the laity and the leadership, alike. While potentially unsurprising in and of itself, what continued to draw my curiosity was the tension I experienced between this reality and the ways that members thought of and talked about themselves. Attention toward racial equity was a recursive theme, both in the sermons I listened to and in the conversations I was having with the community. The church seemed to think of itself as an institution that held political and social space for communities of color, despite there being so few members. As we will explore, this was not only something I recognized as an outsider to the construction of this community, but was also a source of deep confusion and frustration for some of the church members and leaders, themselves.

This observation must sit in conversation with the notion of queer inclusion and inclusion of women and transgender members at both the lay and leadership levels. While not a part of Mile High Community's formational identity in the near twenty years of its church history, over the last five years, the church leaders and their members have been grappling with, and coming to full acceptance of, both transgender and queer membership and leadership.

Because these communities know themselves as inclusive spaces, it seems a natural transition toward racially inclusive rhetoric. However, because these efforts had not translated into more people of color in attendance on Sunday, it became clear that I needed to examine

discourse in my research, as well. What are the connections of inclusive language that resonate toward a sexually-inclusive church space but do not with communities of color? What messages are conveyed that create the notion that people of color *ought* to be in attendance and is this a part of the rooted frustration that community members experience? Inversely, what notions are stated that perpetuate white signaling that allow white people to feel uniquely and especially included?

Whiteness is, after all, the dominant category of race in the United States. White people have created structures that serve mostly white people, much in the same way that communities of color have institutions that serve mostly communities of color. It is no surprise that some churches, even progressive ones, would find themselves heavily skewed toward one race over the other. My curiosity and questions continued to percolate, however, recognizing that churches like the ones I had been attending for the ten years before had developed their faith to include a social, political, and theological concern for queer and transgender representation. The shifts that occurred in these communities to evolve their faith practice toward inclusion left me with questions about potential. It seems a logical next step that the practice of developing an inclusive perspective can occur within the confines of a tradition whose core tenants include bible literalism. These moves toward more inclusion seemed naturally to include racial outsiders, as well. In fact, MHC and churches like it began to develop an awareness toward, and religious claims around, the notion that demonstrating "God's love to all people" ought to unambiguously include communities of color.

It was easy to become aware of the prevalence of racially inclusive messaging within these mostly white institutions. The messaging was continual. I continued to wonder, however,

why their inclusive messaging was resonating so deeply with progressive white congregants yet at the same time continued to muster dismal amounts of representation from the communities of color for whom they espoused their deep concern and theological care. **Because of this, I argue that white evangelicalism is evolving its ideals from a conservative locus to a progressive one, all within proximity to the concerns of white social, political, and theological constructions.** This means, for example, queerness and gender variant expressions are allowed and welcomed by traditionally heteronormative and cisgender-dominant groups, but is happening because those communities also have a dominant proportion of white representation in historically white spaces. When participation is the measure of how well an evangelical church is doing socially, politically, and theologically, obvious representations from those communities in church pews actually matters a great deal. Whiteness is evolving to know itself in proximally-white ways, even when those ways have historically been in opposition to a traditional Christian moralistic social, political, and theological understanding. In other words, churches like Mile High community demonstrate that whiteness is the category around which society, politics, and theology evolve, and not necessarily Christian practice itself.

Inversely, because this progressive evangelical practice evolves in proximity to whiteness, those individuals and communities who take on a progressive awareness are too socially, politically, and theologically distant from the specific concerns of communities of color to affect broad demographic change in membership. Because participation is the measure, racial diversity marks for many of the church's members successful or unsuccessful evangelical practice. Nothing is more obvious to the eye than one's skin color. Members of MHC are so deeply rooted in historically white structures that they are only left able to measure less obvious, more proximally-white social markers like sexuality and poverty, all against a mostly-white

backdrop. This leaves members and leaders alike with an unresolved practical tension, despite members expressing a desire for connection and community with the people they aim to serve. Their theological claims of demonstrating "love to all" meet a social, political, and theological impasse caused by structures and systems designed for, and perpetuated by, white people alone.

On Naming: The use of "Evangelical"

For the MHC church and the members I interviewed, and for practitioners of a progressively evangelical religious expression more broadly, identity is a fluid concept. For the majority of its members, this Christian community has been working specifically against the conservative expressions of their evangelical foreparents *yet* their identities and worlds seem strikingly similar to them. In this same spirit of defiance against institutional legacy, members of MHC and others like them often feel too confined in a name and all that the process of naming does for identity. Words and names matter. As a scholar and observer of cultures and institutions not my own, it is my responsibility to dignify the ways in which the MHC community desires their identities to be reflected into the world. Honoring only the perspective of my gaze, and not the perspective of those whose lived experience I hope to understand more deeply, I perpetuate the strength of my own perspective and not those of the individuals whose stories I aim to illuminate. As Derek Alderman states, in his article, "Place, Naming, and the Interpretation of Cultural Landscapes" (2016), "naming is a powerful vehicle for promoting identification with the past and locating oneself within wider networks of memory" (195). How one chooses to identify, or inversely, how one chooses to *not* identify, places that individual in communion with a broader historical context of self-awareness. Naming allows for individuals and communities to participate, or not, with others who share a lineage, a past, or a place. As Alderman continues,

“naming can be used as a tool of control, a means of inscribing and reifying certain cultural and political ideologies” (204). Naming both tells the world who one is, and who one is not; when one is, and when one is not. For Mile High Community Church, naming is a trouble best resolved through action.

The community members I interviewed often found their own attempts at naming their religious expression too rigid and cumbersome. Religious Anthropologist, Travis Cooper (2017), in attempting to understand and name a similar religious community said this about naming:

> The peculiar site of defining or putting a name to a set of criteria, actions, phenomena, ideologies, theologies, texts, habits, or trends is itself an instance of boundary maintenance... through definitional battles novel religious movements seek to coalesce. To define something demonstrates an attempted act of legitimacy, authority, and power; naming things, as linguistic anthropologists have suggested, brings about a sense of mastery or establishment. Communicated through both spoken and written genres, language shapes, molds, and influences lived experience (400).

It is specifically *against* this sense of “mastery” and “boundary maintenance” that the community of practitioners I observed and interviewed desire. The very notion of authority and power, for the MHC community, strikes against many of the ways they know themselves. Many are still sloughing off remnants of a past that no longer captures their social, political, or theological present. Defining them through a name counteracts the very efforts they have been putting forth in ridding themselves of their burdensome pasts.

As I will share in the forthcoming descriptions, “legitimizing” any experience as a universal or definitional one only isolates this community further. In fact, the institutional act of “coalescing” around a communal truth is in direct opposition to the ways that MHC knows itself. Decentering and deconstructing social authority is, on certain days, the only thing on which the community can agree. Past hurts, incongruent theologies, and an evolving awareness of the

social world around the periphery of the congregation lay a foundation for a "definitional battle" won in *not* centering their community around a specific and organized network name. Naming solidifies while the religious expressions I have witnessed are intentionally working against anything with certitude. A duality between faith in the *contemporary* world and trust in the longevity of the *historical* church comes to mind.

Rather than naming as an act of definition, not naming seems to serve as definition for Mile High Community Church. Michael Buckland (2020), while discussing the complicated nuance of naming, says, "problems arise because language continually changes and because new concepts need new names, which are often, at first, unreliable… Because language is cultural, changes in culture can affect the acceptability of names as well as their meaning" (89). An undeniable tenet of the MHC community is the notion of change. In their nearly twenty years of being in operation, they have evolved toward the acceptance of women in church leadership roles, on full LGBT inclusion, and on full transgender acceptance and expression across all aspects of church life. This spirit of curiosity and change illuminates the struggle that all of my interviewees had in expressing to me their preferred identification; rather, in not choosing one, the community allowed itself to remain open to the social, political, and theological possibility that remained.

For the purposes of this discussion, I first need to identify what names do not fit squarely around the identity of Mile High Community Church members I interviewed. Many scholars before me have attempted to name progressive, Christian communities like this one and have found themselves unsuccessful or dismissed in the results of their efforts. Again, Cooper says "with its affinity for postmodern philosophy and rejection of the categorizing, cataloging effects of modernity, [Emergent Church Movement or ECM] practitioners actively resist definitions"

(404). However, and perhaps despite his better judgement, Cooper goes on to explain, "the proliferation of definitions may represent the growing visibility or influence of the ECM as an inchoate ecclesial community or subculture, in which a proposing of a definition might constitute an attempt at legitimation for the entity" (404). Why Cooper and others would insist on defining the intentionally undefined I believe sheds light onto the aforementioned problem. It is specifically within and against the rigidity of institutional structures that this branch of progressive Christian practice historically desires to know itself. There is no there there, at the design of the practitioners who actively construct their space.

Rather, I offer an alternative claim that answers the question of why these communities are so resistant to being named. Instead of envisioning members of Mile High Community Church as "resistant," I believe they are operating from an altogether different set of cultural values not mentioned in Cooper's argument: possessive individualism. C.B. Macpherson (1962), in his accoladed work on the subject, says of possessive individualism that "its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them". Owing nothing to the desires of collectivistic and institutional religious expression and identity, church members of MHC and others like it prioritize the self as the ultimate landscape for knowing and practicing faith. Cooper describes in his own words the subjects of his study, "as persons who distance themselves from evangelicalism but are also historically, ritually, and theologically indebted to the tradition" (400). Cooper's observations of the distance of the name and not the actions echoes Macpherson when he names that, "society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise". One thing missing from Macpherson's claims however are the important connection to racial identity.

Scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) take Macpherson's claims into the realm of race and social construction thereof. They state, of the development of white, capitalistic culture, that it was, "rooted in possessive individualism and worshipful of the 'free market,' and ran counter to what was, "state-centered and generally democratized" (213). Whiteness aligned itself with conservative, market-based social movements of the 1960s through the 1980s as a form of coalescing social power, political control, and theological understanding. This reached a social, political, and theological height when Ronald Reagan won the 1980 presidential election, according to Omi and Winant. "Allying with the Christian Right, Reagan attracted millions of Southern Baptists to the Republican Party" (222). They go on to share that, "by 1980, the 'solid South' was solid again, this time on the Republican side." Reagan embodied the convergence of whiteness, Christianity, and market-based possessive individualism. The iterations of conservative evangelicalism that started back then continue to be the social, political, and theological structure out of which the Mile High Community Church, as well as all of my interviewees, were formed.

It is this backdrop that produces the people and ideologies that operate the progressive Christian movements that Cooper and other scholars aim to more deeply understand today. This backdrop, within MHC and churches like it, created the sense of "rejection of the categorizing, cataloging effects of modernity." By partly rejecting the religion of their foreparents without interrogating whiteness, as Cooper and others have failed to do, one easily misses the important lingering effects that whiteness still has on identity construction. It is the social, political, and theological rejection of their parents' faith, but *not* the rejection and interrogation of their parents *themselves*, and the racial culture from which MHC and all of my interviewees come, that

perpetuates moments of cultural rejection and cultural perpetuation simultaneously. Naming is but one example of this split that produces in me much curiosity.

Because of the cultural slipperiness of naming, I have conceptualized this community as one that more deeply desires to be understood according to their actions and not by their legacy or history. As I will demonstrate, their form of religious expression is consistently much more about their action than the theory placed upon them by their names. It is in this spirit that I have chosen to call the congregants of Mile High Community Church, and those whom I interviewed, "progressive evangelicals"- not because they identify with the popular expression and nomenclature of "evangelical", but instead because, historically, evangelicalism was a frame of actions through which one understood their religious practice and not as the religious practice (and title), itself.

Famously, David Bebbington coined the notion of the Evangelical Quadrilateral as a way to describe the four frames through which this type of Protestant Christian expressed their faith (3). These parts are biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. Biblicism centers the bible as the essence and foundation of Christianity and its teaching. Crucicentrism is the belief that all Christians are atoned through Jesus Christ's death on the cross. Conversionism is the belief that people need to convert to Christianity to be saved from hell. Activism is the belief that, once Christian, it is the personal responsibility of all believers to go into the world and tell others about the life of Jesus found in the bible.

According to Bebbington, these four notions capture a different and vital part of a theological grounding aimed to deepen one's understanding of this community. They are also terms that capture the actions that best help observers like myself understand what and how they

‘do’ Christianity. They are not in a sequential order and, in fact, Bebbington makes clear that “later generations, while still displaying the four main characteristics, tended to present them rather differently” (3). Each generation’s iteration of evangelical practice has highlighted one while lessening the importance of others but all remain center to the expression of this Christian framing and “nevertheless there is a common core that has remained constant down the centuries”. Even Mile High Community Church, whose open, critical theology and practice might lend itself to perceptions of ridding the community of the bible, still practices these four tenets.

Biblicentrism- Every Sunday’s sermon begins with Nathan opening up his worn, leather-bound bible and reading aloud for the congregation a verse he has chosen to focus on for that day. This is not unlike other progressive, evangelical spaces I have entered. As the sermons go on, he will pull in supplemental resources; often other white men thinkers from this same community of preachers and philosophers. He will often revisit segmented portions of that verse throughout the usually-30 minute teaching time, drilling home the points of that day’s message. The bible verse (or verses), and the bible as a signal of the community more broadly, is used as a frame through which he hopes the congregants will continue to see MHC’s particular stamp on Christianity.

Crucicentrism- Jesus is the theoretical focal point of the entire community of believers at Mile High Community. There are no images of anyone that would be perceived as the Christ-figure in the church at all. In fact, this community meets in an old synagogue that, before their operation, sat empty for many years. The stained glass windows offer signs and signals toward the Jewish practice once housed within what is now the church. That being said, the theoretical centering of Jesus is front and center as their mission, stated on their website and on their sunday

paper programs. It reads, “Our mission is to live as a community who follows Jesus, journeys together, and demonstrates God’s love to all people.” As they have responded to their perceptions of progressive values, they have found theological connections between their Jesus-centered faith and their evolving community. Where others might accuse them of ridding their community of their commitment to both the bible and Jesus, they have found ways to explore and remain committed to both notions without sacrificing either one.

Conversionism- For MHC, conversion is something less overt than what often occurs at more conservative churches. There are no altar calls, no threats of eternal damnation, and no pushy pastors asking you about your soul as you leave on Sunday mornings. Instead, you have Next Steps. These steps are congregant-led and one chooses their own adventure with the church’s hope of deeper connection to community. At the end of each Sunday morning experience, all are invited to the Next Steps table, staffed by lay pastors and volunteers. This table has information regarding various programming throughout the coming weeks, offers sign-ups for ministry opportunities such as meal provision and community groups, and also offers prayer for those who might come to church with needs. This prayer time is also focused on what some would consider conversion. People have the opportunity to be led by one of the lay ministers in a prayer that asks Jesus to enter into their heart. Once Jesus enters into one’s heart, the assumption is that the congregant has now changed one’s questions of eternal destination toward a clear answer of heaven-boundedness. This prayer of conversion is subtle but one that is always offered on Sundays. This practice is the most obvious nod to the conservative Evangelical history deeply embedded within the Mile High Community Church. Additionally, the church also offers adult baptism. While not essential to the theological conversion of heaven-bound belief in Jesus, baptism is offered as a social sign to the community that the individual has

had a conversion experience. This practice appears to be less of a priority but one that is still encouraged.

Activism- similar to conversionism, activism is not as obvious in a progressive church space. Because there are not altar calls and messages of hellfire, the immediacy that comes with those beliefs is simply not present. Also, because they do not draw their faith boundaries according to the same traditional social, political, and theological terms of their foreparents, they are also not out picketing against liberal social events, abortion clinics, or pride parades. Their activism, instead, is centered around the concerns of the individual. They do community walks focused on fair housing, lobby days focused on gun reform, and public book clubs highlighting race and discrimination. Rather than activism focused on conversion, their activism focuses on demonstrating that followers of Jesus can be seen publicly in less traditional ways.

Similarly, it is important to ground this research in an exploration around the use of the word "progressive." Focusing again on action-oriented naming, I aim to describe Mile High Community Church's socially, politically, and theologically progressive beliefs in action.

Before diving too deeply into the specificity of Mile High Community Church, it is important to first state that systemically marginalized church communities have been doing for their members forever what white, progressive Christians have only recently begun doing. Robert P. Jones names explicitly American whiteness that "even after the last white American who grew up in Jim Crow America died, the legacy of white supremacy will survive because, after hundreds of years of nurturing and reinforcement, it has become part of our culture and institutions. Sometimes it lies dormant, but until it is excised, it remains potentially active in overt and subtle ways" (Jones 224). White supremacy practice is inherently a part of how any

structure formed by and for white people practices. It will take the intentional seeking out and undoing of these innumerable systemic practices for white Christians like those at Mile High Community Church to begin to recognize the deconstructionist efforts of churches whose members exist within those oppressed identities. It is along those lines that this project aims to more deeply understand only the practices of how white people understand their progressive, evangelical religious beliefs. Comparing how a white church 'does' progressiveness would be inherently incomparable to a church that serves mostly people of color and how they 'do' church. The positionality and function of 'undoing,' I argue, must come specifically from the community that has historically done and perpetuated the behaviors a contemporary and progressive space aims to undo.

In terms of what these evangelicals are actually doing and against what elements of conservative expressions they are working, David Swartz (2014), writes on the formation of one sector of white progressive Christianity. According to him, "the year was 1973, merely a decade before the Moral Majority, and the assembled activists were strategizing about how to move in a more evangelical direction through political action. That intended direction, however, was to the left, not the right" (1). He describes the elements of progressivism in this realm as pro- civil rights, pro- poverty relief, and pro- economic reform, while also being anti-war, anti-consumerism, and anti-capitalist (3-4). He goes on to describe their beliefs as aligning with this "New Left", centering other new concepts, as well; what he calls "third-world principals"- "previously on the margins of American evangelicalism, non-Anglo groups- including Dutch Reformed, Swiss-German Anabaptists, Latin American Christians, and other third-world evangelicals- joined a growing chorus of voices from the left" (5).

As reflected in their mission, the Mile High Community Church's website states their desire to be, "the visible expression of Jesus in our world. We are never to sound retreat or withdraw from our culture; rather we are called to bring the peace of God to the world. We join with God in serving the poor, lifting up the oppressed, fighting injustice and bringing the love of Jesus to all people." Much like their intellectual foreparents, their social, political, and theological position is solidly both in alignment with a contemporary liberal bent, as well as intentionally counter to the conservative and more traditional expression of evangelicalism as the members and leaders experienced it. White progressives know their Christianity through the fraught political and religious frames upon which the Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam Movements were establishing footing. Only in a more contemporary world, Civil Rights issues take the form of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Antiwar sentiment is police reform. Anticapitalism is neighborhood outreach and community support for the poor. As Swartz goes on to state, "International encounters forced American evangelicals to think more critically about their own heritage and assumptions. If travel to Marxist countries by [Students for a Democratic Society] leaders in the 1960s encouraged radicalization of the New Left, exposure to the third world pervaded the evangelical left even more" (113). The "third world" (a capitalistic and oppressive sentiment in its own right), can be seen within our own country and is positioned by members of MHC as immigration and asylum rights. While the world is quite different than it was in the 1970s, the sentiment remains the same and is being taken up, at least in theory, by the members of MHC that I interviewed, and by the church as a whole.

It is important to address the most evident politically liberal sentiment that Mile High Community Church has taken on under its progressively social, political, and theological perview: sexuality and transgender inclusion. This is distinctively more progressive an issue and

one more churches like MHC have been willing to address in a contemporary world, than did the community Swartz studies. On the subject, he demonstrates that the leaders of this emerging movement sought to offer a third way, that combined a progressive political view toward their growing social awareness while maintaining adherence to traditional forms and expressions of sexuality (2).

Reflecting back to the initial curiosity that sparked this research, it becomes important to remember the guiding interrogation: the space between Mile High Community's social, political, and theological beliefs and those of their lived practice is wide, at least in terms of race. The Mile High Community Church's historical shifts have demonstrated to the community direct links to more pronounced participation by having those members who were once unwelcome in the seats on Sunday morning. When the same actions amount to wildly different results given the context of their social evolution, it becomes clear why members of this community express disappointment.

In order to more deeply understand this, I have interviewed and gotten to know eight Mile High Community members from across the participation spectrum over the last year. They range in age, professional background, sexuality, and church participation. Some are pastors, some are lay volunteers, and some are congregants without additional affiliation. Some are straight and some are queer. Some are single and some are married. As I mentioned above, all of them are college-educated and middle to upper class in terms of socioeconomic status because there are simply so few people from any other group. Lastly, all of the people I have interviewed for this research are white. This was for a number of reasons but most important of all is that I needed to more deeply understand the ways in which whiteness expressed itself from the perspectives of white people. I have attempted to take whiteness on its own terms and within its

own community representations. While I recognize the desire to understand and critique whiteness from an outsider's perspective, or to understand and critique Mile High Community Church from the perspective of a member who is not white, it made the most straightforward sense to try to understand a typical experience there in that community. Additionally, because the broader community of progressive evangelicals is mostly white, the applications of this study have potential for more church spaces than the one here in Denver, CO. The tension between theology and practice is not simply a phenomenon for the community with which I worked- the tension between identity, practice, and participation is one that resonates across white progressive spaces more broadly.

Chapter Two: Theory and Method

I begin the second chapter with a specific focus on race. I do this because race is ultimately the foundation of both my curiosities and my project as a whole. Race can often be an unnameable, immeasurable datapoint. On the other end of that inability to put one's finger on the subject is clear and specific outcomes that point explicitly to disparities for people who look and identify as people of color. The darker a person is, or the less white they seem, the seemingly worse their social outcomes are in reference to many important parts of society so it is obvious that race is something and means something.

I focus on race because I find that negating the power and impact that race has on cultural and political moments only serves to perpetuate the power that whiteness has on society within the United States. The power of this negation has tangible impacts that move beyond simply philosophical discourse and into the realms of life and livelihood. An example of this is contemporary society is the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans in the United States, and a reluctance by legal and political forces to racialize the crimes.

As I write, the Asian community is mourning the loss of six Asian women's lives, and two white lives, during a killing spree in Atlanta, GA in March of 2021. As reported in Time Magazine, "the shooter walked into three separate parlors that he reportedly frequented, intending to kill the Asian women that worked there" (Bergengruen and Hennigan). However, the article goes on to explain that local police are not at the moment inclined to name the murders as a hate crime. This decentering of race-based violence, and the reluctance to name race as the motivating factor for the white man who killed them contributes to the statistic that, as the authors' name, "only 15% of [race-based hate crime] referrals led to prosecutions" in 2019 alone. In fact, 21 states either do not have hate crime laws or do not require states to collect data

on information like race in prosecuting crimes, according to the article. Additionally, "prosecutors need to be able to present evidence of this bias in the attacker's previous actions, words or affiliations." Assessing bias and allowing bias to be a motivating factor can be difficult to prosecute because, as I will discuss in this chapter, race-based bias is often acted out but is rarely named as a motivating factor.

It is important to name race within issues of disparity because it can illuminate specific intersectional identities that are more uniquely targeted and harmed. In the Atlanta shooting case, it matters that those targeted were immigrant, Asian women. When leaders and decision-makers are less comfortable or not able to consider racial hate as a motivating factor, they prevent society from tangibly grappling with, and resolving race-based bias, harm, and racism that has been a part of our country since its inception. As author Roger Andersson names in "Comparative Perspective on Segregation" (2018), leaders in the United States, "must start with a clear understanding of the meaning of racism in America and the ways that race is hard-baked into our institutions. We must move beyond defining racism as individual acts of bigotry. An institutional and structural approach to racism names our history and its cumulative impacts, and provides policy solutions that cut across multiple institutions" (50).

The institutional reluctance or confusion surrounding whether or not to name the killings in Atlanta as a hate crime underscores this point. It is important to name racialized outcomes (*mostly* white congregants, *mostly* Asian women, etc.) as something more than coincidental. Allowing the results of institutions in the United States to exist outside of racialized terms only serves to perpetuate the privileged classes who benefit from ambiguity, a point I will make within the pages of this chapter. In the Atlanta murders case discussed in Time Magazine, Bergengruen and Hennigan quote only white officers and show images of only white policemen

at the scene of the crimes. While there are no doubt at least a few people of color involved in the investigation, it is also no coincidence that mostly white men are reluctant to implicate a white man in the killing of mostly Asian women, yet, at the same time, shirk from naming racism as the motivating factor. The following is an exploration of this point.

When I reflect on the specific ways that race appears in institutional spaces such as churches (there are others, as well, including schools, courtrooms, and government houses, to name but a few), it becomes evident that the intersection of race and American institutionalism is simply not discussed enough. This evidence is found in the unsureness and reluctance to reflect on systemic racism, as mentioned above. The evidence is found when those with privilege have to grapple with how their institutional gains have often meant institutional losses for many others. In the United States where Christianity is aligned with power, this evidence is also found in a dismissal or ignorance of how whiteness, Christianity, and other social powers have intersected and aligned to create systems of harm upon the bodies and minds for whom those American Christian communities often express a desire to help and to serve. This project, in large part, aims to offer this intersectional discussion, specifically within and around communities that think of themselves as trying to solve some of the many problems found within American institutions, such as I found in the conversations I had with members of Mile High Community Church.

As I embark on this important discussion, I would like to begin with a brief exploration of some of the works that attempt to help readers understand parts of these intersections. Additionally, these works have illuminated my perspective and have allowed me to understand parts of each of these intersections more deeply.

I start with foundational claims that, from their intellectual origins, whiteness and Christianity were always aligned to construct an insider/outsider (favored/unfavored might be more appropriate term that Christian believers would understand) dichotomy in the colonized world. This aligns with the claim that some of the scholars make that White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant being the racial identity against which all other racial identities have tried to form. I have attempted to focus on texts that discuss whiteness through three somewhat loose themes:

The origins of whiteness as authority:

- *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (2001) by Maria Elena Martinez
- *National Colors: Racial Classification And The State In Latin America* (2014) by Mara Loveman
- *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996) by Stephen Gould

This section focuses on books that discuss the foundations of whiteness as an object to be examined. In *Genealogical Fictions*, Martinez states that "Limpieza de Sangre," the cleanliness of blood, was attached to those that remained on the Iberian Peninsula after the Jews and Muslims were expatriated. Those that remained tended to be lighter skinned and were religiously Christian. Spanish conquistadors brought this notion to the New World, applying various levels of cleanliness to the later generations of children who were the offspring of Spanish men and Indigenous women. In *National Colors*, Loveman discusses the creation and use of the national census throughout the Latin American world. Using mostly pseudoscience and arbitrary cultural distinctions, Loveman claims that national censuses were used to emphasize whiteness as a claim of social progress so that countries whose demographics appeared more white (or favorable toward whites) were also seen as more developed. In the classic text, *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Gould explores the long history of the pseudoscientific approaches to understanding

race. Highlighting the Scientific Revolution of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Gould discusses how many scientists in developing fields used bad science to explain what we now know are arbitrary and untrue distinctions between individuals of different races. Gould shows how many of the scientific claims are still wrongly in use in contemporary America by people who allow their own racial biases to influence how they view even the allegedly unbiased world of the sciences today.

Whiteness as an intersecting force:

- *White Women, Race Matters* (1993) by Ruth Frankenberg
- *They and We: Racial and Ethnic Relations in the United States-And Beyond* (2014) by Peter I. Rose
- *The Curse of Ham* (2005) by David Goldenberg

In this section of texts, I highlight the intersectionality of whiteness and other identities. In the first, *White Women, Race Matters*, Frankenberg shares a historical take on the intersection on being a woman and being white. She explains that the identity of being a white woman was socially constructed specifically against racial minority identities so that white women could remain seen as socially superior. In the seventh edition of *They and We*, Rose explores stories told by people over the last fifty years, as they learn to define their own local community toward social similarity and away from social difference. He explores how white cultural identity is defined specifically against cultural expressions found in minority groups. In *The Curse of Ham*, Goldenberg studies the history of the so-called "curse of Ham"- the Christian claim that Noah's cursed son, Ham, moved to Africa and his progeny are who we know as Africans now. The book explores the racialized historical explanation of the difference between white Europeans and their relationship to the continent of Africa.

The relationship between whiteness and religion:

- *The Soul of Judaism: Jews of African Descent in America* (2018) by Bruce d. Haynes
- *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (2005) by David Chappell

The final selection of Whiteness Studies books I explore for this exam includes a section of books that highlight the relationship between whiteness and Religion in a more contemporary setting. The first of these books is *The Soul of Judaism* by Bruce Haynes. Here, Haynes claims that Judaism has an extensive history among pre-enslaved Africans. Because of this history, and because European Jews in the contemporary US have leveraged whiteness to improve their social status, Black people with a religious history in Judaism desire the opportunity to leverage a similar social standing based on historical notions of religious privilege, linking back to their pre-enslaved African religious traditions. In *A Stone of Hope*, David Chappell claims that it was not the social progression of white northerners that got Civil Rights legislation past; instead, it was the prophetic preaching style of black southerners that gave people in the south a vision for black freedom and equity.

Another important element through which to understand this intersecting work focuses on Christian moralistic thinking within the hegemony of whiteness in the United States. Themes to notice include political constructions of race, the alignment of whiteness to political and economic power, and the monolithic political identity of being white, Christian, and wealthy. For the sake of this dissertation project, I want to use elements of the study of Christian morality as foundational to the construction of *Americanness*.

The history of the foundation of Christian moralistic thinking and whiteness:

- *The History of White People* (2010) by Nell Irvin Painter
- *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (2016) by Ted Vial

- *The Ethnic Myth* (2001) by Stephen Steinberg
- *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (1993) by Richard Carwardine

In *The History of White People*, Nell Irvin Painter explores the broad historical construction of the identity of whiteness. In the text, she examines how the power and financial authority of western Europe both colonized the world and set in place legal structures that maintained the social authority of whiteness. In *Modern Religion, Modern Race*, Ted Vial both highlights and troubles the origins of self-conscious race. His book discusses an important historical challenge to those who are considered the forefathers of the Enlightenment. He believes that Kant and others offered teleological claims of a developmental hierarchy that placed white Christians as superior over black and brown people and their religious traditions. These claims of the importance of the individual have led to both contemporary moralistic rhetoric, and a critique from minority communities who believe individualism is in opposition to a community-based ideology. In *The Ethnic Myth*, Stephen Steinberg discusses how the western racial project enveloped many previously-distinct white ethnic groups into a monolithic white race. He claims that, because white skin was the only distinct characteristic of various European migration groups, over time, these whites leveraged their race into political privilege, acculturating toward whiteness broadly, and away from the negatively politicized social order they previously held. In *Evangelicals and Politics in the Antebellum America*, Carwardine explores the political development of the Evangelical vote leading up to the Civil War. In this text, Carwardine details the many examples in which politics of the time focused on soothing the fears and frustrations of the white Evangelical voter in both the North and South. In each case, Carwardine highlights that Evangelicals desired political control over the fate of slaves and indigenous people. He claims that Evangelicals were the main political force of the antebellum period.

Morality and Race in the contemporary

- *Race, Religion, and Politics: Toward Human Rights in the United States* (2018) by Stephanie Mitchem
- *White Lies: Race and Uncertainty in the Twilight of American Religion* (2015) by Christopher Driscoll
- *Divided by Faith:Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (2001) by M. Emerson and C. Smith

Beginning with *Race, Religion, and Politics*, Stephanie Mitchem focuses her efforts examining the close ties between various racial groups, their racial traditions, and their relationship to human rights efforts. Here, Mitchem demonstrates that various groups have closer and less close relationships with rights and, unsurprisingly, shows that race and religion need to be examined together when analyzing their participants' treatment in broader society. In *White Lies*, Christopher Driscoll claims that any examination of the killing of black bodies without looking also at religion is a "white lie" of which white Christians have convinced themselves, in order to both perpetuate and ignore tensions within their own lives. He goes on to claim, about the word "twilight," that the encroaching darkness for whites in the US is because whiteness is dying, if not already dead. Driscoll wants white people to live in a twilight that minorities have been living in their whole lives. However utopic, this was written before the Trump election, making this book's claims important yet naive to the power of white politics. Lastly, I focus on what is arguably the most cited book on race, religion, and politics in the US. In *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith interview both evangelical whites and evangelical minorities. In this process, they discover that while church leaders believe there is a "race problem" in their congregations, most white evangelicals do not see political and cultural systemic oppression of minorities.

Evangelicalism in the Contemporary US

- *Sacred Subdivisions: The Post-Evangelical Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (2012) by Justin Wilford
- *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (2012) by David Swartz
- *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey Into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (1989) by Randall Balmer

Beginning with *Sacred Subdivisions*, Justin Wilford takes a deep look into the community he calls "Post-Evangelical," exploring the ways in which Evangelicalism culturally and physically moved from the centers of community, to the suburbs, and beyond. In this ethnography, Wilford examines one of the most influential Evangelical churches in the US, found in Southern California. Through examining this church, Wilford makes broader claims about the way the church went from being about the community to being housed in the home and in the individual. With its straightforward title, *Moral Minority* explores the ways in which progressive Evangelicalism was able to maintain a foothold, while small at times, throughout the waves of popular conservatism in the 70's and 80's, known as the Moral Majority. This historical account highlights key figures in this progressive movement, including Jim Wallis, founder of the progressive Sojourners Magazine. Lastly, Randall Balmer, in *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, claims that Evangelicalism has roots in pietism, Presbyterianism, and Puritanism, all of which contribute something unique to the contemporary practice of Evangelicalism. Each contributes elements found in today's Evangelicalism; individuality, biblical literalism, and anti-state sentiment, respectively.

All of these texts and their claims have influenced the following dissertation work. Additionally, while all of them laid the groundwork for my foundational understanding, none quite captured the broad sentiment of the contemporary expressions of race in the United States

quite like Omi and Winant's Racial *Formation in the United States* (2015). Scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) state that, "we understand race as an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (110). When discussing race, it is not enough to state that churches and other evangelical institutions have racialized identities; one must be willing to investigate the institutional constructions that these racialized identities have made for themselves. In a deeper conversation about race, we are able to uncover not only that race does exist, but it operates, it manages, it gate-keeps, and it perpetuates race at the center of how the institution knows itself. As Omi and Winant state, "race linked the corporeal/visible characteristics of different social groups to different sociopolitical statuses, and provided various religious and political principles for inclusion and exclusion from the imagined community of the nation" (76). In simpler terms race is not a byproduct; it is the product itself. Conceptions of race cannot and should not exist in a state separate from it's own self-critical awareness. Accepting any discussion on race as innocuous recycles the "principles for inclusion and exclusion" stated above.

Three scholars often noted for their work on evangelical thought and social critique are David Bebbington, George Marsden, and Mark Noll. Each thinker in his own right has made the field of the study of evangelicalism what it is today. Their contributions have illuminated both the historical movements of this group as well as some of the contemporary expressions evangelicalism has today. That being said, while the three authors have attempted to discuss race within the context of their writing, none have discussed race as a formational and operational aspect of the Christian religious frame that is evangelicalism. Rather, all three offer discussions of race that are focused on happenstance, perpetuating a slippery slope fallacy that whiteness is merely in proximity *to* evangelicalism, and not the construction and perpetuation *of*

evangelicalism. Similar to the case I point to at the beginning of this chapter, negating race as a direct outcome or result of the actions produced only serves to perpetuate a racial erasure.

Historian David Bebbington (2019) offers several perspectives into how evangelicalism has grown and changed in the contemporary world. In his article, Bebbington briefly describes the relationship of evangelicalism to race as other historians like him often often do: through the perspective of abolition. He states, “the issue of race focuses mainly on the subject of abolition of the slave trade,” and shares that historiographical works focused on evangelicalism, “helped consolidate the place of evangelical religion in the process of abolition” (117).

Bebbington, in linking evangelicals to the freedom of slaves, demonstrates the uncritical thought, and inflation of, white Christianity as salvific. Indeed, some white evangelicals participated in ending slavery, as Bebbington mentions. However, to state that evangelicalism is consolidated in the process of abolition perpetuates the false principle that white evangelicals are the sole reason that slavery ended. The discourse Bebbington offers, without the necessary subjectivity of race as a location for social construction critique, provides very little toward the understanding of how race as a critical consciousness perpetuated white domination in relationship to slavery.

George Marsden (2019) makes similar critical errors in his discussions of race. In a recent article, he states, “religious identification has often been strongly correlated with party identification, but once that correlation is in place, then political behavior follows that party identification”. By this, Marsden aims to argue that religion is motivated by political party so that alignment of theological approaches echo those beliefs of political parties first. He goes on to mention that, “throughout American history, much evangelical political behavior has fallen

into patterns where religion as such does not challenge, or where it simply reinforces, attitudes that are already ingrained in constituencies where evangelicalism spreads" (283).

Marsden, in making a case for a theological predisposition toward political belief, misses the broader, and more encompassing realm of social critique which, I argue, can and should be found in a discussion of meaning-making based specifically in race. Omi and Winant, while discussing notions of nation-building, rightly claim, "from the earliest days of US national independence, Anglo-Saxonism and 'anglo-conformity' helped create a norm of whiteness that shaped the national image and culture" (77). It is precisely this norm of whiteness that centers both theological and political belief, so that both are motivated by race, rather than one being motivated by the other. Whiteness is the force toward which politics and theology of evangelicalism move. Marsden, without an explicit discussion of the culture of whiteness, misses this point.

Last of the white scholar forces who focus their work on the realm of evangelicalism is Mark Noll. Noll has written explicitly and extensively on the subject of race and religion. In one such text, Noll claims, " those countless [evangelical] variations, and not the vagaries of American political history, will determine the boundaries, acceptable ambiguities, evolutionary byways, and indeed, the survival of evangelicalism in the days and years ahead" (314). Here, Noll is discussing the varied ways that evangelicalism appears to the broader world and what that does for evangelicalism as it is known. He believes it is through the repetitious acts of "ambiguities" that evangelicalism has allowed itself to stay nimble and responsive. However, it is also these acts of shape-shifting that makes evangelicalism often too nebulous to be defined. Noll claims that removing evangelicalism from the locus of 'American vagary' solves the

problem of having too many and too loose ways to understand the evolution of evangelicalism. This is because *Americanness* is itself a vague notion.

I argue that it is not a useful act to parse out the descriptions of the transitory nature of what evangelicalism is and does. Using the example Noll provides, he is advocating the notion to judge evangelicalism's actions in the world as isolated to the international connection it is attempting to make and not by the history from which it comes. He goes on to explain, "the combinations of links to well-recognized Western evangelicals and rooting in local contexts describes [evangelical] developments" throughout the world.

However, in order to understand evangelicalism in all its meaning, one must understand it as a co-conspirator of its Americanness, and with that, its whiteness, both in terms of time and in location. Omi and Winant argue this very point when the state, "because racial formation processes are dynamic, the racial regime remains unstable and contested. We cannot step outside of race and racism, since our society and our identities are constituted by them; we live in a racial history. Evangelicalism is the accumulation of its "vagaries of American political history" *and* its root in local contexts. De-centering the United States from an understanding of one of its largest religious tenets is an attempted act of de-centering a history from its consequences. The act simply is not possible.

Going beyond a critique of the texts themselves and the notion that each scholar's highlighted historical moments are locations for indiscriminate white domination, it must be stated that it is their work in and of itself that also contributes to this inflated discourse. That Bebbington, Marden, and Noll constructed the arguments laid out here implicates them in the same foundations of whiteness that roots itself in their productions. On an uninterrogated race consciousness, Omi and Winant state, "in its most advanced forms, indeed, [racism] has no

perpetrators; it is a nearly invisible, taken-for granted, common-sense feature of everyday life and social structure" (129). When race and racism within a structure is viewed as coincidental and not intentional, it disregards ownership and accountability. It allows scholars and scholarship to perpetuate long-standing white supremacist beliefs coded as natural, stable, and 'as it has always been'- all of which perpetuate the "common sense" nature of it. Critiquing race as a specific and intentional location is essential for all scholarship, especially when the scholarship aims to take on race as a subject matter.

Grounding notions of race is essential in bringing a fuller conversation about it to the foreground. It is necessary to understand the important role race plays in locating a community such as Mile High Community Church. The reason I desire this centering and uncovering is because, without talking explicitly about race, tenets of whiteness and white interpretations of race can get a universalizing treatment, diluting otherwise racialized moments as not worth interrogating. Scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in taking a similar stance, share, "it is said that the most effective anti-racist consciousness, policy, and practice is simply to ignore race," and, like them, I offer a racially critical approach to understanding this church community.

Race, while seemingly obvious to the eye, is a rather complex set of ideas. Elements of race impact every possible arena of our broader cultural world. Race is a part of both how one is seen and how one sees oneself. The burden of race is both on our bodies and inside of our consciousnesses. One of the greatest triumphs of white supremacy, however, is alleviating its affiliates of the obligation to grapple with the burden of whiteness. In fact, the construction of race quite literally places that social self-consciousness on the bearers of browner skin.

It is within this spirit, and through these frames, that I have decided to focus my work on Professors Michal Omi and Howard Winant's Racial Formation Theory. This theory comes from the book, *Racial Formation in the United States*. The book and theory's main premise is this:

> Race is a fundamental organizing principle of social stratification. It has influenced the definition of rights and privilege, the distribution of resources, and the ideologies and practices of subordination and oppression. The concept of race as a marker of difference has permeated all forms of social relations. It is a template for the processes of marginalization that continue to shape social structures as well as collective and individual psyches (107).

Omi and Winant make plain and clear that race is the structure upon which all other societal structures are built. They center race in this way because they believe that race operates as a signaling function upon bodies. It is something that cannot be ignored or refused. With race as a guide, bodies and body parts signal myriad meanings, all relative to the society and time within which a body exists. "Through a complex process of selection, human physical characteristics ("real" or imagined) become the basis to justify or reinforce social differentiation" (111). Those characteristics, decided upon and maintained by the dominant group, become locations for social strife. The dominant group, through the powers of class, gender, sexuality, and other categories, decides which racial characteristics are "othered." These otherwise unique distinctions, when assigned to race, take on a hierarchical power structure so that certain categories align with privileged racial identities and further exacerbate certain bodies while marginalizing others.

Omi and Winant explain that, "this process of selection, of imparting social and symbolic meaning to perceived phenotypical difference, is the core, constitutive element of what we term 'racialization' (111). For them, racialization is the ongoing process of classifying the "previously racially unclassified," which allows for the power structures controlled by the dominant culture to perpetuate a racial meaning upon new and evolving frontiers of cultural life. This allows for those agents of power to maintain control over a landscape that is unpredictable and arbitrary.

Race, then, for Omi and Winant is “a concept, a representation or signification of identity that refers to different types of human bodies, to the perceived corporeal and phenotypic markers of difference and the meanings and social practices that are ascribed to those difference” (111). In other words, race is the signification of meaning assigned to different kinds of bodies based on the ways that those bodies look. If the definition seems slippery, it in fact must be. Race is, as they describe, a social construction. As a marker of skin tone alone, standard meaning cannot be applied across all bodies. Brown skin color can indicate ancestry from all over the world. Other signifiers attached to a particular hue of skin are required- such as intonation of voice, dress, gender expression, hairstyle, accent, and any other social or cultural difference. Skin color is never a solitary deciding factor in distinguishing race for any individual body, making race a constant recapitulation of skin color, additional social indicators, along with time and context.

All of this said, Omi and Winant are quick to rebut, “despite its uncertainties and contradictions, the concept of race continues to place a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world” (112). Instead, they encourage those who study the racial world to strike a balance between what they call a utopian position that names races as solely illusory and race as a “fixed, biological given”. Rather, the challenge for individuals in the field is the historical and contemporary expressions of meaning given to race in a given context.

Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory offer a number of frames through which to view the Mile High Community Church. For the purposes of this project, I aim to leverage their concepts to contextualize MHC’s past, its present, and its future. A white racialization, I argue, is the social, political, and theological thread that can be pulled through all three temporal constructions, and does so with ease and without interruption, despite other social issues causing some level of social challenge.

In exploring the past, the racial formation of traditional evangelical Christianity is rooted explicitly in white social domination. The authors themselves name it as much when they say, "Quite repressive itself, ferociously patriarchal, archetypically Protestant-ethic practitioners, and slave-owning as well, the broad cultural orientation of this early settler community has steadily and continuously organized and influenced North American ideas of race identity and belonging in ways that are deeply intertwined with concepts of race" (24). Whiteness and Protestant Christianity, from where evangelical thinking gained its momentum in the United States, share one similar root. The tenets listed offer insight into not only an evangelical past, but an American past, as well. To be a white, colonizing force from western Europe likely meant to also be Protestant. This pastime only solidified itself the deeper the roots of Christianity were planted across the growing United States. Even as Europeans entered the burgeoning United States in the 19th and early 20th century, one way to overcome a contested whiteness was to assimilate into white, Protestant culture. Omi and Winant explain that ascribing into traditional notions of whiteness was, "a powerful antidote to the radicalism and syndicalism that were brewing," among those who did not identify with the majority (25). It was far more important for them to be seen as white than it was for them to perpetuate any similarities between them and anyone of African descent, slave or freedperson alike.

This white and Protestant past laid the foundation for a contemporary evangelical religious expression that is mostly white. At MHC, all of the people with whom I spent time interviewing expressed desiring a religious practice that was similar to but markedly more evolved in theology from their families back home. Redrawing a contemporary landscape that includes other forms of whiteness reiterates the belief that Mile High Community develops its social, political, and theological understanding expressly in proximity to whiteness. In discussing

contemporary political moves by broader white politics, Omi and Winant offer that, "this modern state governs a *civil* society. It has an outside that is not civil. Its outside consists of slums, occupied territories, prisons, and the underground underworlds" (230). Actively incorporated into this civil society of "center-left" social locations, members of the Mile High Community are learning to develop their politics according to insider political beliefs. They express care and concern for women and members of the queer community, two communities often socialized into a second-class citizenry in traditional evangelical spaces. You will find representation from many of those communities within theirs; in their videos and online platforms, in their leadership on stage, and in the community present in the audience on Sunday. Similarly, MHC will express care and concern for communities of color and issues specific to racial oppression. However, one will not find the same representation online, on stage, or in a scan across a typical Sunday morning crowd. On this subject, Omi and Winant say, "other forms of stratification and difference that [exist]alongside or even prior to processes of racialization- religious, tribal, economic, geographical- [find] new expression and [are] given new meaning in a system increasingly dominated by the logic of race" (248). The "logic of race" has made meaning along the evolving ways that whiteness continues to know itself and become self-reflective.

Exploring the future is a necessary part of understanding MHC, as I will get to in the body of this project. For this community, the future is both a series of moments in time here on earth, as well as an eternal afterlife in heaven. All of the members of this community that I interviewed discussed how the work they do here on earth, and within their communities, has a potential impact on their eternal future. This theological perspective, to which I have previously pointed, demonstrates quintessential evangelical sensibilities. A sense of urgency for what one does and believes now can change the course of one's entire spiritual trajectory.

These theological beliefs crest into racial consciousness in two really important ways. The first is, members of the MHC community understand the future in highly personal and uniquely individualized terms. They desire a racially equitable space for people and communities, both in the seat on Sunday and alongside them in heaven in the hereafter. They desire a world in which race seems no longer an issue while, at the same time, not engaging in racial barriers within their own communities. Omi and Winant share that, “while explicit forms of racial animus (such as hate speech) are widely condemned, policies and practices that continue to produce racially disparate outcomes are accepted and even encouraged under the guise of moving us ‘beyond’ race” (259). Mile High Community Church leadership has discussed race and racial disparities at nearly every Sunday morning experience I attended. It is, however, the “policies and practices” of the congregation that pave a future that both lacks a substantial racially diverse demographic *and* creates anxiety about heaven for those that hope their eternal home has true racial diversity.

Now that I have established a frame for my use of the word *race*, and have structured the initial theory of Racial Formation as it applies to the context of my project, I want to offer a supplemental and complementary theory to that of Michael Omi and Howard Winant. Found in *Racism without Racists* (2018) by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, offers four frames of what he calls “color-blind racism.” These frames allow for a deeper conversation about the specific ways that the community like Mile High Community Church engage with race. While Omi and Winant offer a theoretical frame for the construction and history of race that exists and is perpetuated by MHC, Bonilla-Silva’s frames offer specificity to the context-specific interactions and moments that have been present within my community observations and discussions with community

members. In other words, Omi and Winant's Racial Formation Theory illuminates the construction of an interaction or observation, and Bonilla-Silva's color-blind racism highlights the content of it.

At the onset of a deeper dive into his frames, Bonilla-Silva offers my project a functional definition of *racism*. Because the congregation shares explicit messaging around racial inclusion, and at the same time, racial expressions other than whiteness are virtually non-existent and are certainly not operationally significant, it became clear early in this work that something less explicit yet markedly racial was operating just beneath the surface. Bonilla-Silva aptly names this "new racism," arguing that, "contemporary racial inequality is reproduced through 'new racism' practices that are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial" (3). These practices can over-inflate the personal abilities of white mobility while diminishing the role that white institutions have played in the disenfranchisement of communities of color for generations. The racism expressed, then, is not through name-calling and cross-burning, but is instead experienced in a disavowal of personal responsibility. *Color-blind racism* is when, "whites rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations" and not on the systemic institutional repetitious disenfranchisement and oppression of minority communities based specifically on their skin color (2). Below is a conversation about how Bonilla-Silva's definitions and descriptions of "new racism" appear in the form of the four specific frames. I additionally lay the foundation for the connection between these frames and the Mile High Community Church members and Sunday morning experiences through which I viewed them.

The first of these frames is *abstract liberalism*. Abstract liberalism is the idea that those who claim color-blind ideology tend to explain matters of race with broad terms loosely

associated with a liberal politic (56). As he explains, "this frame involves using ideas associated with political liberalism and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to explain racial matters" (56). This can include notions like "equal opportunity" and "choice" without a strong grasp on what it actually means, for the sake of appearing "reasonable" and "moral." Bonilla-Silva believes that this is the most important of the frames because, "it constitutes the foundation of the new racial ideology" (54). This racial ideology is the one that mostly-white communities have established since the 1970's that transitioned their more overt racism to a covert one that hides behind all of the additional frames of color-blind racism. He argues that their race-based claims of a liberal ideology appear "reasonable and moral," even if the broader claim itself is rooted in historically racist sentiment (56). An example of this is what Bonilla-Silva calls the "principal of equal opportunity"- the belief that all people are afforded the same opportunities in life so that institutions made to accommodate people of color, like affirmative action, are giving people of color preferential treatment. Another example he provides is "choice," wherein white people believe all communities have equal access and freedom in realms of society like housing, employment, and college. He argues that, because white people have choice and access, and because they also see themselves as reasonable without the necessary interrogation of race, their beliefs of access for oppressed racial groups are conflated with their own.

This frame is appropriate for understanding the Mile High Community Church. On numerous occasions that I will explore in the forthcoming chapters, members and leaders alike describe their community as being equally accessible for both white communities and communities of color. Because their politics are liberal, they are not always able to see the social and theological barriers that might exist for some of these communities for whom they often publicly espouse support and desires of equality. There are not many representatives from

communities of color, often forcing me to beg the question, 'what are the covert messages people of color experience that prevent them from wanting to join or being able to access this community in such a way that makes them want to stay?' Bonilla-Silva's frame helps get to a theoretical understanding of the context-based communication that makes this so. It provides an understanding of those culturally white moments that serve as racist social constructions that both keeps most members of color out *and* repels the few that few, once they are in. It also provides key theoretical understanding for the impasse that several of the members who I interviewed share regarding their lack of understanding why they cannot seem to attract and keep members of color. Instead of this frustration coming from a passive position, Bonilla-Silva's theoretical frame of liberal ideology places front and center the active community construction that makes the situation what it is for Mile high Community Church.

The second of the theoretical frames I will use to understand the color-blind racism that occurs within the social construction of MHC is something Bonilla-Silva calls *naturalization*. He defines this frame as one, "that allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences" (56). He rightly claims that instances of segregated public spaces, for example, occur naturally and are not the occurrences of institutional design formed by white cultural norms of exclusivity. While true that there is some evidence that points to religious self-segregation, it is still unclear as to whether or not communities choose this or if segregation is the result of long-standing social constructions built by racial oppression. In fact, Bonilla-Silva, citing his research, states that one makes racial considerations that affect a broad range of issues, including school segregation, friendship, and attraction (66). The racial considerations create social constructions that are formed for and perpetuated by racial privilege.

Not unlike Bonilla-Silva's claims and research, the construction and motivations for naturalization occur often within my interviews. From the pastors to the volunteers, and right down to the lay congregants, I heard a number of claims that the church was racially segregated simply "by chance," because members had not "tried hard enough" to become inclusive, or "in a perfect world, church would look diverse, but [Mile High Community Church] is just not like that." The natural state of racial segregation is discussed in such a way that individuals do not seem to feel like they have a chance to change it, or that perhaps it is out of any one person's control. Bonilla-Silva describes this by stating, "socialized in a white habitus, and influenced by the Eurocentric culture, it is no wonder whites interpret their racialized choices… as natural" (67).

The third frame through which I will view the community at MHC is called *cultural racism*. This, according to Bonilla-Silva, "is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments… to explain the standing of minorities in society" (56). He goes on to explain it with examples including "'Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education' or 'blacks have too many babies.'" In other words, this frame offers the misconception that whites and communities of color are fundamentally, biologically different and those arguments have moved into the realm of cultural construction. These cultural constructions name white norms and the only acceptable social identity. Things like "hard work," "old values," and not believing in "hand outs" have replaced outright biological claims in public discourse according to the cultural racism frame.

Similarly, this frame will be used to understand some of the discourse offered by the Mile High Community Church members during our interviews. Because it is a community that self-describes as progressive, these moments are far and away much more covert than one might expect in communities that do not self-identify in the same way. That being said, instances of

cultural racism appear in the justification of whiteness and white domination throughout the congregation. The church members describe their community as serving white needs better than they serve the needs of communities of color. They describe the church as serving it's neighbors first and foremost, potentially not recognizing that their church location sits in the center of a mostly-white, mostly-affluent neighborhood in Denver's urban center. More broadly, these notions of serving their community are taken within a context that points to broader demographics of Denver, a predominantly white city whose middle and upper classes are actively growing and actively displacing communities of color (a point I will explore in later chapters). Mile High Community Church, as a microcosm of Denver as a whole, is no different.

The last of the four frames, *minimization of racism*, is a necessary and constructive frame used to understand this community. Bonilla-Silva describes it as, "a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances" (57). This frame gives social permission for white communities to both diminish the impact of "racially motivated" assaults against communities of color, while also giving them space to critique social unrest and uprising by communities of color as "hypersensitive." More importantly, according to Bonilla-Silva, "this frame also involves regarding descrimination exclusively as all-out racist behavior, which… eliminates the bulk of racially motivated actions by individual whites and institutions by fiat" (57). By giving themselves permission to decide the acceptable categories of descrimination, whites perpetuate social domination over the public racial discourse. Bonilla-Silva elaborates with the idea that, when whites experience this kind of explicit and physical racism less, they believe that racism is actually "less than it used to be" or "isolated," instead of simply being discrete and covert.

Similarly, at Mile High Community Church, because the congregation and leadership have evolved their social, political, and theological beliefs on religiously debated issues like women in leadership, queer inclusion, and free gender expression, they have inflated their evolution on systemically racialized oppression and segregation. Describing their beliefs with the intention of "bringing the love of Jesus to all people," minimization of racism aptly describes the passive ways that MHC has addressed racial disparities within their congregation. Without intentional action toward the white supremacy that built and fortified the congregation and leadership over it's last twenty years, the frustration that some members express feeling toward their lack of racial inclusion begins to make conceptual sense with this framework.

Method

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I come from similar communities as Mile high Community Church. I understand their social, political, and theological ways personally. I have been invested in them for nearly twenty years and have had critical questions about the spaces they occupy socially for nearly as long. This work is academic *and* personal. I will inevitably have social interactions with the members of this congregation for years to come. I anticipate that one day I will be in conversation with the leadership of MHC about my findings. This is not a point I desire to shy away from. In fact, I believe it is my personal relationship to the object matter as well as to the community itself that informs and deepens my questions and findings.

As a method, I have leaned into the work of Charlotte Aull Davies and her notion of *reflexive ethnography* (2008). This methodological approach places the relationship between the object and the ethnographer as important to the development of the research project. As she defines it, "reflexivity expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the

research situation and hence their effects upon it, in terms of the subjectivity of the researcher" (7). The subjectivity of the researcher, in past iterations of ethnography, has long been debated. Davies, herself, names the problem as the effect of the research and researcher on the outcomes of the particular social encounter (8). In other words, Davies describes the process as less about how a community describes itself according to its own terms but, "is more commonly presented as fully revealed only through the interpretive insights of the ethnographer" (9). Because I am not an unbiased outsider, nor do I care to be for the purposes of this research project, I believe it is important to name from the onset my relationship to the community with whom I spent many hours talking and observing.

As Davies and others have argued, it is important to name the inherent relationship that develops, and personal interpretations through those relationships, that truly captures the nature of ethnographic research. She states that, of so-called local models in which researchers desire to build a tool according to a community's own terms, "are no more local than is the interpretative model through which their analyses are constructed" (9). This philosophical claim regarding the subjectivity of ethnography places the relationship as the interpreter, and not the supposed outsider perspective that other ethnographers have tried to claim. Instead, centering both the interpreter and the interpreted produces a much more fruitful perspective regarding the observable ethnographic moments. She goes on, "this more radical reflexivity thus contends that the activities and results of social research are constructed from and reflect both the broader sociohistorical context of researchers and the disciplinary culture to which they belong." The work that I have produced cannot be known outside of the frames through which I view the social moments of my ethnography, nor can they be known outside of contextual locations of my field and background. As Davies explains, "society exists independently of our conceptions of

it… yet is dependent on our actions, human activity, for its reproduction and can be transformed by this activity. It is both real and transcendent” (19). In other words, events and social interactions exist independently of our interpretations but cannot be known to others without those very interpretations.

One caveat to an explicitly reflexive ethnographic endeavor is Charlotte Aull Davies’ concept of maintaining an external social reality. This reality means that it is the responsibility of the researcher to maintain an intellectual distance, knowing that there are things about which the researcher will know nothing, or a recognition of “different ontological levels” (22). According to Davies, “both human actors and social structure are accorded ontological reality. Neither is fully determined by or produced by the other.” Within reflexive ethnography, it is essential to understand that actors and social structures exist within the ways of knowing the world. The duty as an ethnographer of this type is to capture not only what they observe, but the frames through which they are observing. Similarly, they must understand that the actors and situations being observed are occurring beyond the full capacity of researcher knowledge. “Hence, ethnographers are encouraged to explore the phenomenological reality of actors’ understandings and interpretations and their effects on social structure, but not to take these interpretations as fully constitutive of social structure” (22).

Similarly, the researcher must take into account their own effects on the object or objects being observed. Citing other scholars who point ethnographic research toward reflexivity, Davies offers that one’s research may include an interdependence of reflexivity, “so long as we are sensitive to and take into account of our own implication in and effects on that object” (22-23). She describes this through the notion of *critical realism*, or the idea that, “human agents are neither passive products of social structure nor entirely their creators but are placed in an

iterative and naturally reflexive feedback relationship to them" (19). The realism of this relationship reminds the researcher that objective knowledge exists outside of those who are interpreting it but the interpretation of it brings elements of it into the foreground of knowledge. Additionally, society depends on human activity, "for its reproduction and can be transformed by this activity."

Chapter Three: Bringing Christian Forefathers into a Contemporary World

Walking into the doors of Mile High Community Church on my first day of pursuing this research, it became clear that greeting strangers was a part of the Sunday morning culture. As I headed up the thirty or so steps and made my way through the heavy, wooden doors of this old building, three separate individuals said hello. Two looked official, with headsets in ears and walkie-talkies in hand, and the other struck me as a lay member just being polite. All of those who said hello seemed genuinely pleased to see a new face and me entering alone likely signaled to them that I was visiting, perhaps for the first time. They offered a warm welcome, directions to the sanctuary, and even showed me some of their free coffee, served in reusable plastic cups.

On this particular midsummer Sunday, one of the two "official" men who greeted me was especially kind and stood out against the crowd. He was a little older; his mid-50's appearance was rarer among a sea of 20- to 30-somethings who tend to occupy the majority of the congregational demographic. Dan, as he introduced himself to me, had a bold smile against what was an otherwise soft presence that made him feel approachable and engaging. He stuck me as someone who would be at least willing to entertain my questions about the church and his relationship to it.

After service that first Sunday, Dan immediately came up to me after to ask me if I had any questions. This polite check-in I received was not unlike the welcomes at other progressive evangelical congregations I have visited in the past; in fact, I half expected it. Throughout the service, I was beginning to wonder what Dan's relationship was to the church. He seemed to know many people, as he interacted with many different parties after helping me find my seat. As we got to talking, he mentioned that he was an elder for the MHC community. An elder is an elected position within the congregation that serves on what is like a board of directors. They are

tasked with employee reviews, hiring and firing of the head pastor, and managing the budget, among many other tasks. During our post-service chat, and after mentioning to him that I was interested in doing research with the congregation to better understand these outstanding questions, he was quick to volunteer his time. In contrast to the conservative evangelical communities in which I participated in my youth, churches like Mile High Community and others that I have known seem much more open to discussing the behind-the-scenes aspects of church life. In fact, Dan and the other more deeply involved community members that I interviewed all communicated a spirit of openness in discussing their experiences with MHC, especially in contrast to the closed-off nature that they had experienced in churches before, as well. Dan and I exchanged contact information that morning and would go on to establish a very rich relationship through which I was able to learn about his perspective on the MHC community.

It is no coincidence that Dan was one of the first people to say hello to me that Sunday morning. Aside from his role on the elder committee, he was also in charge of scheduling the Sunday morning greeters. He loved this job because, as he would later explain, it was his opportunity to help create exactly the kind of welcoming environment he had hoped MHC would be. Having spent his whole life in church, both as a young person, throughout his early adult life, and now into his middle and older age, he has experienced a wide variety of welcoming and unwelcoming. As he said, “my life centered around the church community. My parents were highly, highly involved in church. MHC reminded me of the church I grew up with.”

Growing up in southern California, evangelical Christianity was the norm for Dan’s community. Many of his formative years and formative experiences were through relationships he had established in his home church. His parents served his church community every Sunday.

His siblings did, as well. Serving was something that was not only natural for Dan; it was his typical Sunday morning experience. Dan disclosed to me early on in that he identifies as a gay man. Because he did not come out to his family about his sexuality until he was in his 20's, he served in churches privately. Dan knew that the unwritten rule of *don't ask, don't tell* gave him freedom to live and serve freely inside of those church spaces. Dan would live, worship, and commune this way until he was in his early 20's, when work would take him away from home and away from that expression of church life. Greeting church members at Mile High Community Church was not just something Dan enjoyed; for him, a positive Sunday morning experience brought with it a deep and familial connection.

Being white and from an affluent neighborhood, Dan only ever experienced a sense of being unwelcome when his church communities would find out about his sexuality. In fact, this was the motivating reason for a handful of church moves that Dan made in his life. He expressed to me a desire to serve on the volunteer greeter committee so that he had his hand in creating the culture that would ultimately help visitors decide if they felt truly welcomed for who they were, or not. It mattered a great deal that the greeters welcomed all, Dan said, because it mattered a great deal that each and every person who entered the church building felt as honored and welcomed as he did: "I love the church and their stance on inclusivity. I mean I had that at other churches, but there were other things at those churches that make MHC seem more authentic." For Dan, Mile High Community Church's public stance on queer and gender inclusion was the reason that set this community apart, and was the reason he served the church in the ways that he served.

While its queer inclusion was the impetus for Dan's decision to attend Mile High Community Church, he needed to experience familiarity, as well. Having grown up in these

evangelical church spaces, Dan was familiar with the cadence of a typical Sunday morning and, even after trying to attend inclusive mainline denominational churches, he found his way back to what felt most like home. "Traditional evangelicalism to me, from a worship standpoint, is contemporary music, good teaching, good *solid* biblical teaching; and when I think of the mainline denominations, it's been not so focused on the preaching. It was very formal and liturgical." For Dan, having a bible-centered, worship-led church service was all he really needed. Much like a typical conservative evangelical church service, there was not a lot of ritual present at Mile High Community Church. Each Sunday begins and ends with worship music played by a contemporary rock band, sandwiching a 20-minute sermon and the sharing of communion (usually grape juice and artisan-baked bread these days). Community gathers for a little while before and after service, but tends not to be a deep community focus on a typical Sunday morning. Instead, quite like many other traditional evangelical church services I have attended, the self the center of the worship experience: the service starts with music often focused on the soul or one's personal relationship with Jesus; followed by a sermon focused on how to improve one's biblical knowledge or how to improve one's relationship to Jesus; ending with communal partaking of bread and juice- the individualized and personally symbolic experience of making the body of Jesus one with the recipient, according to most believers. Community is encouraged during mid-week meet-ups, giving the sense that it is only designed for those willing to more deeply invest in the broader MHC community as a whole. Because Dan centers himself and his role in the church as a greeter, he is able to tap into what little community is offered on a Sunday morning, a seemingly perfect fit for him and his sensibilities as they relate to his church experiences from the past.

Finding a church like Mile High Community- one that allows Dan to both bring his wholeness *and* make connection back to a lifelong familiarity- is exactly why Dan has allowed his roots to grow deeply into the soil of this congregation. “When I heard about MHC becoming fully inclusive, I said, ‘I’m gonna try this,’ and haven’t looked back. It feels like home and I’ve loved it ever since.” Finding a space that, for Dan and for most, is as typical a Sunday morning experience as the evangelical spaces they attended in their youth is what creates this sense of “home.” Dan’s idea of home is a balance of the familiar and the new, the church of his childhood self and a church of the self as he knows himself now, the church of both his private past and his out and proud present: “I finally got to a point where I decided I was not separating the two… I decided I would never compartmentalize and be split.”

Dan’s racial identity aligns with the majority of the congregation at Mile High Community Church. One of the first signals for me of the white majority at MHC was the greeting team. On my first Sunday, and on every Sunday that followed, I did not encounter a single greeter of color. They occupied the demographic most apparent to the congregation as a whole- 25 to 40, mixed between men and women, and mostly white or white-passing. As the organizer of the greeting team for Sunday mornings, it becomes clear that, through racial associations and community-building, Dan participates in constructing the demographic. What is not apparent is the reason for this gap in diversity in this role specifically. Is it that communities of color are not invited into this opportunity to serve? Is it that there simply are not enough people of color who have volunteered to serve? Any number of reasons can point to the more obvious conclusion that opportunities for volunteers to participate in the work of the church are perpetually filled by white community members and are organized by white church leaders.

In a number of ways, Dan's story and social location -as a white, queer, middle-aged, middle-class, cis-gender man- serves as a representation of the church demographic as a whole. For many of those with whom I spent time, the biggest appeal for attending Mile High Community Church is that it is strikingly similar to the traditional conservative evangelical churches from which MHC has grown, with one major shift, it's queer and gender-variant inclusion. For the remainder of the chapter, it is important that I discuss the differences and, more importantly, the *similarities,* between a conventional, conservative evangelical church experience and the experience of this progressive, evangelical congregation.

Differences

Dan, like so many of the individuals with whom I spent time, relishes the familiarity that Mile High Community Church has with the conservative evangelical churches of his past. The church is similar enough to resonate with the social expectations individuals like Dan want to experience when engaging in a Sunday morning experience, but different enough for members of the congregation to locate themselves within their evolved social, political, and theological locations. As Dan explains, "Evangelicalism has always been about 'witnessing' and trying to have others find their way to Jesus. It used to be about fire and brimstone but now it's about a story, one that I believe is inspired through the Holy Spirit but was written in a specific context." It is exactly these shifts in understanding that are necessary to explore here.

Socially, the most visually apparent difference between a traditionally conservative church and Mile High Community Church are the attempts to reduce heteronormativity. While arguably still visually the norm- from the pastor embodying traditional masculinity, to the repeated emphasis on marriage and families throughout the many sermons as only a few

examples- the progressive value of welcoming queer and gender-variant bodies does have a palpable presence within the congregation. I witnessed dozens of queer couples holding hands and demonstrating expressions of affection. I had the opportunity to interact with trans individuals and those bucking the traditional social markers of gender. I listened to women preach and lead from the stage.

In a contemporary world, conservative evangelical spaces have drawn hard lines on queer and gender-variant inclusion in churches. The rhetoric has certainly changed but the outcomes remain the same: queer people are sinners who are not welcome. Regarding this, author Andrea Smith (2019) says, "Evangelical discourse has tended to focus on homosexuality as a set of behaviors that people can easily stop doing rather than as an orientation that cannot be changed. They have advocated that people strive to resist temptation and change their behaviors" (231). Advocacy like this exists publicly and often from the pulpit in conservative evangelical spaces so that in a progressive space, one feels tangibly the freedom the congregation experiences in knowing they are not bound to these sets of social expectations. While this has not been the case for the entire life of Mile High Community, in a contemporary world, they act to create a social life that vocally combats that traditional norm.

Smith goes on to describe heteronormativity as a means to create identity within conservative evangelical churches, a stark contrast to the social construction at Mile High Community Church. She explains that, "Arab and Muslim countries are credited [by evangelicals] with having a valid critique of the West, not against Western imperialism but rather against the West's immoral acceptance of homosexuality, commercialized sex, and 'family breakdown'" (234). This critique allows conservative church communities to perpetuate the normed behaviors that have always served as an organizing structure. Conversely, MHC is one

of the very Christian communities accused by conservatives of supporting these behaviors, specifically because of their evolution on sexuality and gender expression (Sakas, 2017; Merritt, 2017). This contrasting social identity is on display when women preach, when diverse families utilize childcare services, when queer and gender-expansive community members gather in small groups, and when the church officiates same-gender weddings, all of which occur regularly throughout the year at Mile High Community Church.

Heteronormativity is also leveraged within conservative evangelical communities to perpetuate notions of "normal" behavior, quite unlike the Mile High community, who invite members into diverse ways of participating in congregational life. Smith argues that, "[evangelicals] are currently at a stage similar to what happened during the emergence of the evangelical feminist movement, where conservatives would write articles explaining that feminism simply is not 'biblical'" as opposed to simply being "nonbiblical" (231). These constantly evolving definitions of biblical behaviors operate as heteronormativity and come as a form of social control that simply do not happen overtly at MHC. When the church "came out" as queer and gender-expansive affirming in 2017, those whom I interviewed discussed the notion that queer members were already participating publically, which encouraged the congregation to confirm their stance directly. For Dan and other queer church members, the time for the Elder Committee to make a formal decision and announcement took far too long and came much too late. Recognizing a palpable social tension between conservative members whose tendency was to gravitate toward traditional notions of heteronormativity and the socially evolving congregation that was already covertly inclusive and affirming, Mile High Community Church needed to make the decision and formalize what was already occurring. Unlike most churches that tried to normalize heterosexual behaviors and demand all members operate socially within

that framework, Mile High Community Church's vocal permission of queer inclusion dismantled those traditional notions, freeing members like Dan from traditional restraints, allowing them to bring their whole selves to their spiritual and religious social practice.

Additionally, there are a handful of differences between the political experiences for traditional evangelical churches and those one would encounter at Mile High Community Church. Much of what people know about conservative evangelicalism in our contemporary world concerns their political leanings. Frances Fitzgerald (2017) describes the Moral Majority- the political organization created in the late 1970's to register and rally conservative evangelicals as a political body- as mobilized, "into a political force against 'secular humanism' and the moral decay of the country" (291). As she explains, "by 1980, most pundits and pollsters had come to assume that religion was a private matter and politics a secular sphere," however, "white evangelical ministers from previously incompatible traditions were attempting to build lay support for political activism across a wide range of social issues and calling for a holy war against secularists and liberals" (292). This politically conservative branch of American evangelicalism was exactly the rallying cry many communities were waiting for to change or return popular American opinion back toward a traditional, heteronormative, and predictable path. In fact, it is this political movement that started in the late 1970's that is still in political power to this day. Aligning political and religious perspectives under one banner (or American flag, as it were) made arguing against one an argument against the whole. However, many believed they "had no political agenda," and instead, "were merely speaking to the moral crisis in the land" (292).

In stark contrast, Mile High Community Church's political beliefs seem open and somewhat flexible. Often vying for a "third way," Pastor Nathan asks people to consider multiple

social locations and perspectives frequently. As Dan said about his political beliefs, "A progressive church is about looking at something beyond a western perspective and a broader interpretation of what the bible is saying. I've always been fortunate to be in a church where we tried to be very center, middle of the road." This desire to be "middle of the road," or flexible without sacrificing personal opinions, was a sentiment felt across many different sermons and social interactions. Dan echoed what many others did, as well. In fact, one of the tenets of Mile High Community Church is to maintain an open posture of understanding difference. This reluctance to take a decisive stance also led the church to interrogate the question of queer and gender-expansive inclusion for well over two years. However, this desire to allow personal opinions to remain a vital part of the congregation marked a clear difference between this congregation and the conservative congregations from which MHC grows. As Fitzgerald goes on to explain, the Moral Majority has constructed a political platform driven toward definitive answers. Jerry Falwell, known as the originator of the organization, had, "a list of national sins," including feminism, abortion, and homosexuality. Citing Falwell, himself, "he wrote, 'we are very quickly moving towards an amoral society where nothing is absolutely right or absolutely wrong.'" (306). Conservative evangelicalism and their political desires are such that they want a political world filled with the same certitude that their beliefs offer them. In opposition to this is Mile High Community Church's belief in a "third way"- neither staunchly old or new, but a compromise to both. While potentially and frustratingly noncommittal, this belief points to one stark difference between them and their conservative counterparts.

Fitzgerald discusses the Moral Majority's political belief in individuality and competition: "some, like Falwell, were separatist Baptists- self-described Fundamentalists who had always refused to cooperate with others" (293). This sense of competition fueled their desire

to reject compromise regarding beliefs they felt confident that were politically advantageous. Leaders "spoke for most of them when [they] insisted that the nation continue to be devoted to 'the individualism that made America great,' or, alternatively, to 'the rugged individualism that Christ brought'" (202). This "rugged individualism" appears in conservative Evangelicalism in a number of ways today, specifically within their competitive "us vs. them" mentality. Their perceptions of suffering at the hands of an "amoral world" motivate their political action, rallying their base toward the alignment of American and Christian beliefs.

Members of the Mile High Community Church attempt collectivistic approaches toward community. As active members of the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, they approach social concerns not as individual leaders but as a collective. Their role in the alliance has been important for shaping their political concerns for religiously marginalized communities within the Denver metropolitan. Additionally, as advocates for progressive beliefs that include immigration rights, they have provided sanctuary for undocumented immigrants and hosted Interfaith Alliance meetings in which immigration rights were discussed and mutually supported by individual members of the group. These beliefs run counter to the national rhetoric of evangelicals and their stance on immigration, with scholars pointing to research that shows white evangelicals are more opposed to immigration reform and have more negative views on immigration than any other group (Kobes Du Mez, 2018). To call them completely collectivistic in their approach, however, would be an incomplete evaluation of the political landscape of MHC.

The work of both the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado and Mile High Community Church point to Bonilla-Silva's notion of *abstract liberalism* mentioned in chapter two. While the alliance has shaped much of MHC's policy and advocacy, without a critical and intentional

discourse regarding how race plays a role in this work, both organizations perpetuate what Bonilla-Silva names as a process of "ignoring the multiple institutional practices and state-sponsored practices" that formed the barriers against which they are now fighting. Not once in the discussion of their involvement with this organization had I seen them bring those critical questions inside of the church congregation. Not once in the many times the conversation arose about the advocacy work of the Alliance and MHC's involvement in it did Nathan encourage the congregation to interrogate the systemic ways that their *own* church was a part of perpetuating the very problems they believed they were working to solve. The absence of reflective criticality demonstrates a passive opposition to "all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality" that MHC members themselves could very well be perpetuating.

The social and political perceptions of both conservative evangelicalism broadly and Mile High Community Church specifically can also be found in their practiced theology. However, the theological foundations upon which the leaders of MHC rest their religious beliefs and practices are different. The first and most important is the notion of hell. Hell is the most important notion because avoidance of it is the largest motivating factor for conservative evangelicals. As Kathryn Gin Lum (2014) says of the formation of Evangelicalism, "leaders of the Second Great Awakening used pulpit and press to emphasize each individual's natural ability and responsibility to escape hell, befitting the antebellum celebration of the can-do, self-made man" (44). From its inception, evangelicalism has always stressed an individual's direct relationship with the divine, minimizing the role of the clergy as a mediator. But as Lum has pointed out, this only went so far since the clergy was reluctant to give up its power. It has emphasized personal ownership of the destination of one's soul. She goes on to explain that the leadership at that time and, "their stress on individual agency obscured the evangelicals'

increasingly hierarchical and paternalistic leadership structures and the coerciveness of their tactics". With the developing and invigorated fear of hell as their motivator, evangelical leaders established for themselves a "tightening of control" that would remain a core tenet of faith all these years later. In fact, the fear of hell is often what evangelicals use as a leverage point against communities like Mile High Community Church when they believe their beliefs have strayed too far into the secular. "Hell remains vital to hundreds of millions of Americans and continues to appear on doctrinal statements of many churches" (234).

In contrast, Gin Lum discusses a small but growing demographic of progressively evolving evangelicals: "we might also see in the lay rejection of hell for self and loved ones as creative, middle of the road response to the concept of damnation" (236). For churches like Mile High Community, hell is a subject on which pastors like Nathan rarely preach. Progressive evangelical leader Rob Bell (2011), known as one of progressive evangelicalism's forefathers, wrote a foundational book on the subject of hell titled *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. In it, Bell lays the groundwork for what would become the progressive evangelical playbook on the theological subject of hell. In his book, Bell states:

> A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spend forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear. I've written this book because the kind of faith Jesus invites us into doesn't skirt the big questions about topics like God and Jesus and salvation and judgment and heaven and hell, but takes us deep into the heart of them. (robbell.com)

This alternative and undeniably more progressive view of the evangelical Christian traditional narrative of hell has deeply motivated congregations like MHC regarding their theology on hell. Rob Bell is a regular speaker at the church and is a friend to Nathan. Bell's view of hell can be seen in many theological moments throughout the church, through their discussions of queer and gender-expansive inclusion, and this openness and rejection of fear is by and large what contributes to the evolution in faith that has been highlighted thus far. Because hell is no longer a fear for this community, they are more comfortable with their progressive stances on immigration rights, law and order, abortion, police brutality, and many other cultural hot-button issues that inevitably arise in our contemporary society.

Moreover, Gin Lum describes hell as a way for conservative evangelical leaders to theologically construct the social markers of difference in a world in which the immoral are in an eternal battle against the moral. She states, "if the saved were supposed to be efficient, disciplined, self-reflective, self-controlled, and plain, then the damned could be defined in opposite terms: inefficient, lazy, unreflective, uncontrolled, and frivolous" (110). Hell, then, has been used as a way to mark the positive behaviors most often reflected in the conservative evangelicals, and negatively mark those less desirable ones that describe outsider mentalities. None of these notions, however, take into account the social constructions of the power of evangelicalism in the United States that has caused much of these social stratifications in society today. Instead, conservative evangelicals give broader society only two options: conform or choose hell.

Uninterested in this polarizing summary, Mile High Community Church has chosen the theological notion of "demonstrating God's love to all people" as an answer to their own lingering theological questions, as well as a direct rebuttal to the conservative evangelical spaces

from which they have come. Gin Lum continues, “that evangelicals presented white middle-class values as models for the ‘heathen’ to emulate did not, of course, preclude alternative formulations by the people they missionized” (111). Despite conservative attempts to center theological foundations according to the world that they know, Mile High Community Church serves as an alternative to those beliefs by attempting to center relationships over damnation. There is no strong emphasis on altar calls, on “being saved”, or on saying specific prayers of redemption during a typical Sunday morning experience. Rather, the theological emphasis is on responding to spiritual stirrings of the heart, in reaching out to pastoral staff with theological questions, and on going deeper into the bible as a source of textual information, all with the hopes that a relationship with the story of Jesus occurs by divine intervention. Questions are a welcome opportunity to get to know the theological position of the church and there is always a staffed location (called the Next Steps table) at the back of the sanctuary, ready to field whatever questions might come their way. Because hell is no longer a response to “the distant heathen” or the outsider, MHC has engaged in conversations about the self and one’s eternal destination through the lens of community and inclusion, forgoing the social and political need for such theology.

The last difference between conservative evangelicalism and the progressive theology of Mile High Community Church highlighted here is the notion that “others” are no longer strangers to be feared but are neighbors to love. Gin Lum emphasizes this point: “as transportation and publication technologies improve, making the world itself seem smaller, the definition of ‘neighbor’ also expanded to include one’s metaphorical ‘neighbors’ across the continent and globe” (7). Social and political proximity- to concerns, needs, difference- has evolved the theological framework for MHC. When the fear of hell is no longer a sting for the

individual in pursuit of spiritual understanding, the possibilities of expanding notions of "neighbor" are seemingly limitless. For conservative communities which have spent generation after generation defining their social and political identities against those they "other," the threat of hell is also a safeguard and protection against possible contamination. One does not experience a need to expand their understanding because others are always a threat against the salvation of the United States. As Gin Lum aptly stated, "for one group to declare some behaviors and beliefs as hell-worthy was for this group to claim superiority and power over others" (7). I argue that, because conservative evangelicals have set themselves apart as saved, and set themselves apart from that as a potential threat, they have been backed into a theological corner, preventing them from transitioning into alternative theological understandings. In the Mile High Community congregation, however, exposure to communities previously viewed as threatening has enabled them to remove this fear and take themselves out of this theological ambivalence. As author, former pastor, and renowned progressive evangelical theologian, David Gushee (2017), writes, "I am deeply regretful that I had any part of that effort to manipulate people into a profession of faith. Many have left Christianity because of the doctrine of hell and because those kinds of pressure tactics" (20). In making a theological shift away from the fear of hell, Mile High Community Church was able to move into a theological space that is arguably more impactful in the connections they hope to make with some of their neighbors than ever before.

Similarities

There are clear and obvious intentional differences that can be marked within the social, political, and theological lives of Mile High Community Church in comparison to previous and

markedly more conservative evangelical communities that came before and are active today. These differences revolved around exactly what the community members with whom I have spent time achor their identity and location within the church. That said, there are also still many aspects of church life in common between this congregation and the legacy of traditional conservative evangelicalism from which this community has grown. These are more difficult and potentially more insidious elements from their pasts that are both not easily recognizable and are certainly more difficult to change for the members of MHC. The frame around these moments can best be understood in terms of their relationship to white supremacy.

While many scholars have discussed the connections between evangelicalism and white supremacy, Robert P. Jones has provided an excellent and succinct summation. As a striking example of the relationship between evangelicalism and the Confederacy in Richmond, VA, its capital, Jones describes the following scene:

> By 1930, Richmond's white aristocracy had also uprooted seven of its prominent churches, replanting them in the shadows of the Confederate monuments. When west Richmond construction crews weren't erecting Confederate monuments, they were relocating white Christian churches… Monument Avenue, with its blend of monuments to confederate leaders, leading churches of the major white Christian denominations, and imposing homes, was carefully designed to serve both as a living civic tribute to the Confederacy for Richmond's white elite and as a Lost Cause pilgrimage site for whites across the South (111).

This physical example of evangelical Christianity in close proximity to whiteness perfectly exemplifies the deep relationship the two have shared since the beginning of the development of the self-conscious identity of the United States. Many aspects of life were collectively constructed to form the identity of southerners, but there was no greater centerpoint of a southerner's identity than to know one's self as both white (especially in proximity to what it meant to be a black slave) and as Christian (who expressed their religion through evangelical frames). The origins of this can be found far back into Europe and its colonizing mentality (Nell

Irvin Painter, 2011) but, because these notions are formative for white Americans, have stayed as a contemporary expression of identity. The “living tribute” to whiteness and evangelical Christianity exemplified in Monument Avenue can be seen on many streets throughout the South and throughout the country.

Similarly, Mile High Community Church, located on the edge of downtown Denver, sits among monuments to white elites in Colorado, only in a much more contemporary fashion. As reporter Joe Rubino names, in a 2018 article discussing the makeup of this urban center, “23,000 people live in the six-neighborhood downtown area, three times as many as called it home in 2000. More than $1.35 billion in new development was completed in 2018. But… not everyone living in Denver is enjoying its prosperity equally. The downtown population is overwhelmingly white, single and well paid” (denverpost.com). As mentioned before, the population of Mile High Community Church is, on any given Sunday, 90% white. The full time staff is 100% white or white-passing. There is no denying that MHC’s racial demographic is a reflection of its surrounding community. In fact, it is because of organizations like Mile High Community that maintain and support Denver in its trajectory toward more and more urban elitism. Whiteness spurs wealth which spurs on more whiteness. This gentrification cycle can usually only be mitigated by government or community intervention, neither of which are improving the drastic shifts in demographics in Denver’s downtown. At MHC, the community discusses issues related to this gentrification problem but never talks about their relationship to, or implication in, it.

Additionally, whiteness is present in both conservative evangelical spaces as well as in Mile High Community Church’s progressive space through white paternalism. As Jones aptly names, during the formation of a white, American identity, “within this hierarchical worldview, those at the top have their own duties and responsibilities. Just as fathers have a duty to govern

their families with benevolence, masters had a similar duty to govern their slaves" (83). During the formation of these identities, knowing one's self as a leader meant knowing one's self as a dominant social force. These splits in perception only came after this version of social domination fell out of fashion. Many men formed their sense of Christian identity by internalizing this kind of hierarchical thinking and, "conjured a powerful depiction of a harmonious hierarchical system where knowing one's place and doing one's duty lead to an idyllic social life and mutually advantageous individual rewards" (84). This hierarchical structure is the foundation to evangelical theology across the social and political spectrum well into today. These same structures that provide a contemporary worldview of order and domination have also been the same theoretical foundations for subjugation of bodies throughout the entirety of the United States. Even though elements of the social order have fallen out of popularity, the discourse that justified these actions is still in place and practiced in Mile High Community Church.

Men are the social force within almost all of the functions of MHC. The staff is split fifty percent women and men but, of those roles, only one woman occupies a congregation-facing leadership position. The others are less public and more traditional roles women serve in churches- children's pastors, executive assistants, and coordination positions. The head pastor, executive pastor, music pastor, and facilities pastor are all white men. When one encounters a typical Sunday morning, they are likely greeted by white greeters, surrounded by white community members, introduced by white men who offer the morning announcements, sung to by white mostly-men musicians, and preached to by white men. This social dynamic, as Jones demonstrates, is no coincidence.

The hierarchical design inherited by Mile high Community Church is the norm across the country. As Frances Fitzgerald (2017) names in her work, the community of individuals that formed the southern mentality of white domination were the same group of individuals (mostly white men) that would emerge in the 20th century as those determined to respond to the shock of social development in a modern, post-WWII era (6-7). Christian leaders, "stood as a bastion against social change, championing states' rights, white supremacy, and the existing economic order." In the contemporary world, and through an evolving progressive mindset, Mile High Community church, with its generational roots buried deep within this system, has similar social expressions of white, male domination. While the theology and social aims might no longer align with expressions of white social domination today, the framework and structures that supported that worldview in the 19th century, and the resurgence of those desires throughout the 20th century, are enacted on a regular basis today.

Lastly, the presence of whiteness means that race must be named when discussing traditional and contemporary expressions of evangelical Christian practice. With white people and white culture dominating every social interaction at Mile High Community Church, even the most progressive social, political, and theological development will only ever grow away from its conservative foreparents according to the perimeters of its own whiteness. As Dan expressed many times throughout our interactions together, he desired more representation from different communities of color. In fact, this was a trend that appeared throughout the conversations I had with individual members of the church. Aside from the fact that communities of color might simply not desire a shared spiritual space with the Mile High Community Church, one cannot help but recognize that, if communities gather around similar sensibilities, there is really only one racial set of sensibilities present at MHC and that is whiteness.

Jones, in a discussion of the pure recognition of whiteness, says,

> the project of seeing the constructed nature of whiteness, which is to say seeing ourselves more clearly for who we really are, is a particularly American responsibility… and this project is also a particularly Christian responsibility, since white Christian institutions and people were the primary architects and guardians of this exclusionary form of Americanness, which made full membership in the nation contingent on skin tone and religious belief (20).

Whiteness is not some intangible happenstance. Rather, whiteness is the presence of a social force that creates, protects, perpetuates, and limits perspective. Members of the Mile High Community Church who desire the development of a social and political position different than their conservative counterparts will be inherently limited. This is based on the cultural construction and maintenance that occurs both in their congregation and in most evangelical congregations across the United States that are dominantly white.

Specifically on the subject of political and theological life in the Mile High Community Church, the similarities between it and the conservative evangelical congregations against which they identify have important similarities. The first is in regard to the church's stance on a relationship to authority. Kristen Kobes Du Mez (2020), addresses this very subject in her work about the formation of American evangelical identity. She states that, "freedom was found not in individual autonomy, but in proper submission to authority" (75). For conservatives, this proper submission looked to the authority and dictation of the church, itself. How one believed theologically is how one lived in community. These communities physically acted out submission by forcing women into positions of humility, among children, and among their relationships to communities outside of their church walls.

Mile High Community demonstrates these physical actions, even though the language takes on a new tone. Found on their website, MHC's mission statement says, "The Church is the visible expression of Jesus in our world. We are never to sound retreat or withdraw from our

culture; rather we are called to bring the peace of God to the world. We join with God in serving the poor, lifting up the oppressed, fighting injustice and bringing the love of Jesus to all people" (church website). With notions of "bringing peace," "fighting injustice," "bringing the love of Jesus to all people," it becomes clear that Mile High Community still exerts a form of social control that determines the perspective of the people in charge of biblical interpretation. They desire still a "proper submission" that can be understood in clear relationship to the evangelical and missional work led by communities that came before. Without a clear social or political definition of the concept of *injustice*, for example, one is only left to assume that leaders within the community define *justice* according to their personal interpretations. "Fighting injustice," then becomes an act of perpetuating the white sensibilities of the mostly white men in charge of deciding what justice is and what it is not.

Similarly, "bringing the love of Jesus to all people," also perpetuates white dominant views of broad emotional experiences of humans captured in the sentiment. As Kobes Du Mes explains, for some of the leaders in evangelicalism, "the problem of the modern family, and of society writ large, could be traced to the erosion of patriarchal power" (87). "Bringing the love of Jesus to all people" serves as a euphemism for white dominant social perception and authority. The act of "bringing love" in missional terms means that people will go into broader society to encourage individuals to submit to the patriarchal power perpetuated by both conservative and progressive evangelical communities. Conservative evangelicals have used notions of Jesus to symbolize the ultimate father-figure which, through this construction, formed the patriarchy that evangelicals use today. Despite a progressive bent in language, the sentiment remains the same.

Theologically, the emphasis on the self represents one of the unbroken connections between Mile High Community Church and their convervative progenitors. In this case, the

emphasis on self comes in contrast to positive notions of collectivism and otherness. About this subject, Frances Fitzgerald states, "in matters of personal conduct, southern evangelicals held to the same personal standards as their northern counterparts, but they lacked their social ethic. As a theological measure, religion was seen primarily as a matter of the individual's relationship to God and to Christ as a personal savior" (54). Southern evangelicalism, the kind of religious expression that would populate the majority of the country throughout the 20th century, was focused heavily on the evangelical notion of personal relationship and interpretation. This tenet, an aspect specific to the evangelical frame, gave social permission to believers to interpret scripture, create church structures, and frame theological belief, all from the point of view of the individual. In many ways, this notion of the self in western society allowed evangelicalism to flourish. If the self was the focal point of a relationship with the divine, all meaning could be found in personal interpretation of scripture. Individualism was being established as a tenet of broader American identity, in large part because of the emphasis placed on the self in one's Christian identity. Fitzgerald goes on to explain that evangelizers' conversion efforts occurred, "with such success that they turned the South into a country where virtually everyone believed in the Bible and in personal salvation from sin- whether they were church members or not" (54). Self-awareness, especially in relationship to the divine, created for traditional evangelicals a sense of ownership in the interpretation and construction of belief. Because most of these Christians were from western European countries, as Fitzgerald explains, the importance of the self and individualistic interpretation became an important identity marker within whiteness, as well.

For Mile high Community Church, much of the public communication, both in terms of worship music and sermons, focus on one's personal relationship with the divine. An example of

a pastor giving one of these sermons, from a series called "Inner Witness" says, "when I read the bible, I'm faced with this idea that I have. And it's that the people I'm reading about in the Bible are better Christians than I am, they know Jesus better than I do, and whatever they're doing in the church, they're doing better than I am. And I was raised with this idea" (youtube.com). This personal lament would resolve itself with the idea that, in fact, no one understands the Bible better than anyone else because what matters more than is a personal relationship with God and a recognition that God reveals all the pastor needed to know when the pastor needed to know it. The exploration of the pastor's deeply personal self-consciousness is a clear example of one of the many ways the theological importance of personal relationships matter a great deal to this contemporary and progressive evangelical community. Not only are these thoughts attributed to the inner belief of the pastor but, in sharing them as a model to the greater community, the pastor is emphasizing the importance of the self in the construction of belief for all members of the congregation. This model is necessary to the ongoing construction and reconstruction of evangelical beliefs such as these.

Similar to the teaching pastor, the music pastor also models the importance of the individual relationship to God at MHC. On another Sunday, the music pastor led the congregation through a worship song with the following lyrics: "May His favor be upon you, for a thousand generations. On your family and your children. And their children and their children. May His presence go before you and behind you and beside you. All around and within you, He is with you. He is with you" (youtube.com). Again, the emphasis on the construction of their theological understanding is placed specifically in the personal relationship one has with the divine. The personal relationship becomes both the individual goal and the communal understanding of God within the construction of this community. Similarly, within the context of

this song, a congregant might receive the theological message that one's personal relationship *today* will have lasting effects on the salvation of one's forthcoming progeny for "1,000 generations." This theological move implicates the listener in the generationally-salvific decision one should make in the hearing of this song; if the listener has a personal relationship with God, they and their generations are safe in heaven for many, many generations to come. One does not want to imagine what the inverse of this decision could mean for the listener who chooses not to build that personal relationship.

Chapter Four: Not Your Father's Evangelicalism, But Close

It is remarkably easy to enter into Mile high Community Church unnoticed. In fact, I did just that many Sunday mornings. Because I did all of my research alone, I often blended into the single, twenty and thirty-something crowd that made their way into the community and peppered themselves throughout the seat of the congregation. We often filled in the empty two or three seats that larger groups would leave between them. While not inherently odd or uncommon to be seen alone, larger groups made up the majority of the community present on a typical morning of service. These groups were often small families, or groups of small families that, as an outsider, seemed to all be the best of friends. These groups were often usually wearing similar attire, had similar hairstyles, and one could not easily recognize where one group began and where one group ended. If not for the two or three seats left open in between, they would have been invariably indistinguishable.

Additionally, although traditional aspects of Christian family are preached about as an important aspect of identity for many of the leaders and members, alike, at Mile High Community, families are encouraged to utilize the childcare services for their young ones during service. This separation happens at a young age; MHC begins offering childcare to infants as young as newborn age. Not everyone utilized these services, however, and because MHC attracts a large number of families of all different sorts, one will often see many children running up and down the aisles during worship time. It was not easy deciphering the nature of the relationships of those who sat around me but I did hope to meet and interview a young family. I struggled with establishing relationships with one because I simply was not able to tell who was who. The homogeneity of the congregation and my desire to engage with individuals organically meant that it took me some time to establish these relationships.

The first couple with whom I established a rapport and relationship was one I had seen a few times on Sunday mornings previously. In fact, they made an impression on me early in my time at MHC because they were both greeters, on the same team as Dan. Young and attractive, they were otherwise altogether commonplace among the sea of young, attractive, coupled people that made their way into and out of the doors on a usual Sunday morning. Their names are Hayes and Dawn. Dawn is in her late 20's, has medium-length blonde hair, and often offers a kind, soft smile that makes her a perfect greeter. Hayes, who is a little taller and whose hair is much shorter than Dawn, has a similar set of traits- dark blonde hair, kind eyes tucked behind his glasses, and certainly offers the same kindness as his wife. They are the kind of couple that *seemed* like a couple. It became clear that they had been in each other's lives for a long while, having grown up around each other, learned similar mannerisms, and acquired parallel ways of being in the world. If finding a couple to best personify the community was my aim, I believe I accomplished it.

I approached them after church one Sunday because, along with greeting people, they also served communion (typically if one greets outside, they also serve communion inside) and I had seen their approachability and open demeanor as they served for their community. I also happened to be sitting near them this particular day and had an opportunity to approach them after service. They were very excited about the opportunity to talk with me about how they found the Mile High Community and how they grew within it enough to call it their church home. We agreed to meet at a coffee shop across town, where we both lived.

After spending time getting to know Dawn and Hayes, it became easy to understand why they gravitated toward greeting at MHC. They were genuinely kind. They are openly inquisitive, a valuable trait for those who are better community builders when they can present a genuine interest and concern for others. They are open and willing to engage in deep conversation. All of

these characteristics matter not just because they make Dawn and Hayes good conversationalists but because, in order to serve as the first point of contact for the Mile High Community Church, these personality traits are necessary in cultivating a sense of belonging and family- two sentiments the Mile High Community Church desires across all social interactions. Their *Journey* vision statement states explicitly:

> We are not called to follow Jesus alone. We live in authentic relationships with one another that reflect our relationship with God. All people are created in the image of God and created to live in community. We care for one another, give to those who have need, pray for each other, serve side by side, hurt and celebrate together. In living this way we will learn how to live more like Jesus.

And, like many Christians believe they are called to live in familial relationship with the divine, so too does the Mile high Community desire to live with each other in community. Hayes and Dawn offer their family as an example of the kind of family they hope to create within MHC; open, kind, questioning, and most of all, loving.

It is no coincidence that these two deeply desire a sense of familial comfort from Mile High Community Church. For both of them, notions of family grow complicated within the context of church, especially in comparison to their own. For Dawn, her family has taken a passive approach to church. As she puts it, "the majority of my family is good not to consider themselves Christians. I assume they would say they are 'spiritual'- they go twice a year. They're not really Christian, though, so I think that's always been scary to me to feel like an outcast a little bit." Being from suburban Alabama, ideas of Christianity are particularly cultural and infiltrative. That said, Dawn says that her family has never subscribed to traditional Christianity in that way: "my parents were -especially about religion- definitely a little more hands off, 'figure it out for yourself, we don't really know' kind of people, which can be really hard when you're 14, 15, or 16. It is really awesome now that I'm 29 to look back, but was very difficult to

navigate back then." This complexity of family religious expression and community-wide cultural religion was a tension for Dawn for most of her adolescence. It was not until high school and early college where she began to develop her affinity for Christianity. Again, because evangelicalism was such a cultural expectation on Dawn and on individuals more broadly in her part of the country, it was commonplace for young people to attend Christian youth groups centered at local churches. While not identifying as a Christian at that point, she did attend a high school youth group where Hayes had been attending all of his life. It was there where they met and began dating. This relationship would be Dawn's tether into the evangelical world and would help create for her a sense of religious identity all her own; seemingly at the request of her parents, she had figured out a religious life and theology for herself that made sense.

For Hayes's religious identity and foundation, family matters were front and center. Hayes comes from a long line of Church of Christ attendants. Both Hayes's parents and grandparents have been attending the same church- the church where Hayes and Dawn met- for all of their lives, as well. This three-generation influence has impacted the development of his religious identity. Hayes had many expectations placed on him and his religious practice growing up. As he puts it, "in the last two generations, anything I've known has been very straight and narrow on my side as far as Church of Christ. And my entire side organized religion and made sure we attended preaching and heard the word. They were very overbearing on us, me and my siblings." One such example of this, as he explained, was that if he ever missed a Sunday at church, his parents and grandparents would make him have to apologize to his church leaders. "We were always held accountable for everything."

The spiritual and cultural rigidity of Hayes's family created a number of different reactions among his siblings. For Hayes's younger sister, she is quite comfortable recreating for

herself the life that his parents and grandparents always desire. She attends the same church where his parents and grandparents attend, every Sunday, usually without missing a single day. Also, she, her husband, and her children live on the same property as their parents, where they all grew up. Hayes's older brother is "off the beaten path" and a bit more rebellious. Because of these two very different personalities that surround him, Hayes believes he's had more flexibility in who he was allowed to become. "I kind of like being in the middle," he shared. "It has always been something for me that kept me pretty even keel with everything I've done. I had a little bit more freedom stepping outside of my comfort zone and showing them like this is who I am and I'm proud of it."

For both Hayes and Dawn, their spiritual belief system is inspired by, but different from, either of their parents. As they explain it, they are happy within their evangelical religious expression. A Church like Mile High Community has allowed them to connect back to the cultural roots of their family and community while also allowing them to think outside of the limited boxes in which spirituality has been placed for the generations before and beside them, back home in Alabama. Dawn's free-spirited Christianity, partnered with Hayes's semi-rebellious approach, created in them a desire for "open-minded" religious expression. They were not intentionally looking for a place that allowed women to preach or that welcomed queer community expression; however, once Mile High Community Church confirmed it's stance on both, these religious transitions seemed to fit into their religious perspective: "I think attending a progression church these days allows us to discuss things that are happening in politics and share our opinions with open minded people," Dawn shared. Open-minded evangelicalism is exactly what they were after when moving from Alabama to a more urban and more diverse part of the country, and it is exactly what they received. "We church-hopped for so long. I always felt

people were fake or trying too hard at the majority of places we visited. I like that at MHC, people are themselves and are happy showing their imperfections."

Hayes's parents have visited Mile High Community Church a few times. They have been challenged theologically but support his and Dawn's decision to attend. Nathan's sermons have led to theologically-filled lunch discussions after service, but this does not seem to be a problem for them, as they thought they might once be. Dawn, reflecting to Hayes on the first time he brought his parents to service at MHC, quoted her memory of what he said:

> You said, 'I think about my parents and they've always known one thing. *I've* only ever known one thing. If I've only ever lived one day and if I can show them a glimpse of something else that's good and positive, then I'm doing my job as their son.' I'd never been so blown away that you had that thought, reflecting on how far you had come in being different than your parents.

For Dawn, that moment caused a great deal of anxiety. She knew that Hayes's family would have many questions and hesitations about what they might experience on a typical Sunday morning. Hayes, in saying those self-reflective words, comforted her and validated that they were making the kind of spiritual growth they had hoped to make in moving out of the south and into a religious community that was at times similar and at other times very different than where Hayes and she had grown up.

All of this being said, Hayes was quick to mention that he would never take his grandparents to a service at Mile High Community Church: "I was nervous in disappointing my parents and grandparents for being different in that way; and I think the hard part also about taking them to a church like MHC or any church probably, is that feeling of disappointment." Because the theology was so different, and because, at Mile High Church, one never knows who might get on stage to speak to the congregation, the unpredictability made thinking about bringing his much more conservative grandparents to service a source of deep anxiety. A sign of

evangelical success for Hayes's family, especially his grandparents, is the assurance that the legacy of their faith practice remains intact for generations. In many ways, while Hayes and Dawn continue to identify as Christians, their unique approach toward their spiritual life through the lense of progressive social, political, and theological means is quite unlike the religious experiences of those who came before them.

It is important to explore the direct connections in Dawn and Hayes's story to the broader history of the rise of conservative Evangelicalism, stemming from the South and perpetuated by conservative communities across the country today. In this particular comparison, location has great significance to both. It is no coincidence that, before living in Denver, Hayes and Dawn's community experienced evangelicalism with such force. The southern part of the United States is the bedrock upon which contemporary conservative evangelicalism was formed. The most famous and responsible figure in the creation of this southern platform was preacher, crusader, and celebrity Christian, Billy Graham. As Frances Fitzgerald (2017) names it,

> After World War II, when Americans poured into churches and synagogues, Billy Graham, then a fundamentalist, attracted enormous crowds to his revivals… His preaching evolved, and in the hope of bringing all Protestants together into his big tent, he broke with the fundamentalists, and called himself an 'evangelical.' The term, which had gone out of use, he and fellow moderates defined as a convervative Protestant who had been 'born again.' (5)

These tent revivals that Graham started were a nod back to the revivals of the 19th century all throughout the Southern United States. These tent revivals went deep into the night, were an uproarious event, and were, for many, a spectacle. In fact, it was in one of these southern tent revivals that Graham credits as his first commitment to his faith. As Fitzgerald explains it, "Billy, along with many others in the town, went to see the attraction and, one evening, nudged by a friend of the family, he walked down the sawdust trail to the platform and was 'born again.'"

(171). Graham, so moved by the experience *and* so uninspired by the traditional congregational setting that he would soon find himself in after bible school, left the traditional environment behind and took his preaching to the streets. He gave sermons, “in derelict missions, trailer courts, and rural churches with hounds in the sandy yards outside.”

It was this southern spirit that Graham carried throughout his missionary work, taking his traditions throughout the United States and the world. As James Morone (2004) names in his early work, Graham preached of fire and brimstone, a common theme throughout the rural and southern US. He states, “first, the dire warning… and then the promise of grace” (382). This implantation of fear was expressed through threats of hell and eternal damnation if one was not to change their ways. It lacked an intellectual and critical depth, but was powerful enough to turn many toward a belief in his message. This was evangelicalism at its finest and most rudimentary. The lack of critique came with it a spiritual promise also incapable of being fully grasped with the mind. These assurances took the guise of “peace and joy and happiness such as you’ve never known” (383). Morone explains that, “Graham became immensely popular with his colleagues around the nation… With great fanfare, the preacher took his mission abroad” (383).

His popular message and sermons soon made their way into as many Christian homes in the country as could afford a periodical subscription. Allan Lichtman (2008) explains that Billy Graham, wanting a magazine that could rival the liberal agenda of the *Christian Century*, and liberal mainline protestant theology more broadly, he and his financial supporters would launch *Christianity Today* in 1956. The magazine, whose popularity was growing nearly as much as Billy Graham himself, was fixated on publishing “more prominent voices on the mainstream right” (226). These voices, much like Graham, were heavily influenced by contemporary Southern sensibilities that included pushback against the criminalization of segregation and

discrimination based on race. Quoting *Christianity Today*, Lichtman says that contributors' works, "defended the South's right 'to preserve its European racial and cultural heritage." Graham's beliefs and the words printed within *Christianity Today* were spreading throughout the United States and were foundationalizing this modern form of evangelicalism that Graham was making tremendously popular.

With much of the credit in popularizing this form of Christian expression going to Billy Graham and his contemporaries, evangelicalism did in fact begin to beat out the left- and center-leaning mainline protestant denominations at that time and still to today. Graham's convergence of religious life within the inner perspectives of a politically conscious base fueled, according to Lichtman, the rise of all contemporary religious movements from the 1950's on. "Like Billy Graham,..." leaders grasped, "the symbiosis of conservatism in religion and politics" (343). He brought out the uniquely southern sensibilities regarding freedom, rights, and spiritual belief that have since foundationalized evangelicalism as it is throughout the country.

It would be impossible to claim any direct affects Billy Graham had on the theological beliefs of Hayes's family in particular. What's more important than that claim, though, is the connection and recognition that Hayes's family, self-described as "conservative," is rooted, like conservative evangelicalism is more broadly, in a specifically-southern way of knowing the intersections of faith, politics, and cultural life. As he explained, "people ask us all the time, 'when you are going to move back to Alabama?' but, for myself personally, I'm terrified of going back to that place, where I feel so distant from God and I don't see any churches like MHC in the South." The South, and southern evangelicalism more specifically, has impacted evangelicalism across the country more than any other cultural force and the disconnection

Hayes feels toward home and that style of Christianity is the reason he will likely not ever return home.

In many ways, the kind of Evangelicalism practiced by Hayes, Dawn, and many of the members of Mile High Community Church is specifically antithetical to the southern, conservative forms of evangelicalism that have taken root throughout the country. One example of this is found in the discussion around alcohol. Seemingly dated and not of concern for many of the congregants that I interviewed (no one else breached the subject), talking about the presence of real alcohol- not just grape juice- was one of the first points of resonance for Hayes and Dawn when they were looking for a new church home. As they explained it, they had spent time at a few different churches upon moving to Denver but, for various reasons, none felt like the right connection. It was not until they attended a church event where they were consuming alcohol that they finally felt like they found a place that resonated with their evolving ideals. As Dawn shared, "good Christians- or what I would assume would be considered a good Christian- felt different about certain things than I would feel in my heart. Drinking alcohol is a big one for me." Dawn never saw a problem with responsible alcohol consumption and did not appreciate that in order to be a "good Christian," she had to abstain. In fact, alcohol abstinence was a mandate within Hayes's family. Other authors like Frances Fitzgerald (2017) and Molly Worthen (2014) go much more deeply into the temperance movements that took hold throughout the evangelical movements of the late 19th century. However, it is important to remember that these century-old beliefs still remain strong in rural and conservative communities throughout the United States broadly, and in Hayes and Dawn's family community in Alabama, specifically. For Dawn and Hayes, a church like MHC undid many of the rigid social limitations and answered many of their questions of 'why?' that plagued their religious practice back home.

Location is not the only realm in social life against which Dawn and Hayes have attempted to redefine religious expression in their family. A theology of equity is part of what motivates them to continue to call Mile High Community church their home. For them, gender equity is important to how they now understand their faith practice at Mile High Community Church. According to Dawn:

> Women in church leadership- that's another one for me. That was something that, like at the church Grant grew up in- and I spent a lot of time in that church- these are things that were very serious issues for them. You don't drink and women aren't in leadership. I was maturing and having more thoughts about it and I was like "I don't feel this is right I don't believe this." and I was asking myself, 'if I don't believe this, does it mean I'm not a Christian?' I was thankful when I found MHC and they were basically eliminating all of those fears. You don't have to believe every single thing that every other person does to be here.

The importance of believing in the abilities of women- as leaders, as educators, as whatever they wanted to be- became an important part of Dawn's faith, even before she fully realized it was something that was stirring inside of her. For her young family with Hayes, believing in women as church leaders also meant that she was believing in herself as an independent member of her broader family. She cares very much about being respected as an independent and free-thinking woman, a freedom it does not seem she inherently has in the eyes of Hayes's family. As she went on to explain, while discussing the implication of changing toward a more progressive faith practice than Hayes's parents, "I feel like you do have to be making an active move toward engaging with like-minded people in order to prove you are the company that you keep." The "company," in this example, are those who believe that traditional family roles, especially about gender, should be challenged.

Religious understandings of the domesticity and subordination of women- understandings that Dawn and others at Mile High Community Church aim to eliminate- are rooted in ancient

belief. This is a subject oft-discussed in regard to evangelicalism. For the purposes of this chapter, I will articulate more specifically the connection between family expectations and gender roles emphasized within evangelical thought, and discuss how those perspectives have shifted for Dawn and members of Mile High Community Church in their own gender construction.

Kristen Kobes Du Mez (2020) discusses in her chapter, "God's Gift to Man," the specific ways gender has been constructed to serve the needs of men and patriarchy within the realm of conservative evangelicalism. She states, while discussing Marabel Morgan's 1974 publication, *The Total Woman*, "Morgan offered practical tips to help women 'become the sunshine' in their homes, advice that included time management, more efficient meal planning, and weight loss. Most importantly, women just needed to stop nagging their husbands" (60-61). Critiquing the 1970's culture, especially as the foundation of the consevative American evangelical movement still in power today, women should be seen as complementary to, and never as a threat of, evangelical masculinity. One of the roots of this, as she explains, is a literal and "direct" interpretation of the bible, offered by men in church leadership. These interpretations formed for women the contemporary manifestations of ancient biblical texts offered, for example, by Paul and his prohibition of "female authority" (108). Because men were using a literal and decontextual interpretation of the bible, they used Paul's words to construct gender roles according to the male-dominant norms of 1970's conservative society.

It was not just church leaders who constructed these family-centered beliefs. "Evangelical feminism" and the work of Morgan and other women helped construct their own interpretations of these patriarchal norms. "By giving husbands what they wanted… they could keep men at home, which was good for women, and good for their kids- especially their boys," according to

Kobes Du Mez. For women, having leadership outside the home, especially in church, disrupted the natural- and fragile- equilibrium that was needed for peace and protection. Partnered with a "populist" interpretation of the bible that undercut the social capabilities of women regarding anything professional, the dominant role for women was strictly domestic and subservient.

The domestic life of the conservative 1970's led to a political surge in the following decade. Traditional evangelical conservatism was colliding with mainstream Republican politics in ways that attempted to legalize the conservative biblical interpretations found mostly within the home. Robert P. Jones (2016) says, "conservative Christian preachers were transforming the face of American evangelicalism. Some… were overtly political, casting their lot with the Republican Party and mobilizing their followers against issues like gay rights, women's rights, and abortion" (26). These leaders were pushing, "a subtler conservatism, a pro-family ethos." Politicizing the family meant making legal and illegal the conservative and literal interpretations of social life constructed from biblical interpretation. Gender roles, the fragility of children, and the domination of fathers, all took a political spin in the public sphere. Their attempts to politicize their beliefs legally bound those to their biblical interpretations, benefitting only those whose perspectives shaped political belief; all others continued to find second-class status to men, as political leaders, preachers, and fathers.

Unsurprisingly, women's bodies were the site of biblical interpretation and domination during this conervative period, as well. Abortion, which according to Worthen (2016), was not a fight evangelicals had politized before the 1970's. According to her, "most evangelical Protestants believed that abortion was a regretable thing, but allowed that there were certain circumstances in which the mother's well-being required it" (213). However, to some leaders, "legalized abortion represented the barbaric end that [they] had predicted for Western

civilization" (213). Women and mothers were not only disallowed from making their own physical decisions, the paternalistic approach made women political children -incapable of making their own decisions- for the men and fathers who were self-ordained as social authority. Anti-abortion laws were not simply a protection for an "unborn child;" rather anti-abortion laws passed by men, and supported by conservative biblical interpretation, perpetuated the notions that women in charge of making social decisions were an affront to the divine and the society that believed in it. Worthen cites anti-abortion leaders like Francis Schaeffer as "brazen editors of history," conforming hundreds of years of history into "a paragraph and a casual chalkboard diagram," all for similar purposes as bible literalists- to construct a revisionist history that accommodated their contemporary position in society (216). Men like these cared deeply about their social location, and controlling the locations of women and other non-dominant perspectives, for the sake of perpetuating these locations for lifetimes to come. According to Worthen, Schaeffer and others offered, "not academic history, but a grand narrative with a big idea that explained his audience's distress. His mistakes did not matter much. He turned history into a weapon in the culture wars." Gender equity was not a concern for men who believed in the divinely appointed differences among them and women. The weaponization of biblical interpretation, at the hands of fathers, husbands, pastors, and government officials who never saw equity as a positive concern, continued through manipulation of their historical and biblical readings. Through the lens of political domination, family matters were best left to those in political and social control.

Dawn and Hayes know themselves and their family through the social, political, and theological frames that have been made aware to them in their journey of faith. They recognize

themselves as different from their families on many of the topics already discussed. They have endured an identity shift on issues about which, having stayed back home, they might not have been challenged to think differently. The self-awarenesses they have identified have been made clear to them through their interactions with difference- different theological perspectives, different social locations, and even different gender expressions- all of which have impacted how they know themselves and their relationship to and with Mile high Community Church.

However, of the important identities shared across the spectrum of change they have encountered, race is seemingly the *most* important. The racial identities of their social and familial relationships are the same in Denver as those with whom they interact back home in Alabama. In both locations, the friend groups they established are still white. In both cities, their families are still white. In both churches, their communities are still white. This dominant perspective of whiteness acts a thread that can be pulled through all of their relationships, bringing along with it similar social, political, and theological constructions that make whiteness as a broad, American experience similar across location, among church communities, and most importantly, within families. That string becomes the tie that binds whiteness to all of the social and familial experiences that Dawn and Hayes have experienced and shared.

To understand the important connections between whiteness, evangelicalism, and family, one must first understand their shared root. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) discuss this very subject in their Racial Formation Theory. They state, in order to understand one of the "fundamental features of U.S. racial dynamics, one must understand, "*Puritanism*, the founding religious/political orientation of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (and actually Calvinist) settlers of North America" (23). They continue, "nonwhite corporeal features… had to be explained in respect to the white norm. Religious doctrine had long been employed for this

purpose." In order to make meaning out of their white, colonizing power that fit in well with religious sentiment, they needed to develop a sense of superiority based in something that was out of their control and seemingly ordained by the divine. It was important that theological explanations offered a social explanation for why those with darker skin were also weaker, less human, and worthy of lives of slavery. "Since the early days of slavery and colonization the "curse of Ham" had been invoked to connect the phenotype of dark skin with God's displeasure, especially with black people, but also with others deemed nonwhite."

The link between southern, conservative evangelicalism and disparaging beliefs about Black and Indeginous people, as well as other people of color, can be easily traced back as an inherited belief system from slavery. As James Cone (2011) famously names, "The sufferings of black people during slavery are too deep for words. That suffering did not end with emancipation. The violence and oppression of white supremacy took different forms" (2). This violence, according to Cone, was perpetuated all throughout the country but was concentrated in the South. "By the 1890's, lynching fever gripped the South, spreading like cholera, as white communities made blacks their primary target, and torture their focus" (9). These behaviors and beliefs would be carried throughout the 20th century and will into the 21st. As Cone argues, the egregious acts of "spectacle" that was a public lynching slowly transitioned into lore legalized forms of death, including police brutality, prisons, and dehumanizing segregation laws.

Cone's most important claim for the purposes of this project are those he makes about the evolution of white conservative theology that supports these kinds of racialized societal structures. "My wrestling with faith began in childhood. Belief in a good and just God was no easy matter for any black person living in the so-called Christian South," says Cone (153). Developing a positive sense of self, both as a Black man *and* as a person of faith whose roots are

so entrenched in white supremacy, was Cone's heaviest theological struggle. He wanted resignedly for white leaders, especially white, southern ministers, to reconcile their violent pasts with their present beliefs:

> White theologians in the past century have written thousands of books about Jesus' cross without remarking on the analogy between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black people. One must suppose that in order to feel comfortable in the Christian faith, whites needed theologians to interpret the gospel in a way that would not require them to acknowledge white supremacy (159).

White supremacy became the cultural foundation upon which white ministers built their theological and community foundations. The frames through which a pastor offers to a congregation his theological understanding become the interpersonal connections communities make with each other within their theological communities.

As we already discussed, conservative southern theology knew the world through patriarchal, traditionally-conservative notions that formed their congregations. In the same way, white supremacy became the foundation upon which white communities gathered around this same conservative evangelicalism. Not only were pastors constructing their social and familial beliefs, they were doing this through a racially dominant perspective of whiteness. All of the conservative evangelical perspectives I have shared throughout this discussion have been offered through whiteness- white leaders preaching to white families, rooted in a history of Christianity that supported white supremacy. The connection between the social construction of family norms, especially the southern ones we explored through Dawn, Hayes, and their families, and any of their religious experiences they shared were made through whiteness.

As mentioned above, Dawn and Hayes are white. Their families of origin are white. Their church communities- both in suburban Alabama and in Denver- are white. This matters a great

deal when discussing their perspectives of how different a progressive church like Mile High Community is from its conservative predecessors. It also matters a great deal in a discussion around the influence of family on a theological perspective, even a perspective that shifts toward more progressive values from home-town conservative ones. In as simple an analogy as I can offer: for Dawn, Hayes, their families, and their respective church congregations, they are the white fish and white supremacy is the water in which they live. This analogy, as thin as it might be, offers a description of white supremacy that many often miss. When one is born into whiteness, one is born into white supremacy. Through their families and through their social and theological constructs, they are swimming in water, often unbeknownst to them. As Omi and Winant state it, “race is a master category- a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States” (106).

For white people, especially men, the conservative political motivations of the 1970’s, called the New Right, gave this community, according to Omi and Winant, “a sense of cultural identity, renewed faith, and political hope” (191). They were a, “well-organized alternative to the moral and existential chaos of the preceding decades.” This understanding of race, as a coalition of faith, politics, and identity, is at the very core of how people like Dawn and Hayes know themselves. Born into it, both in terms of familial and social understandings, whiteness is the constant sense of familiarity for them. For Hayes, and his family, they are demonstrably comfortable with the changes their son has made, even if the changes were not their choice. As he shares, when asked about no longer attending a church like their back home:

> I think they more so are just happy that we're not running wild or speaking to Satan, if you want to take it that far. I think they're just happy that we are just trying to do the right thing. I don't think they say, “oh well. They are going to

> Hell." They probably tell their friends we're going to a nondenominational, pretty progressive church. I don't think they think that seriously about it.

It becomes clear that the definitions of what it means to "do the right thing," which Hayes's family has made clear to him and Dawn, fall along the lines of comfort and familiarity. They trust that Hayes and Dawn are attending a church that is within their realm of respectable social order. One can only assume that, after having visited the congregation on a typical Sunday morning, there were indicators for his parents that, while theologically different, the space offered other indications of familiarity and safety. These, as Omi and Winant name them, are moments of "religious and cultural traditionalism" (191) that rearticulate the vision of white familiarity (see supremacy) of which families like Hayes's have become accustomed.

Another point of similarity between a conservative Sunday morning experience and one experienced at Mile High Community Church for Hayes's family is the familiarity of the paternalistic head pastor and pastoral staff. While MHC often talks about gender inclusion as one of their progressive points of departure, there is no denying the presence of masculine presence on the stage. Out of the usually ten or so pastors, staff, and volunteers with whom one would likely interact on a typical Sunday morning, eight or nine of them would be white men (the numbers change depending on how many women are participating in the band that day and if the one woman teaching pastor is offering a sermon). The differences between a conservative pastoral team and the progressive expression of pastoral care at Mile High Community Church is virtually indistinguishable. James Moron, (2003) writing about paternalistic evangelical practice, says that white men of the South desire a world in which, "proper society is hierarchic and stable" (178). He explained that, starting during the antebellum and all throughout the 20th century, white Christianity desired a top-down approach to theology, constructing defenses for everything from slavery to the subordination of women all around the social norms of white

maleness. This theology carried into the home: "restoring the family runs direction into the issue of just what a family ought to look like in the first place" (483). While it might come with a tone of irony from Morone, the question remains; both the conservative communities of traditional evangelicalism and Mile High Community Church demonstrate, through sermon and physical representation, the importance of the centrality of a nuclear family with the father at the helm. The church is led by men. The messages are often about parenting and child-rearing and "healthy marriages." The core elements of traditional, conservative leadership, and the social constructions of that leadership within the family, center the dominant perspectives, needs, and social locations of white men.

Dawn and Hayes do not currently have any children. For them, it is important to "plug into community" (as Hayes describes it) now, at this time in their spiritual journey, as a way to establish community and develop their spiritual family. Much like their connections home, they think of church as a time to connect with family; both in a literal sense back home, and in a socially constructed one while in Denver. This is a critical point of commonality between their conservative past and progressive present: the development of spiritual family as a religious experience is something that both conservative and progressive evangelicals do, illuminating potentially the most important connection between the two worlds.

The history of the connection between the importance of family and the evangelical movement is long. For the purposes of this argument, I look to the 1970's post-Civil Rights Era, and the contemporary movements of conservative evangelicals to save what they view as a lost world, the vulnerability of which was found at home. As Kristin Kobes Du Mez discusses, "evangelical fears were real. Yet, these fears were not simply a natural response to changing

times. For decades, evangelical leaders had worked to stoke them" (13). Because so much of the social ordering of their world came from the paternalistic, hierarchical structures mentioned above, there was no greater threat to that structure than a family destroyed. "Generations of evangelicals learned to be afraid of communists, feminists, liberals, secular humanists, 'the homosexuals,' the United Nations, the government, Muslims, and immigrants." The only thing that could save them was a doubling down on the social constructions they made- "God-given, testosterone-driven masculinity."

In this case, the "family" ought to be thought of as a fragment of society that these men believed they controlled. Protecting "Family values" then became a euphemism for protecting a specific, heteronormative, hierarchical, patriarchal way of life that conservative evangelicals constructed and perpetuated. The communities that they feared were communities that offered an alternative frame through which to view society. A threat to those values became a threat to conservative evangelicalism more broadly. It became the duty of these evangelical men and ministers to 1) create a deep value and theological understanding of family among its believers, and 2) construct theological justifications of violence and control against the communities they viewed as threats. Kobes Du Mes says, of the tools constructed by these communities, "the resources that they found introduced them to… traditional visions of masculinity and femininity, and to a social order structured along clear lines of patriarchal authority" (296). These family values became the connection between home and church life, between evangelical and secular culture, and between insider and outsider membership mentalities.

Offering specific men's ministries, women's ministries, and children's ministries, Mile High Community Church maintains the spirit of traditional, conservative evangelical "family values" even in their progressive congregation. Taking on the point of traditional notions of what

it means to be a man, MHC offers this take on their MHC Men webpage: “It can be a challenge to understand what it means to be a man and cultivate healthy masculinity in today’s world. Broader culture gives us one picture of masculinity, but Jesus models a different, deeper understanding.” While it is unclear if this is a critique of broader culture or of traditional Jesus-masculinity, what is sure is that MHC still thinks explicitly through the lens of masculinity, harkening back to Kobes Du Mez’s critique. Additionally, for MHC Women, “We wish for women to have a platform for leading within the church; creating authentic connections and embracing every race, age, size, class, marital status, and sexuality.” Recognizing that Mile High Community is attempting to subvert these traditional roles in some form, this strikes at the heart of those efforts. Still, though, with a special call toward “leading,” this message conveys a woman’s identity in the church is still specifically in relationship to traditional masculine dominance.

One afternoon, Dawn looked to Hayes and made this emotional appeal: “I hope you feel the same way… I'm scared that if I don't continue plugging in here that I will be lost because I've never felt so connected. I've never felt understood more than a place like this.” This strikes at the heart of this argument. Dawn and Hayes have been able to connect and “plug in” at a church that is at the same time deeply familiar and rapidly evolving. These connections to the familiar are the ties that bring them back and keep them inspired by their church community. While it might feel worlds apart from their community and family church experience back in Alabama, in many important and less obvious ways, the conservative and progressive church experiences are quite similar. With notions of family at the center of both experiences, and with generations-old impressions from white male dominance, the two communities have much more in common than

they tend to believe. Getting “plugged in,” for Dawn and Hayes, might actually be a desire to bridge their old and new worlds.

Chapter Five: Social Constructions of Race in Space

Despite having entered a good handful of progressive evangelical church spaces across the country, those few moments stepping inside of Mile High community Church for the first time are unlike any other church experience I had. The building, originally built as a synagogue, gives a sense that the space was designed for a spiritual experience. The steps up to the front doors are many, the solid and heavy front doors give a sense of protection and safety, and the sanctuary, substantially much larger than any of the other churches, offers a sense of so much potential. An enormous pipe organ which first catches your eye, ancient-looking and clearly unused, sits just above the stage. The wall trimming is a tapestry of chipped paint, looking as if it used to offer attendees a view of ornateness but now gives a sense of shabby intentionality. There is no art, no giant cross behind the stage, no flowers, nothing that would indicate to one who stumbled upon the interior that the building was anything more than just some beautiful and historic auditorium.

At the beginning of the service, there are no megachurch lighting and sound effects to draw you in, like at a movie theatre. This church is not a spectacle in that sense. There are two large projection screens to either side of the stage which display about ten minutes or so of a well-produced but simple introduction message, often light-hearted and humorous, at the clock strikes ten. After those are over, however, the true magic of the congregation, and what does set it apart from other congregations I have visited, is the unprecedented talent of the band.

Led by Dean, a young-looking white man in his mid-30's, the band would otherwise appear unassuming in so many ways. No one is strikingly attractive. No one seems especially "cool," attempting to be rock stars in a way that other church bands convey themselves. If you were to see them without first hearing them, one might even be a little disappointed that all of

those traditional markers of a Christian rock band are absent, as I admittedly was (I am a former church musician and care a great deal about music as a part of the Sunday morning experience). However, once they began to perform, it became evident that this group of musicians had every bit of the chops and then some that one would hope for in a progressive, evangelical church space.

Dean has clearly been at this for some time. No taller than five-foot-seven, the voice that comes out of this man is powerful and large. It is raspy and soulful and able to convey a great deal of emotion. His range is also wide, allowing him to both lead and offer a complimentary background focal when one of the backup singers- usually a woman- takes the lead, which is usually about once a Sunday. He is also the lead guitarist- a typical trait of praise band frontmen, but his presence is not commanding. He is subtle in his leadership and does not give the sense that ego is leading him to his role as band leader; rather it is evident from his talent that he has been cultivating his leadership for many years and from behind the scenes. After experiencing that voice for a few Sundays, I waited after church one particular day to speak with him. I wanted to introduce myself, both as a fellow musician and as a researcher. I wanted an opportunity to get to know this man who embodied so much of what Mile High Community Church is- simple and unassuming, yet confident and charismatic. Once we met, we had an instant connection and he was willing to meet with me regularly, from that Sunday on.

Dean is a simple man for all intents and purposes. He is married, has two children, and works as the Worship and Arts Pastor, which is a fulltime job. In the evenings and weekends, he spends time tending to his family and socializing with friends. He is also kept busy with ministerial duties but he does not appear frantic, like other pastors do who have difficulty juggling all of the needs of a religious community and a family. This balance and centeredness is

a defining character trait of Dean. His personality is even and when he talks about difficult or frustrating things, it comes across with limited emotional expression. His thoughtfulness leads first and foremost.

Dean's journey to the position at MHC is a typical one for many members of the community. Having served at a conservative evangelical church for many years in southern California, he and his wife were ready to move on and explore a different part of the country. His mother had unfortunately passed away at a young age and life outside of the predictability of his life seemed to have a strong appeal. After applying, auditioning for, and receiving the job offer from Mile high Community, they headed east. With Dean came years of experience working at large, conservative, evangelical churches throughout Orange County- this county being a known hub and centerpoint for conservative evangelicalism throughout the United States. This experience served him well at Mile High Community Church because, when he started seven years ago, it was not unlike those churches found throughout southern California.

Many of the questions that Dean and I discussed were focused on the construction of the Sunday morning experience. In many ways, those first few moments of stepping into the space were built by his imagination. He is the one who makes the decisions on what music the band will play, what musicians will be playing them, who is on the tech team and what production goes into those introduction videos. He also decides the program and what visuals one will experience within the sanctuary and throughout the morning. His perspective on what church should and should not be is such a force within the congregation and many are relying on his decisions every week to experience the essence of what Mile High Community Church is.

It is exactly this essence of which I have been consistently most curious. I have a drive to deeply understand the decisions and indecisions that individuals like Dean make, leading to what

amounts to a comfortable familiarity in a Sunday morning experience that draws individuals back again and again. I was curious about the seemingly innocuous decisions that leaders and lay congregants alike make which create that essence of familiarity: both in terms of sameness across progressive evangelical experiences on a Sunday morning, and also in terms of similarity across conservative and progressive evangelical experiences writ large. In other words, I was curious about the decisions that key stakeholders like Dean make that construct a social space like a church so that it can easily attract and maintain membership of individuals with certain kinds of social expectations and experiences while, inversely, also repelling or striking against the social familiarity of those individual experiences attuned to a different set of expectations. I was *less* interested in how the band sounded (sensorial) and *more* interested why they chose to construct the sounds in the ways that they did (cultural).

During one of our first conversations, Dean and I discussed the origins of his location, both as a pastor and also as a believer. I was curious how he understood his current theological and vocational position. As he states, "I believe I am pioneering and leading the edge of MHC's beliefs. I haven't been talked into this direction. I bring with me my tribe of origin, into the progressive relationships that I have now. I don't know if I'd label myself [as an evangelical] but I'm compelled by what they're about and what they're for." This very bold statement came at the beginning of our time together. Dean is putting a stake in the ground firmly and seemed to be communicating from the beginning who he was and what he cared about. For white, progressive evangelicals (a term I will still use here because, as defined earlier, it is an observational term used to describe actions and community, *not* personal belief), this statement seems to be what Bonilla-silva names as, "a positive self-presentation" (116). This is important to someone who is

identifying their social constructions because, as he explains, it helps them to "save face" and offer social critiques without blame. It is a way to both identify with a belief system while also offering a social critique of it. For Dean, it matters a great deal to him to be a leader. He wants to be a good one and take personal responsibility for the outcomes of his leadership decisions. In "leading the edge," he is confessing that he and his church are embarking into what for them is uncharted territory. Identifying as a progressive community has only been an official part of their public position for the last two years. The vulnerability in discussing this appeared front and center during our time together.

As he mentioned early, Dean is aware that he is bringing with him a legacy of conservatism. His "tribe of origin" is exactly that- a social construction of ways and people that have influenced his current beliefs and position. One important member of this "tribe" is Dean's dad. After his mother passed away, Dean and his dad's relationship shifted. Dean's dad was the pastor of the church where Dean grew into the talented frontman that he is today. As he says,

> I have seen my family [since mom's passing], and I can tell that my dad is not buying what he's selling anymore. Growing up and hearing about "spiritual fruit" as a product, not as spiritual growth, others I've met look much more like Jesus now than my dad. He's incredibly depressed and narcissistic, angry, bitter. He tries to shove his version of God down people's throats, but since my mom's death, there's been a lot of damage that was done.

This transition for his family brought to light the deep spiritual differences that Dean experiences from his dad, exacerbated by the spiritual experience of his mother's passing. As Dean has learned to know himself within this new reality, he has realized that the spirituality and belief system of his "tribe of origin" is formative in how he knows his world. He desires, however, to sift through that meaning to find a landing place for him and the "progressive relationships" that he has now.

As mentioned previously in this project, the social constructions of both the "tribe" of Dean's past, as well as those of his current relationships through Mile High Community Church, are threaded throughout by predominantly white people in white ways of operating in the world. Dean's family serves as both a white familial story of origin, as well as a white foundation upon which Dean has built his theologically evangelical understanding, since he grew up with a white pastor dad. As Omi and Winant remind us, "race is a vast and variegated theme… race is a factor not only in politics and history, but also in economy, culture, experience" (137). By this, they are sharing that race is not only within the social constructions that formed our pasts, but is also functioning in ways that dictate our interpersonal present. All we know of ourselves and the world around us as dictated by categories created by race. These cultural experiences, such as families and churches, are found within a racial construction. The events that occured within Dean's life and have motivated him to make social and theological change are constructed by many factors, all of which are also structured by race. Dean and his wife did not switch from just a conservative to a progressive church; they moved from a white, conservative church to a white, progressive church. Dean is not building a theological transition from the lessons he learned from his dad; he is building a white, theological transition away from the lessons he learned from his white dad. "We can see race and racism," as Omi and Winant say, "being remade both structurally and experientially" (137).

Because Dean serves as the creative curator of space and experience for a typical Sunday morning, he believes that part of his vocation is drawing individuals into a deeper connection to the divine through experience. As he states,

> "With our gathering, at the beginning, I was hearing the same thing as I grew up in my family. People were really wounded and really angry- not that they shouldn't be. But, if we're gonna be part of a progressive culture, our job is to

> create artifacts. Steve Jobs creates things that drew people toward his art. I believe that is my job; to create things that draw people toward God."

Dean cares a great deal about, and takes deep responsibility for, the experience and the "take-aways" from Sunday morning at Mile High Community Church. As he continues, he asks, "what do I want people to leave with and how do I want to make that happen?" These artifacts are in the songs that people cannot get out of their heads all day. They are in the way that people felt when there was an instrumental break in a song that led to deeper contemplation. They are moments upon which Dean wants people to reflect more deeply, going beyond their wounds and anger. "We want them coming because they're compelled about what we're inviting them into. That's what lacked in other spaces. We could be like those places but I don't think it's helpful." Those moments that Dean believes are helpful are also those moments of progressive theology that moved him away from his past and into his progressive present. They are those moments that feel more connected to the divine, more connected to "spiritual fruit" that is not just product-driven (an ironic nod to Steve Jobs, I recognize).

It is important to name that Nathan, head pastor of Mile High Community, and Dean share many of the same theological foundations and contemporary landing spots. Collectively, they work to develop the entirety of Sunday. As Dean says of Nathan, he "was really instrumental and was helpful in getting me support" for developing the artifacts for a Sunday morning musical experience. Their work together creates the essence of progressive evangelicalism that they believe is altogether different than iterations of churches past. They hold each other accountable in building those experiences for the broader community and, as Dean shares, "I observe Nathan and have sought out advice and observation from him, as well."

I include this word about Nathan because Dean is not solely responsible for the evolution of progressive thought within the congregation. They build those experiences together and

equally share in the construction and feedback loops that the community gives the leadership. While Nathan is the face of the church, and produces the explicit theological messaging, Dean is really second in command in terms of community interaction. Their words (or word choices) construct the progressive, evangelical foundation for the congregation and the "pioneering edge" of their theological exploration.

As I begin to understand Dean's role through a racial lens, it is important to do a brief exploration of race in Colorado, understanding the contemporary landscape and the ways that landscape offers insights into specific conversations within the context of Mile High Community. As mentioned previously, whiteness dominates both the economic and cultural construction of MHC's neighborhood of downtown Denver, CO. The church itself sits within a pocket of Denver whose median individual income is about $85,400, about $24,400 more per year than Denver as a whole (denverpost.com). This disproportionate wealth, in an area that is also 76% white, means that Mile High Community- made up mostly of people who live nearby- is also wealthy and white. Dean's sensorial experiences that he offers resonate with a white congregation because whiteness is a social expectation within the community. For both people walking in off the street for the first time, inexperienced with evangelicalism personally, *and* for people who pursue this progressive expression of evangelicalism specifically, they will likely find resonance in what Dean offers, specifically because they are white. "People conceive of, operate, and inhabit their own racial projects (within proader constraints) and "experience" race in distinct and varied ways" (137).

Colorado is a white-majority state. According to the US Census, Colorado is 68% white, 22% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Black/African American, and 5% Asian, Native American, and other

races (census.gov/Colorado). Whiteness and white-dominant perspectives are very much a part of the culture and politics of this state. Constructing perspective outside of that is not necessarily a task white evangelicals can even take on. Because, as previously mentioned, whiteness formed the conservative evangelical foundation upon which progressive evangelicalism knows itself today so that it has only ever been designed for the senses and social expectations of white culture.

Progressive white politics dominate Denver's urban center. Nine out of the thirteen city councilors are white and members of the Democratic Party. Colorado's democrat governor, from the Denver metropolitan area, is the first out queer person to ever hold the office in the country. These perspectives inform and decide the state of Colorado's political present and future. Their racial perspectives, while seemingly progressive, are much like those of the Mile high Community: constructed out of a white-centered social location. With this in mind, it becomes clear that whiteness is the center of those political perspectives and will naturally be limited to the social concerns of white-dominant communities.

Mara Loveman (2014), while discussing the classification of race as a quantifiable political force, says, "states that legally institutionalize racial distinctions 'make race' by making race matter, directly and explicitly, in the lives of individual persons" (5). Because the United States, including Colorado, pursues and understands their populations through a racial lens, the political application of skin color exacerbates racial difference and power thereof. The act of quantifying race becomes a political move that empowers the racial authority of the largest group. In the United States broadly, and in Colorado locally, whiteness dominates because, as Loveman names, "states that formally link individual racial classification to the delivery of benefits or penalties *institutionalize* racial distinctions within populations" (5). It is no

coincidence that whiteness as a dominant perspective means that voters tend to elect white leaders that perpetuate white normativity. It is an act of the state to give power to these white perspectives, perpetuating the ideas and social understandings attributed to a specific group.

Looking at this through the evangelical lens, whiteness is what is being taught in churches and Sunday schools, so that even when people like Hayes, Dawn, and Dean leave their "tribes of origin," they are still bringing whiteness as a worldview and political force. States like Colorado and cities like Denver do the same thing so that, even when white progressives are politically dominant, they are still operating from an "institutionalized" location of centering the social concerns and politics of white culture. Loveman names this: "The ethnic or racial categories used to implement targeted social policies will never correspond perfectly to all of the relationally determined categorical distinctions that are operative in the lives of individuals and communities" (322). Even when white politics attempts to implement political action for groups outside of their dominant perspective, their capacity is limited based solely on the centering of their own racial awarenesses and concerns. Much like Loveman's process aims to function for communities outside of the dominant racial category, so too does Dean inevitably perpetuate white-dominant perspective. This is true because they are the political, social, and theological ideologies through which he knows himself and the world around him.

I believe those social markers of familiarity are constructed from contemporary experiences of whiteness. It is whiteness that bridges progressive evangelical experiences across the country on a typical Sunday morning. It is whiteness that allows individuals like Hayes and Dawns' parents to find peace and comfort in what is a theologically oppositional church community. It is whiteness that Dean and others are creating and recreating every Sunday morning. People like Dean, who are able to make the theological journey from conservative to

progressive evangelicalism, do so with whiteness as the support and undercarriage that is holding the entirety of the experience together.

It is not enough to point to the presence of white people alone to make this claim. It is also not enough to argue that whiteness historically constructed the transition from conservative to progressive evangelicalism, while still important as a historical background and framework. What is missing still and what will be developed in these following pages, is an imagining of the construction of whiteness in the contemporary. This chapter will explore, through the help of Dean's narrative, the unique, contemporary constructions of sensorial moments that reconstruct the past and propagate the contemporary of whiteness within a typical Sunday morning at Mile High Community Church.

For Dean, these spiritual moments are the tangible and intangible experiences that separate Mile High Community Church, and its progressive ideals, from their conservative foreparents. These are the artistic and sensorial moments that harken to a deeper faith that one could not get in traditional expressions. "Most people don't know why they believe what they believe," he argues. "If pressed, they wouldn't be able to reference a single thing. It's a game of regurgitating someone else's thoughts. [Conservative] evangelicalism needs something to be about. Abortion, inclusion, those were used as tools to unite a group of people toward a common goal." Dean desires that progressive evangelicals create sensorial experiences that take members into what he thinks of as a deeper faith, and experiences that he believes are in opposition to those 'regurgitated' experiences that are old, outdated, and shallow.

Specifically, the experiences and exploration that Dean offers are dominantly through music choice. Deciding on a song, and the performance of it, are two key components to how

what Dean thinks about his role. His song choice has meaning and he knows that this is what people will take away from the typical Sunday morning experience. One afternoon, we discussed this very subject. Dean shared, "I have been given a gift and have experienced God in deep ways through worship. We still do church like evangelicals- we offer a welcome, we perform worship songs, and we try to get people to interact with faith between Sundays- but when this doesn't feel like enough, especially in a traditional evangelical space, I say, 'let's come back to song and content.'" It is here in the "song and content" where Dean centers his progressive beliefs. It is here where Dean cares most about locating Mile High Community. It is here, in this moment, that Dean desires to have people take away an "artifact" from Sunday morning.

Before this exploration of the lyrical connection between the song choice and the meaning behind it, it is important to first name a fact about the songs that I will be discussing: all of them are composed by white evangelicals. In fact, of the 35 songs I skimmed before deciding on which to more deeply survey, not a single one of them was composed or originally recorded by a person of color. Spanning between white men and white women singers- most composers were men- it became evident that the resources Dean uses are from an all, or almost-all, white library. I heard hundreds of songs during my time at Mile High Community and I imagine at least one of them was written or originally performed by a person of color, but I am not certain. As has been made evidently clear, whiteness, and white maleness are the creators and propellers of evangelicalism in the United States. Because most churches believe that the head musician role is a pastorate, and because most pastorates are filled by men, it is no wonder that the music that Mile High Community Church chooses are from the demographic options presented to them.

One such song that is often sung on Sunday mornings at MHC is called "Reckless Love." The song's chorus resounds, " Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God. Oh, it

chases me down, fights 'til I'm found, leaves the ninety-nine. I couldn't earn it, and I don't deserve it, still, You give Yourself away. Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God." In the context of a progressive, evangelical church service, these lyrics would likely resonate with a large number of individuals. The lines, "I couldn't earn it, and I don't deserve it," resonate loudly for members of Mile High Community Church, whose vision statement reads, "We experience redemption in our relationships with God, self, one another, and the earth"- redemption from a broken and lost world who, through original sin, made the world a sinful place, according to their evangelically rooted belief system. These lyrics offer a worshipful pause to reflect on this idea of not deserving, but still receiving, redemption.

This type of theology harkens back to the origins of evangelical thinking. This thinking, called Millennialism, is the idea that, as evangelicals interpreted from a single line of Revelations, Jesus would return to the earth, free it from its sin and destruction, and would rein over it for a thousand years . As James Morone mentions, "men and women would be the central agents in the cosmic pageant; the coming of the Lord awaited their moral triumph. The millennial visions reflected… destiny had passed from divine volition to the people's free will" (129). Divine destiny became something that one could choose and was no longer something that happened to you, as Morone explains. "The preachers recast history and prophecy into a distinctly American idiom… Americans were back in business as God's chosen people." This belief system made notions of being chosen out of many, or being chosen despite one's humanness, a theologically sound argument for defending their understanding of their social dominance. In this reversal of power, to admit that one was not worthy but was chosen anyway allowed for a justification of a perceived sense of superiority over other belief systems.

Even in a contemporary, progressive church space, one cannot help but recognize the dominant perspective offered in the theological claims of this song. Shared in the previous chapter's exploration of evangelicalism and its social construction by white men, this sort of socially and theologically dominant affirmation enlivens the belief that evangelicalism is a construction of male- and white-dominated society. Hearing lyrics like this, even in a progressively theological space, validates the notion that Dean's progressive evangelicalism is still one that supports dominant white narratives. It is no wonder then that a sensorial moment of connection to the divine would also be a validation of familiarity and comfort in long-held beliefs of whiteness and dominant perspectives that even this progressive space perpetuates for its mostly white audience.

Another lyric, presented in the song "Holy Spirit, You are Welcome Here," reads

"There's nothing worth more, that will ever come close, nothing can compare You're our living hope. Your Presence Lord I've tasted and seen, of the sweetest of Loves Where my heart becomes free, and my shame is undone Your Presence Lord Holy Spirit, you are welcome here Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere." Again, while a seemingly resonant example of a positive and love-filled cry out to the divine, this verse also serves as a reminder of a conservatice evangelical past. The lyric, "where my heart becomes free, and my shame is undone," has roots in a belief system that dates back to a traditional and conservative evangelical expression. Morone offers that jeremiads, members of evangelicalism who lamented in a similar fashion to Jeremiah in Lamentations, focused only on the plight of society. He states that religious covenants with communities and the divine, "pledged order and harmony; the new world produced disorder and discord. Jeremiads mediated the differences" (44). Discussions of the divine as the only salvation from a world of torment and shame have their roots in these

theological understandings offered by America's first evangelicals. And, as Morone goes on, "just beyond this moral crisis, if it can be negotiated, glimmers of success of the mission, national glory, even the biblical millennium." Calling on the divine to "come flood this place and fill the atmosphere," is certainly a part of that negotiation, of that reconciliation just on the horizon for even the most progressive of evangelical believers. Morone offers that, "Jeremiads survived the 20th century… and continue to reconcile the tensions between stability and change" (45). Into the year 2020, during a global pandemic, these beliefs percolate to the surface of this evangelical thought. This matters because, as Dean desires his congregation leave with unique and original contemplations of a god that is present and responding to the world around them, it is hard not to see these moments of the "game of regurgitating someone else's thoughts" that he quipped in opposition about his conservative counterparts.

The final lyrical example is found in a song called "Lay It All Down" and says, "we've come to fear what we can't explain, there's nothing here that can ease the pain. Lay it all down, lay it all down at the feet of Jesus, at the feet of Jesus." Evangelicals have been in a decades-long battle with contemporary forms of knowledge and knowledge-seeking. The line, "we've come to fear what we can't explain… lay it all down at the feet of Jesus," is a small nod toward the long crusade of Christian victory between the bible and conventional science. As Morone explains, evangelicalism positioned itself staunchly against science and any form of knowledge outside of the Bible and its authority. One's evangelical belief system was designed to encompass all forms of knowing the world; any knowledge produced outside of that was considered sinful and not from the divine. He writes that the Scopes Trial- a world-famous Tennessee State Supreme Court trial pitting "fundamentalist champion William Jennings Bryan" and his defense of creationism against "Clarence Darrow and the liberals" and their belief in Darwinian evolution- was in fact

more of a landmark case for the victory of science over religion (336-337). Even though the trail would end with a conservative victory, the case made a national spectacle of this form of thinking. Secular society had evolved toward the sciences and conservatism fell into unpopular and disgruntled belief, and Morone explains it.

That trial served as a mile marker both as the first diminishment of Christian thinking in dominant social thought, *and* as a point of reckoning to which conservative evangelicalism fundamentally desired a return. With whiteness at the center of that thinking, this form of knowledge is also inherently white by nature. In fact, as white traditional forms of thinking began to deteriorate around the same time as the Scopes Trial, the Ku Klux Klan and other popular white supremacist organizations found the height of their popularity. Morone states that, "the Klan specialized in lost moral values...alongside that moral populism gleamed racial malice" (338). It is specifically this alignment between fundamentalist Christian thought and it's connection to whiteness that bred the Klan in the United States. And, while the Klan is often viewed as an extremist organization who takes its beliefs to the furthest extent imaginable, it becomes evident that evangelical, moralistic thinking, partnered with a direct objection to science, perpetuate unmitigated belief structures whose possibilities are endless and destructive to those who believe otherwise. These extreme examples- one, a simple lyric to a song sung on Sunday, and two, the destruction and brutal thinking of the Ku Klux Klan- serve as a connection and reminder that evangelicalism was designed to serve whiteness, and was constructed from whiteness, first and foremost.

Expanding out to ministry more broadly, it is not just music that is constructed for and by whiteness at MHC. In fact, many of the ways that Mile High Community "does" church are

constructed around white ways of being in community. In fact, it has been proven quite difficult for other communities who are not just white to form because whiteness has been proven such a hegemonic force. As Dean names, in an attempt to subvert this perpetuation that he recognizes, “There’s no way as a white male, I can sit with you as a -lgbt person, person of color, etc.- and tell you that you are doing community wrong. I would ask you what you’re working through… I can point you toward help.” However, even with his offers of support, the permeation of white culture dominates.

This rearticulation of whiteness, even in a progressive, self-aware space, is to be expected, says Omi and Winant. As they name, “racially-based political movements are inconceivable without the racial state, which provides a focus for political demands and structures the racial order” (148). At a micro-level, this is quite literally how the Mile High Community sustains itself racially. The “racial state” is the generational race dominance of whiteness that is structured deep within how the church knows itself, even as the politics mutate toward progressive evangelicalism. Despite political movement toward a racial self-consciousness, such as Dean demonstrates, undoing the “racial state” of whiteness in MHC- and evangelicalism more broadly- would cause an undoing and a destruction of the racial order of white dominance.

The white dominance of the racial state of Mile High Community can be experienced at all levels of social interaction. As Omi and Winant share, “‘colorblind’ theories” state “that racial policies should be guided by principles of individualism, and oppose demands for ‘equality of result’” (57). Instead of perpetuating community opportunities that are explicitly white-only, Mile High Church has developed individualism-focused gathering. By this, I mean that community events still have a clear emphasis on the self and of personal gain. There are many

examples of this within the traditional offerings of connections for members of MHC. These include two specific examples: Question Everything and Growth Group.

MHC Questions Everything is a meeting that happens on the second Sunday of every month. It is an opportunity to gather curious members of the congregation, or those who would like to be congregants but still have lingering, unresolved questions. It is a dedicated two hours in the late afternoon where individuals gather, eat a few snacks provided by the church, and discuss any range of questions that are coming up for some. They are sometimes structured, sometimes loosely organized, or sometimes not organized at all, allowing for a free flow of thinking and discussion. Once gathered, and the topic presented if there is one, people are invited to ask the pastor (usually Nathan) whatever questions come up. The conversations are usually very lively, and a broad range of conversation points are illuminated by a broad range of individuals present.

This event is very evangelical in nature. Because all of the questions are answered and centered around one person's perspective and base of knowledge as the final say, it can feel as though there is in fact one way of knowing a certain topic. In other words, the structure supposes that there is in fact only one way of answering or knowing something. This centers individualistic thinking because the time together does not appear to be building collective knowledge. In fact, because it is an uninterrupted two hours with the lead teaching pastor, himself, it is actually doubling down on the traditional evangelical approach to understanding community. Nathan then rearticulates his authority as supreme keeper of knowledge when, after a long discussion around a topic of interest, he chimes in or offers a teaching as the final response (which he did a number of times during my visits to these events).

Nathan's individualism was on full display for these small groups of congregants. They seemed to quickly move from collectivistic curiosity, often on the topic of human rights and progressive theology, to an individualistic moral education from the top down. David Chappell (2004), on the subject of individuality and the nature of humanity, says, "an individual man, though tainted by original sin and incapable of perfection, was at least capable of moral choice" (40). Chappell offers this as a critique of modern liberal white men in the United States. Nathan became all too willing to share his moral choices, even when those choices were not what was being asked. His ability to center the conversation onto his own knowledge was baked into the process of Question Everything. He was willing to open up the conversation to any number of unscripted questions because, at the end of it all, it would be the centering of his knowledge that was ultimately on display. The priority of his individual knowledge was presented under the guise of communal vulnerability.

Chappell goes on to offer, "liberals felt the need for other things, especially their own power, much more strongly than they felt the need for civil rights" (43). To a much lesser degree, Nathan's behavior in those meetings echoes this sentiment loudly. These meetings demonstrated not a vulnerability and cultivation of original and collectivistic thinking on controversial and progressive topics; rather, they offered a presentation of individualized knowledge that centered Nathan's white, male social location and evangelical background. And, like the caveat Chappell offers liberal, white men, Nathan was indeed "sincere." That being said, Nathan did not move any needles toward a more progressive, more inclusive church environment. In fact, these Question Everything events not-so-subtly rearticulated his white, intellectual power and authority over the congregation, one small, Sunday afternoon meeting at a time.

Growth Groups are a six-week offering by the pastoral staff at Mile High Community Church aimed at helping individuals who are struggling with everyday aspects of normal life. The advertisement reads as follows:

> Want to grow closer to God and others? Are you anxious? Want more satisfaction in life? Struggle with relationships? Feel depressed? Join us for a six-week online group experience of relational, spiritual, and emotional growth, health, and healing. We will focus on developing four developmental capacities to help us grow in becoming more mature, eliminate unhealthy patterns, and recover from past wounds.

Focusing on spiritual direction and therapeutic practices, the intention of the group is to improve the social lives of those who choose to participate. The group gathers over video conference technology once a week and it costs ten dollars per person for materials. This group combines the sacred with the self in an attempt to better understand both. Elevating the self in this way proposes the notion that to understand the divine and the world around you, one must first know one's self. Inversely, if one does not know themself well, they are potentially limiting their experiences with the divine.

Historically, church landscapes were often designated specifically for interactions with the divine alone. Justin Wilford (2012) in discussing the locations of the sacred, says, "'traditional' religious performances… rely on strictly marking and separating secular and sacred place. Sacred place archives its power precisely because it is sharply bounded and removed from everyday life" (5). Because of the stain of sin, human bodies were not thought of as inherent sites for the sacred, making church and divine interactions a destination.

In a contemporary world, however, conservative evangelicalism changed that. "These new evangelical performances blend the sacred and secular so that the secular becomes only the *potential* for the sacred, not its opposite… The sacred in these performances invades every crevice of daily life." Opportunities for the self and the divine to be one are now much more

plentiful, in an evangelical world. One need not move beyond one's own flesh and bones to find potentiality for these interactions. Much like how the location of the church moved from the center of town to the borders and beyond, Wilford argues, so *too* did the divine and the self blur their boundaries. In this spirit, evangelicalism learned to house and prioritize the self in a theological shift that made it and the divine much more interactionary.

With notions like anxiety, personal satisfaction and depression at the forefront of this advertisement, it appears evident that Mile High Community Church is perpetuating the same bridge-crossing offered by evangelicalism more broadly. These deeply personal aspects of individualism additionally center the white-dominant perspectives that evangelicalism has always centered. In terms of importance, whiteness then becomes elevated to a similar level of blurriness with the divine. The self becomes a site of interrogation and inquiry, much like traditional evangelicalism would think of the bible. The body is now an extension and alternative way of interacting with God for this community.

With its emphasis on healing, individual members of the congregation can participate in a guided process of interpreting the needs of the body through divine thinking. This blurs the line between sound medical advice, spiritual interpretation, and evangelical theology. Members of MHC have the opportunity to correct behaviors and make their perspectives more in line with white evangelicalism, creating the ultimate form of healing and alignment. Charles Mills (2017) calls this "*normative* individualism, which makes individuals rather than social collectivities the locus of *value*" (18). There is first and foremost an assumption that implies individuals with those feelings need to be corrected and put in line. The second assumption then becomes the idea that a white evangelical man can offer his perspective in such a way that fixes the individual. Leading to the third assumption- a self that is most attuned to its needs (in the specific ways that

white men have defined) offers the most value to a community like Mile High Church. While therapeutic, sound medical practices are implied (the meetings are hosted by a doctor, of what is left to the imagination), what is more evident than that is the notion of 'getting right with God,' since this training is being offered through a church community. The individualism and centering of specific practices, while seemingly a practice of health and wellness, is also, and more evidently, a practice of normalizing and centering white, evangelical sensibilities.

As Dean said during one of our many conversations, "the white evangelical church has done a lot of damage to people on the margins. There's trust that needs to be built, work that needs to be done repairing the relationship. This is a layered thing." White evangelicalism cannot know itself outside of its own social constructions of whiteness. Repairing such damage, while a seemingly positive sentiment, would require the forcible undoing of the many social structures and paradigms (some of which were discussed in this chapter) that have made Mile High Community Church, and the generations of evangelical iterations that come before it. The structures of whiteness used to center its own dominant social perspectives are not easily recognized and thus make them extremely difficult to "repair"- in fact, even in their many attempts to repair and reconcile (through a move toward progressive politics, for example, as is the case with MHC), it becomes evident that new forms of white, dominant culture take hold. Individualism, forms of community engagement, and the rearticulation of male dominance, are but a few ways that Mile High Community Church have tried with limited success to undo some of the social harms in which they themselves implicate traditional, conservative evangelicalism.

Chapter Six: Limited Inclusions Within Progressive Evangelicalism

Queer inclusion is a hallmark for many of the members of Mile High Community Church. Curiously enough, however, there is a phrase that many of the people with whom I spent time over the year used, which seemed to serve as a mantra and official stance at MHC: "unity over uniformity." Dean used it. Hayes and Dawn used it. Dan used it. With queer inclusion still arguably in its infancy, I was growing in my curiosity about how those two ideas could ever exist together in one place. It was just two years ago when members of the congregation left MHC because of this stance. It was just a little over two years ago before they ever said anything publicly about their stance on queer inclusion. How could a church like Mile High Community reckon their stance on "unity over uniformity" without relinquishing some part of their ends? How could a queer person attend this congregation and not have deep feelings of incongruency when hearing this phrase uttered from the stage on numberous occasions? (Nathan also uses it.)

I began to realize that the community was defining unity around a developing theology that included a broader vision of "God's creation." Unity was beginning to include communities that were once ostracized by Mile High Community itself, which is still cast out by hundreds of thousands of churches globally. Unity was shifting toward queer members with the implication that they have been there all along, which they have. It was a recognition of the fact that queerness has been around church communities forever.

Another curiosity that struck me was the notion of preserving relationships with people who did not agree that queer people should be included. On many occasions, I heard Nathan preach about "unity over uniformity" so that even those who disagreed still had a seat at the table. This, again, did not reconcile the very presence of both queer and straight people, sitting in the same church, possibly even sitting next to each other in the same row of seats, and were both

actively encouraged to build and sustain relationships, despite one person's stance which denies the existence and lived experience of the other. I wanted to more deeply understand how it might have felt to be one of those whose queerness showed on their bodies and in their very presence.

These questions and curiosities led me to an introduction with a queer couple who visibly and proudly attend church nearly every Sunday. Their names are Dani and Maddie. Dani is a little taller than average, has an average frame, and has a sporty demeanor. She always wears baseball caps that hold back her long, brunette ponytail. Large, plastic frames adorn her face and she seems to always be wearing a fleece pullover, even in warmer weather. She embodies a quintessential mountain vibe that one often sees throughout Denver. Maddie is about four inches shorter, has an average frame, as well, and has a similarly Colorado-casual spirit. She does not wear glasses and a cap as often so her face always appears just a bit brighter than Dani's, yet they equally share a kind and welcoming spirit.

As two white women, also from the South, they are quite accustomed to church life (despite having the pleasure of being in close relationship with two southern couples, southerners are not actually the norm at MHC). Dani is from Abilene, TX and Maddie is from Allen, TX, and they both moved to Colorado to be together four years ago. They decided on Colorado because of its progressive politics, because they had a few friends in the area, and because of its proximity to home. They also decided on Colorado because Maddie had done a short internship for a ministry in the Denver area back in 2008, so she had a sense of how the Christian culture would be. They desired to build spiritual community around their relationship and desired to have people surround their first queer relationship with nothing but love and support, something they did not think they could find back home in east Texas. As Maddie states, "we both had a really good experience coming out for the most part from like 95% of our communities which we

were not excepting. It was really surprising for being from where we came from." They were not accustomed to queer rejection and wanted to protect themselves from it.

In making the decision to move here, they were invested in finding a church that felt familiar and comforting (a theme across many of the sentiments shared by those whom I interviewed). They had visited a few churches that they knew were "open and affirming"- a phrase typically given to evangelical churches that have made a public stance in support of queer inclusion- but did not find that sense of familiarity there. Having grown up in large denominational churches back home that were evangelical in spirit, there was something unique and special about that experience for them that they hoped to find in Colorado. In spite of that, though, they did offer a sense of the confusion and challenge they faced in deciding on MHC:

> Sure, we can go *only* to an open and affirming church. We didn't want to go to a church where we would make anyone ruffle their feathers. We were new to being in an out relationship in a Christian world and so we knew if we were making someone else uncomfortable, we would probably downplay our relationship which wouldn't be good for us. There was all of that swirling. So, I think we just didn't want to write off people who hadn't gotten to where we were. Like, I'm gay and I'm okay with that. And, we can be in a relationship with people who disagree just because we know it takes time. It took us 20-something years to be okay with who we are.

This was not an easy decision to make but they felt like they were on the path to making the right one for them.

Dani shared:

> Nathan had posted a video on YouTube about the church's stance. The language that he used was very kind about the LGBTQ community so I emailed him and just kind of like a little synopsis of who you were. I said, 'you know, I just want to come and be a part of the community and know I have a place to go to church. Would it be okay if we came?', and he was like, 'absolutely! please come meet me.' So, we went probably August 2016 and then have stayed and got to watch them come out as a church."

Since starting at Mile High Community, the church did in fact "come out" into being publicly open and affirming. Dani and Maddie have made church attendance a regular part of their life ever since their move.

A large part of my discussions with the couple have included what their motivations are to attend church in the first place. They seemed to be invested in church not just as a connection to their childhoods and pasts, which others have claimed, but instead as a means to build a life for themselves in the present. On this subject, Maddie and Dani both agree that they deeply desire to build community around a spiritual center. "In a perfect world," Maddie says, "the way the church is designed to be set up, I'd walk to church with my neighbor because Church is just down the street. You take care of each other in the blocks around you and all your neighbors are a part of the church so everyone is taking care of it." Even though the couple does not live within walking distance of the church, they do feel like the church is in their neighborhood and they feel a personal connection to their proximity.

For Maddie and Dani, community is not just about the location but also about the people who are present. They talked about those who surround them on Sundays as a point of pride. They take much stock in being surrounded by two rows of friends every Sunday morning. The community is diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, and relationship status. It is not diverse in terms of race, however, and that by now is to be expected. Maddie shares that, "the group that we have now are also people we know outside of church. So now it's like we have a group of friends that is inside and outside. It's not *just* because we go to church together, but we happen to all go to the same church. That is a big part of why we continue to come every Sunday." They have formed a community that is not just made of fellow church attenders, but are also friends. This is

exactly what they hoped for when they started those few years before. They are affirmed in their queerness and in their humanity, both of which are reflected in the group that they have formed.

Racial diversity is actually something to which Maddie and Dani are both attuned. They expressed frustration multiple times at the fact that Mile high Community is nearly all white. Their neighborhood, unlike that of Mile High's campus, is historically Black and is rapidly gentrifying (in part because of the many young couples like them moving in and driving up real estate costs). Maddie offers, seemingly frustrated with herself and her church community, "it's such a hit in the gut because my personal life looks like that, too. I wish the church had more cultural diversity in it but, it's like, I don't know, you can't want that for your church if your personal life doesn't look like that either." Maddie has worked for racial justice causes, and works in the adoption field, where racial awareness is central to the needs of the children she supports. She has the social awareness of systemic racism and social oppression caused by white dominance, but does not seem to have an answer for herself or her community. Speaking about the direct connection to work, she states, "white families who adopt transracially moved away from Colorado or into specific communities in Colorado where they are the minority and not their kid. We have to put ourselves in a place where we do the same for our neighbors." Racial diversity is something on Dani and Maddie's mind but, like many, the answers are beyond their abilities. Mile high Community Church is white. It attracts white people and does not attract communities of color. It attracts diversity among white people but has not crossed any racial divides.

Back to the original question of this chapter: what does it mean to desire "unity over uniformity?" As we are exploring in Maddie and Dani's story, it is clear from their exuberance that they, in their queer identities, have been brought deeply into the fold of unity. Yet, at the

same time, they are aware and frustrated with the clear abundance of whiteness as a monolithic racial representation, both in terms of leadership but also in terms of the congregational composition. As they said, their friends are diverse but all within one racial expression of whiteness. When queerness was once an outsider social identity, it is now as welcome a presence as any other in the seats on Sunday. However, in the midst of this theologically and socially heavy transition, it has become clear that whiteness is at the center of the notion of "unity over uniformity." At MHC it is white queerness, an appendage of the body of whiteness that for generations and across the globe has been continuously cut off, that is now being recognized as a part of one, whole, unified body. In this process, it is whiteness that is being centered and it is in proximity to whiteness that Mile high Community Church has evolved its theological frames, so that "unity over uniformity" means that each, unique aspect of whiteness is welcome, in full recognition that each part of the body serves its own divine purpose.

To begin this exploration of MHC's evolutionary theology of community in proximity to whiteness, allow us to first examine the literal proximity to whiteness around Mile high Community Church. As discussed previously, the neighborhood itself is mostly wealthy and white, which certainly contributes to the community construction on a typical Sunday morning. Beyond that, though, are the reasons that communities grow to become white in the first place. For that discussion, let us begin with first understanding community construction.

Eduardo Bonillo-Silva offers an important perspective on the institutional creation of communities and the privileging of whiteness. He states that, "Blacks and Latinos are denied available housing from 35 to 75 percent of the time, depending on the city" (25). Because communities of color experience discrimination from even being able to rent or own in particular

neighborhoods, the foundations of those communities are disproportioinately favored toward white communities first and foremost. “Compared to whites, Blacks are likely to be shown fewer apartments, be quoted higher rents, offered worse conditions, or steered toward specific neighborhoods” (25). Communities that surround MHC, for example, are likely exclusively white by design. When communities of color are denied access from even being able to rent or own in a neighborhood outside of their traditional ones, Maddie’s desires to “grow roots in diverse places” experience multiple systemic limitations for people of color to even be her neighbors.

For those people of color who have attained wealth equity and were interested in purchasing a home, Bonilla-Silva offers that, often they are discouraged from, or not given access to, loans and the lending process. Studies found that, “Blacks were given less encouragement to apply for the loan, fewer helpful hints as to how to successfully obtain a loan, and differential treatment in prequalifying” (25). So, even when they were able to qualify, and were as competitively equal to their white counterparts on all qualifying measures, their ability to purchase was limited if not fully cut off.

Dreams of inclusive communities, and frustrations when they are unattainable, are more than theological disappointments. When theology reflects culture, as we have discussed many times throughout this project, divine intervention is often skewed toward those in privilege. Maddie shares, “I want to go to church with my neighbors who don't look like me. It was or is important to us.” While not a fully resolved sentiment, Maddie and Dani would likely have to attend another church to find the kind of racial inclusion that they desire; the kind that is likely not geographically and economically limited from communities of color.

Intersections of white wealth and the divine are not unique to only urban church construction. Justin Wilford, who explores the evangelical location transformation from urban center to the suburban (and beyond) spread, talks about how white flight created a new landscape for divine interactions. He states, of the spread of evangelicals throughout the suburbs, "their success is rather the product of a very active but tenuous collaboration between church organizers, postsuburban constituents, and postsuburbia as a cultural and material place" (5). The success of the evangelical project within the 'burbs was by active and intentional design that capitalized on the white flight. When white weath moved toward a city's periphery, they purchased land which created space, allowing church organizers to negotiate a new theology that evolved toward whiteness in this new location.

This shift in location developed a theological outpouring of accommodation. Religion was enveloping new landscapes that included "the sprawling, freeway-laced landscape that is the setting for… thousands of evangelical churches" (4). God was no longer simply an experience on Sunday but, for many of those who were now living in a theologically uncharted territory, divinations and religious experiences were cropping up throughout everyday life. Theology was growing to accommodate aspects of life that were not of central concern for the typical white, evangelical Christian. Church locations and a Sunday morning experience were no longer central to a believer's spiritual journey, according to Wilford, and the process of theologizing the home and the self as locations for divine interaction grew. In responding to these new needs, suburban evangelical church spaces began "delivering therapeutic and easily accessible sermons, producing high-quality, upbeat, and cutting-edge worship services, and promoting and maintaining small groups have proved quite winning" (10). As white evangelicalism went deeper into the self and further away from a divine location, so too did the theological development and

evolution follow. As Wilford says, the groups were "homogeneous and coherent local communities" that exist. However, because these churches were responding to the needs one one social archetype, their reach was much larger and they were able to make a much greater impact on a large number of people. "The evangelical church's reach is so geographically vast that no single local community could be its sole target' (6).

Theologically, the church had to begin to accommodate this new, self-centered and fringe perspective. Without an accommodation, people would have moved too far from traditional church locations to find traveling into the city center as a viable option. Luckily for those church organizers, the community was typically made of individuals with similar social locations. With those social accommodations also came theological ones. Events that require attendance, or that happen outside of the self, take on new meanings in these spaces. As Wilford states, "practices that appear ritualistic… are recast as authentic statements of internal, spiritual states. For example, baptism… is understood as a symbolic representation and not as having any ritual efficacy itself" (165). Because divine location moved from an inter- to an intra-body experience, so too did theologically salient experiences evolve.

Lastly on the subject of theological evolutions in physical proximity to whiteness, Wilford names that, "behind these few stylistic accommodations to contemporary white, middle-class American tastes, lies an unwavering commitment to traditional evangelical orthodoxy" (8). After all of these adjustments are complete, the thing that remains most intact is a staunch commitment to the familiarity of the evangelicalism that they know and love (one cannot help but recall the phrase, "unity over uniformity" in this instance). All parties involved- both the pastors and the congregation- circle back to a commitment to their unique yet collective interpretations of the bible. After all, these interpretations are the very matter, the essence, the

substance, that make them a community and give them an identity. Without this theological commitment, they no longer have building location nor neighborhood to which to turn for that sense. It was white-centered ideology that developed the suburbs and beyond, and it is the accommodation of that ideology, through theological and divine shifts, that make the suburbs a place for whiteness to remain as the ideological and theological center.

Mile High Community Church is outspoken about their commitment to creating space for women and gender-expansive individuals to be involved in all levels of participation and leadership throughout the church. This leadership includes all gender expressions as teaching pastors, as elders, as volunteer ministers, and as lay congregants. As Dani said, “I like that there's women in leadership. I like the worship music more from the women. I grew up in a church where that's not allowed and in fact they probably view it as sinful.” Including all genders in church leadership is a hugely progressive step and even a spectacle for some individuals who come from more conservative traditions who take a literalist Pauline interpretation of the bible. As Maddie replied to Dani while we were discussing this topic, “women were allowed to pass the plate at my childhood church, and they were allowed to serve communion, but they were not allowed to fill the communion portions and they were definitely not allowed to pray,” at which point, Dani quipped, “so women can serve men, but they can’t lead them?”- a jab at traditional and oppressive gender norms.

Despite having one woman on the teaching staff, and having one woman as the main second-in-command when Dean is away from the microphone, women still serve Mile High Community Church in traditional gender roles. Women serve as children’s ministry pastors, as administrators, as spiritual care providers, and as assistants. As discussed earlier, men still

operate and manage the public-facing and large-scale ministry efforts. As MHC transitions further away from a traditional and conservative model, people like Dean hope to see these vocational positions evolve, as well. He stated, "Two residents [ministry interns] were women of color. My last hire for part time music staff was a woman. Gender representation matters. There are a lot of women who are rightly angry. Men have blocked women out of church leadership for a long time." That being said, until women serve as head pastors and teaching pastors, it seems apparent that those like Dani, Maddie, and Dean will have to remain in an unresolved tension.

Present positionality of women and gender-expansive people at Mile High Community Church aside, there was still much theological work to be done to develop a shift around traditional gender roles within church leadership. MHC leadership needed to include women in how they thought about themselves as divinely inhabitable bodies, worthy of the same social and theological responsibilities as men. Men needed to develop theological frameworks around the possibility that it was not just them that were called to leadership, ordained to pray and teach, and able to read and interpret religious texts. To the demise of interracial relationships, much of this historical work came as seeing white women as separate and more human- more relatable, more *proximal*- than people of color, especially Black and Indigenous individuals.

On the subject of whiteness in theological development, white communities have been developing theological understandings of the world to distinguish themselves and their power from other communities since before eurochristian colonization began. Christopher Driscoll (2016) says that, "white lies are about the business of offering incremental distances between groups, and those groups' relative proximity to death and uncertainty" (12). In order for white male leaders and thinkers to draw a line of distance and distinction between themselves and communities of color over whom they desired to remain dominant, they needed a justifiable

defense. That defense came in the form of unquestionable theology. “These distances,” according to Driscoll, “stem from the religious orientation towards certainty referred to white religion, made in the image of exaggerations of a person or group’s proximity to death, limitation, and uncertainty based on presumptions about that person or group’s abilities and value” (12). This certitude came on the backs of those communities of color, against which all positive traits were ascribed to whiteness and white culture. “Race-making can also be understood as the process of ‘othering,’” as Omi and Winant name it (105). Behaviors are judged as good or bad, positive or negative, from God or from the Devil, and then are given respective meaning. In other words, these social constructions are quickly supported by developing theological constructions around the world in which they were formed.

This brief description illuminates the foundation upon which the theological transition of gendered inclusion has taken place. Driscoll goes on to share:

> The social, cultural, and economic advantages afforded white people, and by dehumanizing non-white people. In fact, if I might invert the arguments regarding double or triple jeopardy suggested to occur amongst African American women as a result of the oppression felt because of sexism, racism, and poverty, white theists are doubly advantaged because of their whiteness and theism, and where economic advantage is found, *triply* advantaged (75).

It is exactly in these quantifiable social locations that white women have been brought to the precipice of full equality. Being a Black person in the United States has been socially constructed by whiteness to be a deficit. Being Black comes along with it all of the negative associations white people have ascribed onto it, specifically as its antithesis. It is specifically through white domination and supremacy that this is even possible. As Driscoll names, the impacts of being both a woman and a Black person make anyone who embodies those social intersections all the more vulnerable to the powers of whiteness, male dominance, and socioeconomic wealth and privilege, all specifically by design.

Intersectionality, a term coined by scholar and Black feminist, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (1989), is used to understand the intersections of identities that embody every individual. It is exactly at the individual intersections of various degrees of privilege and oppression that white women and Black women were at odds. For both communities, stereotypes of weaker, less able, less sophisticated gender difference has been the dominant perspective offered by white men in power. These perspectives, strengthened by religious discourse, have only recently begun to be questioned. As Driscoll explains, because God is ascribed the traditional characteristics of white men, they have created a theological understanding of God specifically within those terms. "God-idols [the imaginative characteristics ascribed to a deity] do the work to actually procure these advantages, the complex transmuting an ideal-type, a norm which is actually an exception, into a quantifiable group" (75). These social creations are then used as the measures against which any other group. Because, up to this point, only white men have been able to compare to their own imaginations and ideal types, those further away from that imagination of God are proximally distant and disadvantaged. Inversely, those whose intersections more closely align with the imaginations of those in power have proximal power and authority.

Because whiteness is the organizing force of all other social interactions and intersections, what we are witnessing at Mile High Community Church is whiteness transitioning toward an even greater overarching social force. This force of whiteness can be so much more impactful in a world where the distinctions and superiority of white men over white women are met with less and less social acceptance. Driscoll states that, "the first and foremost feature of white religion is that it constitutes a social/existential paradox as a sacred/profane distinction" (141). If white men expand the potentiality of the sacred, which they are doing by recasting a

vision of women as equal and able, then, *one*, women and gender-expansive people are no longer seen as profane and, *two*, the distinctions of the profane and the sacred are articulated much more acutely against characteristics which construct the sacred. The white imaginations who articulate these social traits reaffirm the profane found within black bodies specifically because they are not white bodies.

The story of white, evangelical men and their reconciliation journey with white women begins in conservative evangelicalism. In its most contemporary iterations, Andrea Smith (2019), argues that these moves began and crystallized in the 1990's and 2000's. She states that, in the racializing of religions outside of Christianity in a time when geopolitical strife was raging, white women began to be recognized as much closer to the center of a familiar American Christianity than formerly positioned. Smith says that, as evangelical Americans began to push against Islam and its treatment of women, a strong counterargument by evangelicals was to reckon with the idea that evangelicalism has not treated women well in the United States, either (154).

Similarly, Smith discusses the moves conservatives and Christian Zionists (Christians who believed Jewish people were the rightful progeny of Jerusalem) were making during the same time. In the early 2000's, as political unrest was reemerging in the Middle East, "Jerry Falwell, who organized the Moral Majority, quickly became active in supporting Israel" and it's right to the "Promised Land" (160). Jerry Falwell, known for his literal interpretations of the bible, maintained a public outcry for his own interpretations of Middle East political dealings. As a result, and because of the deep involvement from conservative women who were followers of the likes of Falwell and other conservative leaders, a women's summit was hosted by a caucus organizing support and momentum for evangelicals and pro-Israeli Zionism (160).

The final example that Smith offers is the theological move to include women at the Promise Keeper's rally in Colorado in 2009. This was the first time that the historically men-only conference had allowed women to join, and came during that year's theme they called "Stand in the Gap"- a bridge-building effort to connect communities to the organization whom Promise Keeper's had been publicly criticized for not supporting. As Smith says, "The three principal divides that PK addressed during this event were those between men and women, haves and have nots, and Jews and Gentiles" (189). In all three examples, whiteness was centered on both sides: The community was white men and white women, the haves and have nots were actually both rich and poor white men, and the Jews and Gentiles were all white-presenting, as well, according to Smith. What was being reconciled, then, were all of the various forms of whiteness under the guise of evangelicalism, or evangelical-friendly. In all three examples, it was white male self consciousness that was expanding and at the center of those efforts.

The final frontier of whiteness proximally developing to include gender variance- and not simply patriarchal authority alone- is in the field of body autonomy for women. In a world completely void of men, women's bodies have been a landscape upon which white, religious (evangelical) men have been attempting to claim the role of decision-maker. Women's bodies have been a site of generations-long religious discourse forever and specifically since the 1970's and the legalization of abortion, despite conservative evangelical leaders' best efforts.

On the progressive, evangelical subject, scholar David Gushee (2016) writes, "there is no legislative solution to the problem of abortion. There is no president who can end abortion. There is no Supreme Court justice who will solve abortion" (sojo.net). Rather, Gushee suggests, "I do not think [abortion] should be our focus. Instead, we must address the prevention side, the demand side—and we must take the side of young women who need deep personal and systemic

help to avoid having to face that miserable drive to the abortion clinic." Despite the non-answer answer, Gushee is actually doing a theologically progressive work here. First, he uses "we," assuming that the audience of readers are like-minded, rational, intelligent readers, like himself. That rhetorical work brings together those who might not have been in support of his words into the intellectual fold.

Second, Gushee focuses on prevention, a quintessential pivot offered by Planned Parenthood and other abortion rights activist organizations. On the Planned Parenthood website, the organization offers many more pregnancy prevention tools, like contraception, then abortion services alone (plannedparenthood.org). Prevention also promotes science and sex education, two realms of public discourse conservative evangelicals staunchly oppose. Additionally, prevention rhetoric is presented as a foregrounding means to not only center the science of birth control, but also to center the science behind the biological meaning of pregnancy. This removes the discourse from the religious sphere, where abortion narratives are often housed by religious thinkers.

Lastly, Gushee centers the perspectives of women. This final move brings women right along men in making what is normally a moralistic decision. Because Gushee recommends "taking the side of the young woman," he is also inviting his readers to think of women as responsible, self-determined agents of their own bodies and health decisions. Aligning women to Gushee's white, male power and discourse, he is inviting his readers to think of women as powerful agents of body autonomy, themselves. Gushee adds, "What is an anxious Christian to do about all this? Understanding the universal human and then particularly American cultural factors that lie behind the demand for abortion should certainly help." Connecting women, often the objective focus, as the subject of abortion rhetoric invites a discourse and theological shift in

thinking of women as “universal humans,” aggregating various gender expressions into one common evangelical concern.

Dani and Maddie genuinely feel included in the Sunday morning experience of the Mile High Community Church. They have been in communication with the highest levels of leadership and have been greeted with open arms, literally and metaphorically. Maddie shared:

> I was a ministry major in college but, since coming out, I hadn't really gotten involved at church because I didn't know if I wanted to ever work in the church again. My options were cut. The places that I could work and feel home were limited. So, I think it was cool when MHC came out because it opened that back up to me. It was like I could work at a church again if I ever wanted to. That's one thing that keeps me coming back.

Maddie, before coming out, could envision herself as a representative of the divine community of evangelical ministry. Once she came out, that vision was dashed and yet was brought back as a possibility once MHC became affirming. Recognizing one’s own queerness has historically been a seemingly automatic cancellation of any intentions to lead within church in a meaningful way that both honors one’s sexual and relationship identity as well as their perceived vocation. Furthermore, notions of possibility and vision by evangelicals in power are what allow theology to expand and develop. These have historically happened in proximity to whiteness and, what we are learning from the examples through Mile High Community, as whiteness evolves to know itself as queer and queer-inclusive, theology develops in ways that include these perspectives, as well.

One example of this is found in the discussion of millennial evangelical voters. Author Deborah Jian Lee (2015) writes, “white evangelical millennials are also twice as likely as evangelicals over 65 to support same-sex marriage. And their missional attitude toward changing their communities makes them a unique force” (time.com). The younger and more exposed a

white, evangelical person is to sexuality differences, the likelier they are to cast a vision of possibility that includes queerness within white evangelical theology more broadly. Because of this vision, along with their willingness to be in conversation with those with whom they may disagree, progressive, white evangelicals are poised to continue the trend of evolving their theology. Jian Lee adds, “This shift has rocked the evangelical establishment, which is grappling with how to respond to a generation that is no longer galvanized by opposition to abortion and gay marriage, or by the call to self-reliance and buttoned-up piety.” This, arguably, reinforces the claim that whiteness is evolving and evangelical theology is responding in kind.

Jian Lee, in offering a rebuttal to the conservative notion that this younger generation is succumbing to the pressures of popular culture and media, “For decades, some conservative leaders have drawn their own boundaries defining which theological beliefs are truly ‘biblical.’” In other words, evangelical leaders have hegemonically contributed theologies that support and maintain their own social and, thus, theological interpretations. They have built entire political structures that support their social and theological claims, as well, perpetuating white, male dominance within their perspective. However, she continues, “now that young progressives are exegeting scripture themselves… They’ve lifted up marginalized theologies… They’ve carried on the evangelical tradition of rigorous hermeneutics,” and are willing to interpret them in ways that are more resounding of their inclusive communities. Only this time, their hermeneutical frames carry with them historically marginalized communities, enveloping them into their evangelically-dominant narrative. While not dismantling their theological foundations outright, instead they are growing that foundation to be more expansive than previous generations. As this younger generations grows to know and accept historically-fringed communities, like women and queer people, they have developed a theological framework that support it. And, while this

younger generation is also more racially diverse, these perspectives are still centered around whiteness so that it is whiteness itself that is growing and changing.

Returning to David Gushee (2015), he reminds his readers that "the call for 'generous spaciousness' has been expanded" to include voices of queer evangelicals (142). He shares that, in the last decade, various white, male evangelical pastors have "called for a full 'embrace' of LGBT Christians 'in the company of Jesus,' though he attempts to frame his approach as a 'third way,' emphasizing Christian unity rather than moral approval." This language choice is an interesting one. This pastor places Jesus in the present tense and, in so doing, allows himself to dictate an interpretation of biblical scripture onto him, seemingly taking authority over both theological grounding and time itself. The power conveyed in a decision like that implies a sort of institutional authority. Being a white man and a pastor, it makes historical sense for someone like him to leverage socially constructed power in these theological terms. What is new here is that he is leveraging that power across landscapes like queer inclusion- formerly an antithetical group who has not been welcomed into Jesus's company. This theological evolution places the body of Jesus among those who have been historically ostracized by that same community (a theological irony, I know, given the biblical company that Jesus kept). White evangelical theological claims of queer inclusion, of literal bodies joining in the company of the divine, prove that the evangelical imagination is expanding into new spaces.

Gushee continues in his exploration of a developing and inclusive theology by problematizing the discourse of biblical interpretation and authority. Of it, he states, "Especially as a result of brutal disputes in evangelical life in recent decades, the conservative side has tended to heighten its claims about biblical inspiration, truth, and authority. It is hard to question the authority of a book treated as God-breathed, completely inerrant, and utterly supreme in its

authority" (145). Digging his finger into the chests of the white men who have attempted to strong-arm their interpretation and discourse across evangelicalism more broadly, Gushee offers a critique of not only the interpretations but of the texts themselves. He is attempting to show the fallibility and the humanity of those in control. As a white, evangelical man himself, this serves as a willing dismantling of interpretive authority given to his kind, and perpetuated for a millennia.

He is also presenting an opportunity for anyone listening to engage with the tradition in a new way, that is not dismissing or dismantling the spiritual practice, but is in fact inviting more people into it. Recognizing from the onset that both those whom he is critiquing *and* those who will be reading all are white, he states, "although the LGBT/conservative Protestant interaction carries similarities across racial lines, the differences are sufficient to dissuade me from straying outside the white evangelical situation with this essay" (143). In this recognition, Gushee is perpetuating the sense of white dominance by inviting white women, white gender-expansive people, and white queer people deeper into evangelical authority. Through a reclamation of space that was once not theirs, they are offered social and theological authority. This reinforces the notion that it is whiteness that is evolving to know itself more fully- as queer- and, in response, Gushee is inviting evangelical authority to evolve theology.

In one of our last conversations together, Maddie shared the following sentiment:

I think I think it's the biggest gain if I am spending time with people who look different than me, than those who I grew up with. Our experiences are gonna be a little bit different but our lives really are the same. So, if I am spending time with people who have had a different life, because they grew up in a different way, in a different place, see in different ways, I might learn by this. They might understand me and I might understand people who don't look like me. That's a win.

It matters a great deal to her to expand how she knows the world, broadly, and her church community, locally. It matters to her to be able to understand individuals from different perspectives and from different walks of life. As we mentioned earlier, however, because Mile High Community Church is mostly white, and the diversity that one experiences is among various white expressions, her opportunities are limited. While the sentiment is powerful and creates imagery of an inclusively beautiful and diverse place, one cannot help but wonder if acquiring more perspectives of whiteness only ends with giving whiteness more power. As we have seen throughout this chapter, with a developed sense of the expansive perspectives of whiteness- through gender and queer inclusion- theology and ways that this community knows itself is specifically in its relationship with, and proximity to, more racially-domaint whiteness.

Chapter Seven: Impediments to Integration

It is not often that one will see a woman facing the congregation from a position of leadership on a Sunday morning at Mile high Community Church. As mentioned, women tend to occupy supportive positions or positions that serve the church in traditional ways, through childcare or administration. Often, these roles are part time, as well, reducing the opportunity for social interaction, especially on a typical morning.

This was the case for Nicole. Nicole is the Children's Pastor at MHC and serves with a small team of volunteers every Sunday morning. The children's ministry is tucked away at the garden level of the church building so, unless one is a parent, one does not regularly interact with Nicole or her team. Because childcare is the only regular Sunday event that happens below, the location of the children's ministry also serves as a barrier of security against the unknowns of the lobby and the broader church community, all entering the building above.

This physical separation signals a broader separation for Nicole. As someone who identifies as highly social and as someone who longs for community, Nicole mentioned a number of times the social separation she experiences as the children's minister. She loves her job and is able to be with her own young children during Sunday mornings, but she communicated a sense of absence from the community with which she once identified deeply. It was something that pulled on her emotions and something that she wished she could reconcile somehow.

Nicole dislikes the ways in which dominant culture presents itself in her church community. She tries, with various amounts of success, to be aware of social concerns and has a willingness to address them head on. When border agents began detaining children in cages, Nicole was especially passionate and hung a sign outside of the children's ministry room that

had a painting of a detained child and read, “what if these were your children?” As Nicole explains, “I put it up and no one had anything to say. I’m not sure how much of this is parents ignoring it and how much of it is people just don’t want to talk about it. It gets people thinking about how other people on our planet under different governments are living right now.” Geopolitics are certainly a concern of hers, despite having a mostly monolithic parent base in children’s ministry. Even if the congregation does not seem “ready” to engage in difficult conversations about power and privilege, Nicole- over anyone else I interviewed- was the most willing to engage in that discourse. This, unfortunately, also means that Nicole is seemingly the most frustrated at the social, political, and theological dynamics of the church that, in small and large ways, she is helping to create.

Nicole is an emotionally aware and sensitive person. She is open, both in terms of her emotions as well as her intellect. She is willing to engage deeply and was, of all of those with whom I spent time, the most interested in me as a person. In a world where interpersonal relationships and spirituality center most interactions, this personal investment came through as a critical assessment of her work, as well. She was someone who made conversation easy and was always willing to ask me questions in return. She seemed to resonate the most as a stereotypical pastor- an experience less common for women, even in progressive, evangelical church spaces.

Nicole was also the most engaged with progressive political discourse. As a devout feminist herself, many of our conversations centered around political and familial bouts regarding her perspectives as a woman in a male-dominated vocation and religious tradition. As she expressed, she was not afraid to have conversations that centered on gender equity, both in personal terms- as a wife, a mother, and a daughter- and in terms of being a woman pastor. As

she stated, “it cannot be God’s design that He’s asking something of us that we do not contain. There has to be something about church that allows us to be ourselves. There has to be a place in church that allows us to bring our full selves. My mom and dad never did that. Why do we have to play by this weird ‘you’re not allowed to do this or that’? I feel like that’s too limiting.” Nicole uses her theological reasoning to inform how she fulfills her many social and vocational roles, and vice versa. It is within her intellect that she is able to nimbly move between social and theological progression, allowing her many perspectives to continue to shape how she lives in and views the world. The physical barriers of her work, then, symbolize the intellectual and social barriers she has experienced as a worker and as a practitioner of her religious traditions.

Nathan, as the head teaching pastor of Mile High Community, was always welcoming guest pastors. These included friends of the church that MHC would welcome on a random Sunday during the month, and also it was the local broader pastoral staff pool from which Nathan would draw and invite to guest preach. On one particular occasion, it was Nicole who led the congregation as teaching pastor.

Although this was Nicole’s first time preaching, she appeared as confident and seasoned as any of the guest pastors who came before her. She shared about the development of personal identity within marriage and, in fact, she discussed many of her beliefs about gender equity that she had shared with me in private. It was refreshing to see Nicole be so open and honest with the congregation, a luxury that guest pastors did not often afford the congregation given their interpersonal distances. This was Nicole’s church and she was leading her community with familiarity, comfort, and sensitivity; all quintessential traits of hers. During our next time meeting individually, I asked her about how it felt to be so honest. As she stated,

> One thing that shocked me is that so many people thanked me for being so vulnerable. I didn’t feel vulnerable. I don’t know what it was. There was nothing

> that I shared that felt particularly vulnerable. Maybe I'm more vulnerable in my everyday life. Nathan guided me and cautioned against too much vulnerability. He said "there's this weird power thing, that once you give it away through too much vulnerability, you can't get it back." That felt strange because this is who I am. 'You're asking me to be too not myself,' I thought. Maybe what made me a dynamic speaker was my normal level of vulnerability, which gave people permission to be a little freer, themselves.

Nicole's truest self was always present and it was from this place of common vulnerability where she was always willing to engage me and those around her. It is this openness that one might think of as particularly progressive and intentionally inclusive of the feminine; two notions that Maddie, Dani, Dan, and others celebrated about Mile High Community Church. The perspectives that Nicole was sharing were one of the intentional threads she was weaving in and out of her role at the church, both as a progressive woman, but also in her personal ministry.

Nicole is not just aware of gender and the complexities of gendered social interactions; she is also astutely aware of the ways that race shows up, or *not*, at MHC. Nicole is a white woman in her mid-thirties. A large part of her spiritual journey through feminism has included deeper development in awareness of who gets to be present in church and who does not. From our very first interactions, Nicole centered her concerns for racial equity in our conversations. It is specifically through her feminist approaches toward challenging her faith that her racially intersectional awareness arises. She said, "In terms of applying faith to the current world, this has gotten to a place of not being politics. Talking about the way the world works, policy... that has nothing to do with politics. *This* is Christianity." To Nicole, thinking of the political realm outside of her faith was giving those political moments too much room outside of the world in which she lives. In naming social concerns as "Christianity," she is bringing them into more meaning for her and her approach toward the world in which those things exist. As she

continues, “there are many things now that I care about that I have not always cared about. The reason I do now is because I stepped into Christianity.”

As we continued to talk about the particularities of what was inside and outside of the realm of Christianity- and deeper concern- for Nicole, she stated, “It’s a lot to care. Before I didn’t really want to. Now I do. The idea of the church being inclusive of lgbt people, science in our doctrine, egalitarian thinking as it relates to gender, Black Lives Matter- this is also a rejection of, and a pendulum swing against, how I was raised.” Race was not something Nicole learned about in church. In fact, none of the progressive values about which Mile High Community Church preaches were an area of focus for her as a child. Nicole, having grown up in a traditionally conservative, evangelical megachurch in the very wealthy suburbs of Denver, never felt called to engage into more inclusive thinking. As she stated on several different occasions that her current belief structure is something she has had to develop out of personal interest and intention. While in college, she was exposed to feminist and inclusive thought that inspired her to continue challenging traditionally marginalizing theologies that she learned were keeping her in oppressed positions in the church, as well. Understanding the ostracization of racial diversity in church spaces was something that came very natural to her developing inclusive theology. She wanted not only for her perspectives to thrive and reduce barriers, she also wanted those inclusive perspectives to allow space for communities of color, as well. She recognized that it was perspectives like the ones that kept her down- like the ones with which she grew up- that were the social barriers to a more diverse church community today.

Much of Nicole’s personal awareness around issues of gender and race come from lifelong interactions with family. As she stated, “my religious and political life feel intertwined.” For her, it was against her mom and dad and the conservative evangelical upbringing in which

she grew up that was the source of much of her development of progressive values. As she explains, "when we were together growing up, my dad would say things that felt racist, sexist, misogynistic. Now, he feels like he can't be himself around me, to which I reply, 'if you are those things, you're right.'" As an adult, Nicole feels like she and her husband are too politically and theologically far removed from her family, and it is this distance that she believes she is learning to accept. "it feels like we're on the outside now. It's about establishing a comfort level with that. We can attend different churches and believe different things and that's fine by me." Because she has a church that has grown with her in her evangelical progression, she is comfortable developing a sense of self away from, and outside of, the church lives of her youth.

As she puts it, the development of Nicole's social justice awareness has come "at the cost of" closeness with many relationships in her personal life. However, these are sacrifices she is willing to make. Her social, political, and theological advocacy has brought her into new depths of understanding diverse landscapes around her and, at the height of our time together, led her into a deep sense of curiosity and wonder. Once, during a particularly impassioned moment of discussion regarding her view of the potential for more inclusion at Mile High Community Church, Nicole shared:

> There's a lot of value placed on antiracism. We like to study it, we like to read about it. We like to discuss and include it as examples. It's very much top of mind I think. But it's not. There's a missing piece. It's like, what does this antiracism work mean once you study it? Where do you go next? I think inclusion, because the lgbt community has few other places. I know that this is their place. Talking to lgbt congregants, I know there's a freedom. Because there are very few other places of worship, we've naturally attracted a lot of that community, because they've been marginalized. Listen, if you have few options, you're going to find a place like MHC.
>
> So, for many people from the Black and Brown community, they think, "why the fuck do I need you? We have houses of worship built for my safety!" With MHC,

> we're not adapting to their needs. We're forcing them to adapt to us. Who would do that? This is not something we haven't talked about. So now fucking what? There are lots of 'non-traditional' family types. We don't have many Black and Brown families. Because I think they think of it as a risk to come here. We can't emulate the Black church. That's not my work to do. Until we have representation on the board, it won't be that space. Until we switch from songs of blessing to songs of lament about our service to communities of color, you are asking to stay a white church.
>
> So what's the point? Why do white people want an inclusive, diverse church anyway? I think it mirrors something important. An idea that's central to Christianity. Everyone has inherent value. Everyone matters. So if that's a central idea to our faith, to have a divisive, flat, shouting into the abyss of whiteness, desire, *and* if everyone's not here, we're not mirroring the divinity at all. If the gospel is "everyone matters, especially white people," then we have some very important and immediate work to do. Right? The idea here is that Jesus was not white. Christianity is not white. Only white people gather at MHC. We've made some essentializing of Jesus. That's why a diverse church matters. If that's true, then you're not reflecting the true divinity and creativity of God.

For Nicole, the low numbers of people of color demonstrate Mile High Community Church's poor attempts to reckon with the racist past of evangelicalism that is still expressed in her church today. She sees that leaders have opened up membership to other marginalized communities specifically because of their proximity to whiteness which, on one end is cause for celebration for her and her community, and on the other, raises serious concerns that this openness has not had a similarly expansive effect on communities of color. She also recognizes the theologically challenging experience it is for leadership at MHC who attempt to desegregate church spaces like hers and constantly fall short. The white evangelicalism she experienced growing up is a source of xenophobic rhetoric, both in church and within her evangelical family. As her progressive, evangelical church is attempting to break free from this same background, aiming to "create difference," Nicole recognizes that her church's attempts are insufficient in creating the lasting and meaningful results that she desires.

Broadly speaking, Nicole's words help articulate two essential elements of Mile High Community Church's impediments to meaningful racial integration. One, because their communities do not have active engagement with people of color, the attempts members and leaders have made to overcome white supremacy are defined only by white cultural expectations. This means that even their approaches toward racial integration are structured only by white understandings. Second, because of these institutional forms of racism, a progressive evangelical church like MHC does not have the critical understanding to dismantle and rebuild a structure that is racially inclusive of those outside of white-dominant perspectives, causing a cycle of white-dominant social constructions.

To begin this conversation, it is important to locate a broader discourse of feminism in the context of race. Afterall, Nicole emphatically describes herself as a feminist with empassioned concern for issues of gender acceptance and equity. For those reading, it will likely come as no surprise that the discourse surrounding feminism, especially in its first wave, was primarily rooted in the freedom of white women alone. This is well-documented. What is often less discussed is the effects of these feminist beliefs on theological development. Brandy Daniels, in her article on time and feminist theologies (2018), states, "formation that is rooted in belonging [is] ultimately rooted in the incarnation of Christ and the ecclesiastical implications of the incarnation of the God-man" (187). These connections to *manness* often limit the entry points those not in power have into more deeply understanding an equitable theological development.

When this development aligns itself with privileged bodies, theologians "demand... an eschewal of a clear teleology of success [and] a rejection of a particular account of the good" rooted in the "God-man." Upon a closer reading of the discourse surrounding these theologies,

Daniels rightly makes the connection that "'the good' really translates as 'whiteness'" and this "rejection of the good" then is actually a rejection of contemporary discourses that narrate white, privileged bodies. A developed feminist theology, then, cannot sit idly by the traditional feminisms that erase the specific intersections with race.

About discourses that do not merge deeply enough the intersections of race, gender, and theology, Daniels states that some scholars fail, "to speak to the ways in which some communities are societally demarcated as 'other' in such a way that could potentially be exacerbated by personal and communal religious practices" (188). In other words, it is potentially the religious practice itself that does the work of 'othering' already-marginalized communities.

It is precisely to this point that one must be profoundly clear: both feminism and theology will be inadequately understood without the necessary intervention of critical race discourse. If, in Nicole's case, she is unable to see the social, political, and theological connections of her feminism with her theology, she will continue to find frustration in her desired aim for a diverse theological church home, which she is. It is perhaps this lack of critical intersectionality, that I will continue to explore here in this chapter, that leads Nicole down a path of tension. She desires a diverse church community, she is thoughtful of her own feminisms, and yet, she continues to participate in a church community that, as I have proven in previous chapters, is not equipped to build for her an adequate racially diverse community.

It is important to also frame the point that white cultural expectations are formed by the white laws of society so that, without interrogation from communities of color, white supremacy and white normativity self-perpetuate without hindrance. This means that, in a white-dominant society, in a white-majority city like Denver, CO, whiteness tends to operate as the organizing

societal factor. Because of that, meaningful critiques of white supremacy are still constructed by whiteness. Ian Haney Lopez (2006) names this important fact through much interrogation of the white supremacy legal system of the United States. About this, he states, “ideologies rationalizing white dominance have often undergone dramatic mutations, from religious doctrines contrasting Christians and heathens to Manifest Destiny to eugenics to, most recently, notions of cultural difference” (149). As whiteness remains in power, it molds the conversation about racial domination to the context of its contemporary time. Whiteness controls the discourse so that it remains the dominant and controlling voice, even as society becomes more self-conscious and aware of difference. He continues, “the justificatory rhetoric of race, like the composition of the population, constantly changes, even as racial inequality consistently endures.” Dominant white societies control and justify their power through new and evolving understandings of white superiority, even as the foundations upon which that superiority changes. Even across time, and with different meaning attached to is, white supremacy, through its own force, maintains control of racial discourse.

It is no coincidence that even in a progressive evangelical space like Mile High Community Church, whiteness still reins. As Hany Lopez names, it is whiteness’s interwoven connection with Christianity that has given white supremacy its divine quality. He states, “we live race through class, religion, nationality, gender, sexual identity, and so on” (xii). Race, and whiteness, are inherent parts of the experience of attending MHC. It is a part of the core identity, part of how the church functions, and a part of how the church rearticulates visions of itself. Even in a space like this church, with so little influence from people of color against which to measure itself, whiteness perpetuates its own power in its racial reconstructions.

As the church becomes more self-conscious about its minoritized white members, it has been able to evolve in-grouping and social constructions in proximity to whiteness. This perception of inclusivity has been a false summit upon which members of Mile high Community Church have foundationalized their progressively inclusive work. However, as Haney Lopez states, "whites must overcome the omnipresent effects of transparency and the naturalization of race in order to recognize the many racial aspects of their identity, paying particular attention to the daily acts that draw upon and in turn confirm their whiteness" (136). Indeed, whiteness at MHC is commonplace to that point that it becomes an invisible force. This invisible force becomes the power from which white-dominant perspectives tend to operate so that, even when self-critical discourse arises from within, it is already laden in racial oppression of communities of color. These "daily acts" that confirm whiteness, then, become those uninterrogated moments when few people of color can be found on the Board of Elders, up on stage, or in the seats on sunday morning. Without the self-awareness of whiteness and the power from which it is operating, moments that Nicole highlighted continue to simply be a point of frustration and not something the community feels empowered to change.

Additionally, Haney Lopez adds, "[whites] must embark on a daily process of choosing against whiteness" (136). By this he means that, in order to move beyond legal forms of whiteness that construct everyday life and construct its own measures of self-critique (as is the case for Mile High Community), participants must first see themselves as perpetuating this system. A privilege of white supremacy within a legalistically white society is that whiteness seems to exist as a given fact or centerpoint upon which all aspects of legal and moral rules are constructed. He continues, "they must ask themselves to what extent their identity is a function of their race, how this racial self is constituted in daily life, and what choices they might make to

escape their circular definition of the self implied in the unconscious acceptance of a racialized identity." It is this self-interrogation that will move systems that function specifically for whiteness to build out a racially critical space that will make room for communities that exist outside of it.

For Nicole, and for members of Mile High Community Church broadly, constructing a church space outside of white dominance is a seemingly impossible task. Their community is mostly white which means that their social constructions are defined along the lines of white culture. This, in a politically progressive space, means that even their progressive values are defined according to historical and contemporary notions of whiteness. Even as pastors and community members discuss the importance of "Black Lives Matter," (as Nicole mentioned in her speech), the sentiments lead only to theoretical change and not a practical one. They have a public discourse that includes antiracist sentiment but, without an infrastructure that supports those antiracist sentiments, it is inevitable that nothing will change.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva names this phenomenon in his text. The antiracism that leaders and believers alike espouse is not rooted in antiracism action. Instead, as he puts it, "the ideologies of the powerful are central in the production and reinforcement of the status quo" (54). Because being nonracist is an ideology of the progressive white movement, as Nicole mentions, ideas like Black Lives Matter can circulate through the MHC congregation without making any tangible change. The messages are there and the community is primed to have difficult conversations about the existence of race and racism but the conversations do not go beyond the surface of the pure existence of these social problems. As Nicole names, when discussing the difficulties of reconciling challenging theologies around race, "It requires a

reconciling. how much of that was learned in a church context? How do you learn to let that go?" As Bonilla-Silva views it, it is not possible to let it go without intentional action.

Bonilla-Silva offers a number of ways through which to understand the problem of white-dominant perspectives on antiracism. First, he says, "the central component of any dominant racial ideology is the frames or set paths for interpreting information" (54). When white communities form their own ways of understanding the problem of racism, they naturally prevent outside and non-dominant perspectives from influencing how they understand the same problem. He adds, "these set paths are cul-de-sacs because after people filter issues through them, they explain racial phenomena following a predictable route." In other words, when white people create the discourse around race, they set up for themselves white-constructed paths of understanding the problem. This predictable path becomes the route that other white people take, as well, creating a structure for white supremacy *and* critique. "Dominant racial frames, therefore, provide the intellectual roadmap used by rulers to navigate the always rocky road of domination, and… derail the ruled from their track to freedom and equality" (54). The path toward and out of racism are both paved by dominant, white social perceptions. This prevents meaningful interaction with the problem, and also prevents white people from grappling with the tangible problems of racism from the people who experience its negative affects first hand.

Nicole's notions of white supremacy run through both her constructions of evangelical community as well as her critiques of it. Once, when we were talking about how her church handles the discussion of race, she said, "I just think that when we talk about immigration, we need to discuss it as a human issue that we have politicized. I think our pastors are political people but our tendency is to utilize too much of that in teaching." In her mind, the political and the evangelical Christian approaches toward immigration should be viewed as separate. For

Nicole, immigration is a religious issue that is more personal than political. In establishing the paradigm this way, according to Bonilla-Silva, she is perpetuating a “dominant” way of “interpreting meaning.” Setting the racial discourse within terms of what is and is not political, according to a white-dominant view, is perpetuating that the view has a specific path through which it *should* be viewed. Locating a racial concern like immigration according to a specific set of cultural norms- norms defined by and for white people- is to perpetuate Bonilla-Silva’s “dominant racial ideology.”

In terms of racial location, Nicole seems to connect to issues of race through her gender expression. Once, in a discussion we were having about the ways that race and other progressive values show up in her belief system, she said, “I call things like that ‘complimentary theology’ and it’s hard but necessary to extract that from how I was raised. I learned about others through my personal relationships. My mom instilled emotional intelligence and care. My dad instilled in us a need to succeed, whatever that would look like. There are roles men and women play necessary to family.” Bonilla-Silva talks about this very phenomenon in white, progressive women. He states, “one can understand why white women are the more likely segment to express solidarity with racial minorities… actors who experience multiple oppressions are most likely to share… a set of experiences that tend to develop a sense of ‘commonality’” (156). Nicole, through the dismissal of her childhood ideology which housed very specific and traditional roles for certain kinds of people, has been able to tap into a deeper awareness of the connections to marginalized communities ostracized by Mile High Community church.

However, as she stated during her speech, “We don’t have many black and brown families because I think they think of it as a risk to come here.” She understands the social risk personally. As a woman in a mostly-white, male church hierarchy, she has a personal connection

to feeling socially outcast. She once stated, in another conversation, “Nathan reminds me of my dad. I don’t always feel like I can show up as myself in front of him.” This aligns with the church history, which tells us that conservative evangelicalism was both exclusive to whites and constructed by men. As Bonilla-Silva continued, “if working-class women are more likely to be racially progressive, organizations seeking progressive social change must rethink their politics. It may be that, after all, class will be the uniting factor in progressive politics, but it will be class solidarity through race and gender prisms.” Even within their perceived progressive beliefs, women like Nicole are not in enough power to make the linkages and social change around race in a way that would create a marked impact on the amount of people of color who show up on a Sunday morning. This lack of power, even for someone as aware of race as Nicole is, perpetuates white-centered ways of knowing and expressing the progressive theology espoused by the leadership of Mile High Community Church.

Because of these factors, members of Mile High Community Church lack the fundamental understanding needed to dismantle and rebuild antiracist institutions, causing a cycle of white-dominant perspectives and culture-building. In fact, it is the idea of dismantling that I would like to take up the argument that white spaces are not necessarily spaces that communities of color desire. As Nicole mentioned, “with MHC, we’re not adapting to their needs. We’re forcing them to adapt to us. Who would do that?” Spaces that center whiteness are naturally not inherently accommodating to the cultural and theological needs of communities of color. In desiring racially-inclusive spaces can be a white supremacy assumption that communities of color want what white spaces have to offer. Author Mary Pattillo (2019) addresses this fact when she says, “promoting integration as the means to improve the lives of

Blacks stigmatizes Black people and Black spaces and valorizes Whiteness as both the symbol of opportunity and the measuring stick for equality" (30). When people like Nicole desire church space that is racially inclusive, that serves the needs of the white community only. It devalues the opportunity that Black people give themselves in building religious church spaces that serve their needs and the needs of their community. It essentializes the theological understandings that whitew communities have built as central to their salvation and communion with the divine. As Pattillo continues, "In turn, such stigmatization of Blacks and Black spaces is precisely what foils efforts toward integration. After all, why would anyone else want to live around or interact with a group that is discouraged from being around itself?" (30). Centering the social, political, and theological value of whiteness only perpetuates white-dominant narratives while at the same time belittling those perspectives and spaces held by communities of color. Desiring that communities of color have an active role in a white congregation is asking those communities to bend to the cultural norms of whiteness that have up to that point not been culturally inclusive.

In critiquing the centrality of white dominance in these cultural constructions, Pattillo goes on to share, "Instead of providing hard and concrete opportunities or equality that would make Black (or poor) people's lives better, integration dwells on and is motivated by the relatively problematic nature of Black people and Black spaces and posits proximity to Whiteness as the solution, or the most likely way to get to a solution" (31). It is this notion of proximity to whiteness, discussed in previous chapters, that rears back into this conversation, as well. Not only is Mile High Community Church developing its social justice concern along the lines of whiteness, so too do they hold their belief that proximity to whiteness is the ointment for white guilt and white legacies of racism. As Nicole states, "We can't emulate the black church. That's not my work to do." However, it becomes difficult not to notice that perhaps it is the work

that white church needs to do in order to develop a culturally and theologically sensitive view of and toward the Black community, for example. If MHC did more work to dismantle their white supremacy center, perhaps there would be more room for perspectives to authentically exist outside of the normed white one. Perhaps, if MHC could do more work emulating the Black church experience, the deconstruction needed for communities of color to genuinely exist in their fullness, with a church that was responding to their specific needs, would naturally break down the structures of white supremacy inherent in those at Mile High Community.

Those for whom a separatist perspective is not the goal, it becomes necessary to discuss the current approaches to racially diverse churches. Afterall, people like Nicole demonstrate it is possible to desire a community that is racially inclusive and authentically engaging for more than one race, and whose desires are to deconstruct white domination. In this exploration, it is fundamental to understand the difference between racial *integration* and *desegregation,* recognizing that the two are different.

Throughout the modern history of racial desegregation, the goal has always been to undo the binds that have tied and held back communities of color, both literally and figuratively. Desegregation has been the act of dismantling the institutions of forced separation and oppression of communities of color by white supremacy. As Elizabeth Todd-Breland (2018) notes, while discussing the 1960's Civil Rights movements, "although desegregation remained a moral imperative and an important tactical strategy for many, these efforts were primarily concerned with gaining access to resources rather than seeking racial intermingling of [people] for its own sake" (23). Desegregation, then, focuses on Black and Brown community access, while integration is considered the "intermingling" of communities for an altruistic purpose. For desegregation, white institutions would learn to unfetter their predispositions of race and allow

access to parts of society previously cut off by their own power and domination. Desegregation became a “moral imperative” because whites began to recognize that they held unjust social control over these tools of access for communities of color. In desegregating parts of society where they maintained social control, whites were also attempting to overturn their explicit injustices that were historically and contemporarily causing harm. However, Todd-Breland says that leaders “questioned whether desegregating… actually had the potential to significantly dismantle ideologies of White supremacy or deliver racial justice. Others worried that desegregation would require assimilation into White culture” (24). Desegregation was only part of the answer to dismantle white supremacy.

Integration, as Todd-Breland offers, is the “intermingling” of communities. This relationship-oriented perspective allows for communities to move beyond simply passively undoing the systems of social, political, and theological social oppression and into an active interpersonal understanding between communities. Author and scholar Edward G. Goetz names, “The case for integration begins with the identification of the personal and societal-level costs of segregation,” which “produces inequalities of opportunity that reinforce themselves over the course of a lifetime” (19-20). In other words, integration is not just about a dismantling of segregation; rather it is about grappling with, and locating the outcomes of these racist beliefs, in the bodies and communities of people who have suffered because of white supremacy. “To some degree the expected benefits of integration are simply the logical negation of segregation and its costs. Thus, if segregation limits access… integration will increase that access” (25). Integration allows individuals to flourish in an intentionally antiracist way that not only stops ignoring racism but rather moves into dismantling and deconstructing it. Integration is the set of acts a community in power can do to spread and portion our power with equity in mind. Acts of

integration acknowledge white domination's past and aim to deconstruct it with active antiracism and decentering of historical perspectives of oppression. Integration is not simply positioning whiteness as the elite goal but is, instead, the recognition that perspectives and contributions from communities of color make a fuller and more authentically inclusive environment.

For members of Mile High Community Church like Nicole, who desire racial participation, it becomes obvious that they are settled in notions of racial desegregation and not integration, thus limiting their critical understanding of white supremacy that is historically and contemporarily rooted in their community. Going back to a comment during one of our conversations, she stated:

> There's a lot of value placed on antiracism. We like to study it, we like to read about it. We like to discuss and include it as examples. It's very much top of mind I think. But it's not. There's a missing piece. It's like, what does this antiracism work mean once you study it? Where do you go next?

This captures the essence of desegregation through a few different reasons. The first is that members of MHC are focusing on gaining access to resources only. In "studying" and "reading" about racism, one is not tangibly grappling with the negative implications of racism built into the everyday congregational life of the church community. Studying and reading about racism keeps racism outside and peripheral to the ways in which the church functions. Simply studying and reading about racism do not actively engage community members to self-interrogate their racist practices. Doctors David Acosta and Kupiri Ackerman-Barger (2017) critique the field of racial education in medicine. They have this to say about how some engage with their field of study:

> As many have recognized, cultural sensitivity training, through which participants learn about cultural differences and the importance of not assigning more value to one culture over another, is not enough. Such training provides a starting point, but it does not prepare faculty to talk about race and racism in the classroom or at the bedside. Likewise, unconscious bias training is not enough. Unconscious bias

> training assists faculty members with self-reflection and identifying personal biases, but it does not provide a deeper understanding of how and why we are impacted by race (285).

They rightly argue that the types of educational processes that desegregate thinking are a necessary but elementary part of diversity education and social deconstruction. This "self-reflection" process is the first step to understanding others but the process centers the self in ways that only aim to support white supremacy perspectives. This process does not lend itself to understanding the personal construction that white people actively do in maintaining the structures of white supremacy. Additionally, they do not provide space for communities of color to self-advocate and share from their own experiences. These resources are passive tools that do not actively undo the personal gaps that keep some communities away; the communities that Nicole wishes were present and active in her church space on Sundays.

Additionally, as Nicole mentions, "reading" and "studying" about racism allows members and leaders of Mile High Community Church to *release* their predispositions of communities of color but those are based on white norms and ways of experiencing racism. However, those acts do not support the community in *replacing* those predispositions with actively new views of the communities against which their church legacy has committed acts of racism and exclusion. As Acosta and Ackerman-Barger continue, keeping the focus of race within personal development and not community development means that leaders do not "provide the skills to dialogue about race especially with students, staff, and faculty of other races and ethnicities. Both cultural sensitivity training and unconscious bias training are important, but faculty need more" (285). Being able to replace self-awareness alone with self-actualization that leads to human engagement in conversation across races is the essence of this argument and the essence of Nicole's frustration with her community. It is this critical moment

that Nicole deems “the missing piece.” Without providing skills- not just education- it appears that members of Mile High Community Church will only recreate the cycle of self-centered and systemic whiteness. Without actively engaging in practical tools of racial deconstruction- beyond traditional, evangelical notions of personal development- they will continue to perpetuate the desegregationist approaches which are, at best, an incomplete approach that does not respond to the “missing piece” that Nicole sees.

If members and leaders of Mile High Community Church were merely offering desegregation to its white members, they were certainly not offering integration as their approach. Nicole is able to see, in the ways that her church is communicating about race currently, that they are not bridging the conversation into the “intermingling” space that she desires. In fact, because communities of color are virtually absent from a typical Sunday morning experience, there were not even any intermingling opportunities to be had. The few that do attend are often elevated to higher levels of church authority, something I noticed quite often. As mentioned before, there is one Black family that attends the church regularly. When probed, both staff members and all three volunteers with whom I spent a large amount of time named that single family as their reference for people of color church members. As Elizabeth Todd-Breland mentions, “real change, however, seemed impossible without political power, and African Americans, while granted token representation, played a subordinate role in the White-dominated... machine” (25). Tokenism can hardly count for genuine community “intermingling,” however hard some may try. Until more people of color attend, however, the problem of integration will likely continue. Because their church, their neighborhoods, their city, and their state are dominated by whiteness and white supremacy cultural constructions, this might be the furthest point the church is able to develop at this current time. Members like Nicole might have

to choose a different church space in which to invest their time, especially if racial integration is a need and a natural next step in her evolution toward more cultural, political, and theological progressivism. However, perhaps this space of ambivalence will spur more people like Nicole to challenge the status quo of white, patriarchal domination that has made itself a home within the construction of even a self-described progressive space like Mile High Community Church.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion- Reflections and Last Questions

For the purposes of this project, *reflexive ethnography* served as a useful and liberating tool. I was able to leverage the many years of my personal experience as a foundation upon which I built my year-long study. In so many ways, I believe I was giving myself an advantage over another project of which I might have known very little. I challenged myself to plunge as deeply as I could into the parts previously unknown and potentially unrevealed to me. Whiteness has an instinctual ability to fortify its systems with a certain sense of hoarding that, without the encouragement of a tool like reflexive ethnography, I might not have challenged myself to understand deeply enough.

Scholars SJ Lewis and AJ Russell (2011) ask of themselves an important question: “What, then, is the constant of ethnographic practice? It lies perhaps in an attitude toward 'being there' sufficient to experience the mundane and sacred, brash and nuanced aspects of socio-cultural life and, through observations, encounters and conversations, to come to an understanding of it” (400). Certainly knowing enough about the field of progressive evangelical Christianity allowed me to find both the “mundane” and the “sacred” in new and interesting ways, and in ways that I believe had yet to be understood by broader scholarship. With a researcher’s lens, the routinized Sunday morning experience, for example, transitioned from robotic ritual to a site of endless potential. I was invigorated by my own curiosity in such a way that every song choice by Dean, or every scripture reading by Nathan, opened up the potential for a new answer to a question I had begun to ask. In fact, this process illuminated for me how very thin the space is between the mundane and the sacred.

Through reflexive ethnography, I was able to understand whiteness in a new way. As a white-passing Latino, I have made it my life's personal passion to more deeply understand whiteness and how my body presents to the world. Through the lens of this style of ethnography, I was providing, as Lewis and Russell named, "a summary which accounts for the co-presence of (and symbiotic relationship between) research independence and ethnographically sourced familiarity" (411). Through this process, I was learning through the lens of my research and that research was offering me personal insights back. This balance between independence and familiarity states precisely the duality that I was experiencing as a white-skinned body attempting to understand how whiteness affects the lived experiences of a religious community. The symbiosis gave me personal insights as well as information for my research.

Through reflexive ethnography, I was able to understand power in a new way. Understanding the relationship between researcher and participant requires a clear understanding of the power that exists between the two. Lewis and Russell state, "embedded and other forms of collaborative research are inherently 'ethical', insofar as they are based on knowledge-sharing aimed at equalizing or reducing power differentials that can undermine all forms of research in organizations" (410). It is not lost on me that the questions I asked and the ways in which I was present in the interviews affected the variety of responses I might have received. This is an inescapable reality of qualitative research in this way. However, I also view it as my duty to convey the outcomes I have found with the community with whom I participated. This process of information sharing, both in terms of the questions I asked and the information I will share in return, will limit the power I have as an 'outside' researcher.

Finally, I was able to understand the continuum between history and the contemporary in a new way. Locating myself in the research also meant locating myself in the history of these

moments. I was not simply assessing how deeply into the past whiteness and evangelical Christianity were in relationship. I was implicating myself and my family of origin within those same historical moments. I was not only challenging notions of privilege and proximity to whiteness; I was also trying to understand my own privileges as a researcher with white skin, and locating my work in a long body of research and history of critical race and religious scholarship. Not only was I attempting to understand the historical roots of all of these contemporary moments, I was also pinning my work to a moment in time, attaching it and its relevance to this specific church within this specific historical context.

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There were very few questions that I was able to ask each person with whom I spent time. Often our conversations were guided by the information the community members of Mile High Community Church wanted to discuss. However, there were two questions that I was able to ask everyone, and that was the following: When you think about the imperfections of MHC, what do you think about? What do you wish would change about it, or what would you change about it if you could? The answers varied.

Dan replied, “I have not found any yet. Can't think of a thing.”

Hayes replied, “I am having a hard time answering this question. We church hopped for so long and I always felt people were fake or trying too hard at the majority of places we visited. I like that at MHC, people are themselves and are happy showing their imperfections. At this time, I wouldn't change anything about MHC."

Dawn replied, “I agree with Hayes, but sometimes I feel like I have struggled with getting connected into smaller groups.”

Dean did not reply.

Maddie replied, “I think that I don't see many minorities in leadership. Still a very white, male dominated group. I know that there's a least one deacon who is a POC, but that's all that has been visible if you are looking. If you aren't, it's only white folks. I also am unsure of any members of the LGBTQ community in leadership. I think it's a common desire to see yourself represented in leadership of parties you consider yourself a part of and MHC doesn't offer that consistently if you aren't a straight, white person. They do have many women in leadership, however only one or two that are in public facing teaching positions to adults. The rest are children's pastors, or just in more behind the scenes positions. You don't have to be a pastor to lead, and I haven't ever done the math, but it feels like it's mostly men we are learning from in the pulpit.”

Dani replied, “I think of my own imperfections when I think of imperfections of MHC. All churches have them, some might fit my worldview more so than others but every church has fallen because it was created by humans. I think it’s still very white, and run by a predominantly male voice. And I know that though it’s known that’s who we are I wish there was more we could do to force ourselves out of that. I too am predominantly comfortable and in the majority in life and I wish I worked harder at being not that. If I could change things about church it would be about all churches not just MHC. But I would turn it into a lottery system. If you want to attend church.. you put your name or family unit in a drawing and you're assigned to a random church and you attend.”

Nicole replied, “I guess I think most about the fact that we are all imperfect people who are trying our best to lead ministries. There’s bound to be imperfections because we are human but my hope and expectation would be that we are truly trying our best to do what we think is right, what honors God, what honors people who attend MHC. I think most times that’s true but there’s bound to be moments and situations where the imperfections are what rise to the surface and our own selfishness and ego keep us from leading with integrity within the church. I guess if I could change anything about it, it would be that I wish there was a more varied type of personality that is put in leadership at MHC. We don’t have a ton of pastoral voices or people who are really shepherding our community with tenderness, time, patience and relationally. I think there are too many people in leadership who have the same type of approach/personality. This tends to be those who are great at getting attention, those who speak with confidence, who love to teach others, who thrive in scenarios where they get to impart wisdom. There’s nothing inherently wrong with that, but it means that our staff and leadership is lacking in a more traditionally pastoral voice. Those who are providing true care and giving attention to those in our community who are not thriving as things are.”

These words all ring as important and should stand on their own as a critical analysis of their Sunday morning church experience. They are all introspective and thoughtful, even if, like in Dean’s case, they had very few words to offer. They all demonstrate a level of personal investment and deep commitment to the core values of why they chose a church like MHC to give of their time and efforts. For the most part, they all demonstrated a willingness to engage in a scrutinous process of self- and community-reflection, a hallmark of the progressive evangelical movement. Through these critical responses, however, it is important to name two outstanding themes that require final analysis.

The first is that none of the men with whom I spent time offered a negative critique of Mile High Community Church. Whether queer or straight, older or younger, staff or volunteer, the men- all white and middle class- could not find within their church experience a piece of critical feedback regarding imperfections and things they desired to change. The second is that all four of the women offered critical feedback. Aside from Dawn, who offered a critique of community, three women offered feedback specifically related to pastoral and leadership representation. They all discussed an opinion that they disliked seeing so many white men leading and guiding their Mile High Community experience.

Specifically, looking at the critical feedback that the women offered, it becomes apparent that the more socially aware of oppression someone is within the church community, the more critical the feedback they had to offer. The more personally someone held awareness of their church history, and of the legacies of conservative, evangelicalism more broadly, the more critical they were about their church experiences. Women clearly occupy a more critical space in a community that self-professes progress toward their ends. Rather, with the kind of feedback I received from these women, it becomes evident that women are still interrogating whether or not the claims of inclusion are as authentic to their lived experiences as they are for the men in charge who are making them.

Additionally, these white women were thinking about race and racial oppression when it came to their feedback, as well. These comments were not unlike the kind of responses that rang true during our time together over the year. Maddi, Dani, and Nicole all had critical feedback regarding the amount and the positionality of people of color within their church space. While the feedback was all very similar in that they wished there were more people of color and more who occupied positions of power, all three of them also implicated themselves in the broader

race problem that dominates MHC. None of them offered solutions except to say it was a problem that they noticed- a theme throughout this work.

On the subject of race, and as a closing thought, I would like to offer this: the present project will not make suggestions or offerings for ways out of this patriarchal, white problem. That taps too deeply into the history of communities of color doing the historical work of leveraging their personal investments and narratives for the improved outcomes of the oppressors. This is not that kind of project. Instead, this project aims to shine a bright light on the legacy of conservative, patriarchal, white evangelicalism and redirect that attention toward progressive evangelicalism, whose members think of themselves as far removed from their oppressive legacies, yet are still very much rearticulating those racist histories. This project aims to articulate a vision that it is in fact not racial progress that is evolving but, instead, it is the progress of the whiteness project that receives all of the attention from members of the Mile High Community Church. Queer and gender inclusion ultimately signal the evolution, development, and broadening of whiteness to include more people who were previously left out of the dominant racial project. The borders of the progressive social, political, and theological foundations and discourse that surround the church gravitate toward racial inclusion. That being said, racial inclusion occurs in name alone. As discussed, antiracism is a scope of work still on the horizon for this community, despite making elementary attempts to begin that deconstructionist work. Because non-dominant racial bodies are kept on the fringes, so too is the discourse of antiracist sentiment, and antiracist action is still even further away from the center of the community's locus of meaningful action. Because this project does not desire a list of proposed solutions, it ends with an uncomfortable anti-climax. It ends with unresolved questions.

It ends not in racial harmony- a desire often held by white supremacy- but instead ends in racial discord- the reality for most people of color in the United States.

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