



## **Children as An/other Subject: Redefining Moral Agency in a Postcolonial Context**

Kate M. Ott

[kott@drew.edu](mailto:kott@drew.edu)

Determining moral agency as it relates to children is a difficult and historically fraught task. And yet, in order to know when and in what cases we can hold children accountable for their actions and better understand formation of moral character, ethicists have for example relied on stages of development or delineated an age of reason. What continues to be troubling is that children don't fit neatly into these categories, that is, when we actually listen to them.

I invite the reader to fix a spotlight on children as an/other subject of postcolonial discourse to help us hone questions already raised by the interplay of postcolonial theory, imagination and inequality as they relate to moral formation and agency. To do so, I offer a descriptive account of the tensions that emerge in ethics when one locates the child, children, and

childhood in the place of subject while also pushing the boundaries of how we understand oppression related to identities of transitory status. More specifically, this work focuses and brings particularity to these categories by limiting the investigation to ethnographic research of U.S.-based children in preschool. The ways in which children both resist (engage a postcolonial imagination) and reinforce oppression (perpetuate the fantastic hegemonic imagination) through their behavior during play require we develop a new definition of moral agency.

### ***Children as An/other Subject***

Children by virtue of age and ability as well as socio-economic position globally reside in tenuous space of non-agency, in many cases not counted as fully human in social practice and theoretically removed from the possibility of having agency in theological discourse. Similar to arguments about the moral status of women, in particular racial/ethnic minority women, in feminist theologies and ethics, child as non-subject is often perpetuated by white, Western anthropological notions of moral agency and personhood characterized by independence, rationality, and honed experience. Consider how children are not deemed “aware or accountable” for what they are doing because their actions are categorized as play (not serious), the result of adult intervention and influence (not of their own creation), and based on limited information and social interaction (uninformed). These descriptive categories exempt children from the current means testing for moral agent status.

Radhika Viruru argues that theories of child development, and I would include those with theological roots, “have become another of colonialism’s truths that permit no questioning, and that is imposed unhesitantly upon people around the world for their own good.”<sup>1</sup> Christianity and early childhood education are both deeply influenced by dominant Western discourses that together perpetuate an object and yet-to-be view of children, agency and personhood. The current views of child development that promote non-agency fall into the category of “civilized

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<sup>1</sup> Radhhika Viruru, “The Impact of Postcolonial Theory on Early Childhood Education” in *Journal of Education* 35: 2005, 7-29. Direct reference from page 16.

oppression” as described by Viruru.<sup>2</sup> Civilized oppressions are subtle and invisible forms of oppression that present as the dominant, objective narrative that is in place to benefit everyone. For example, many would argue that children should be able to articulate the benefits and costs of a moral choice during play prior to that choice being considered agential. This “means test” reinforces the requirement of a rational, coherent moral reason for a behavior to be counted as an act of moral agency.

Understanding both the socio-historical construction of childhood and the similarities and differences with the real lives of children is a necessary step in shifting children from object to subject. One of the primary claims in postcolonial studies is a methodological commitment to the postcolonial subject writing for themselves. There are inherent problems with this claim as it relates to children specifically, but also language issues as it is applied to the various global postcolonial adult subjects.<sup>3</sup> In response to this methodological issue, I present in ethnographic style children “speaking” for themselves. Yet, shifting the child to a subject position then is not simply, or only about placing their voices first. As Joyce Ann Mercer reminds us that dominant constructions of childhood, what Viruru calls civilized oppressions, “. . . while not to be confused with the lives of children themselves, have formative, shaping power on children’s real lives as they set forth what a particular society means by the idea of childhood.”<sup>4</sup> We must also untangling the ways in which dominant constructions shape our hearing and influence the speaker—an apt description of the task of postcolonial studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Viruru, 19. Viruru relies on the earlier work of Jean Harvey, *Civilized Oppression* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999) though he applies it to early childhood education and developmental theory.

<sup>3</sup> Such awareness is akin to the development of historical imagination that Kwok, Pui-lan describes related to subaltern women. See, Kwok, Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), Chapter 1. In an earlier essay, Kwok cautions that “The subaltern woman has been written, represented, argued about and even legislated for, but she is allowed no discursive position from which to speak.” See, Kwok, Pui-lan, “Unbinding Our Feet: Saving Brown Women and Feminist Religious Discourse” in *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse* eds. Kwok, Pui-lan and Laura Donaldson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 67. In the chapter she is articulating key concepts from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66-111, creating a preferential option in postcolonial method.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 4.

Thus far, postcolonial study and childhood studies meet up in the realm of educational reform, highlighting questions like how do educational systems support or disrupt colonizing practices? Often there is a concentration on children's literature which makes sense given early conversations between postcolonial theory and literary criticism. We know the actual sites of education in colonizing contexts were often fraught with violence and abuse as a colonial tool.<sup>5</sup> Current research suggests coercion and indoctrination take more subtle forms within educational institutions, often ambivalently supported by parents and communities, especially for young children.<sup>6</sup> In the field of religious studies, there are works on children in the bible that utilize methodology and theory that signal connections between the role of empire and diasporic impacts on biblical narratives, but most do not directly deal with postcolonial theory and the child as subject either in the biblical text or as the reader of the text.<sup>7</sup> Without a more robust knowledge of children's moral lives, these works tend to fall short of privileging children as subject and may re-inscribe constructions of children and childhood that perpetuate current dominant ideologies or replace them with hoped for futures that seek to remedy the conditions of child oppression, while still not involving children as subjects.

In contrast, postcolonial studies related to ethics and imagination provides a platform for asking new questions and developing richer insights into children's moral agency. Specifically, the works of Kwok, Pui-lan and Emilie Townes lay the groundwork for considering agency and imagination in ways that reflect and interpret the moral lives of children as complex postcolonial

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<sup>5</sup> For example see, Andrea Smith, "Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide," *In Remembering Conquest: Feminist/Womanist Perspectives on Religion, Colonization, and sexual Violation*, ed. Nantawan Boonprasat Lewis and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1999), 31 – 52.

<sup>6</sup> Gaile S. Cannella and Radhika Viruru, *Childhood and Postcolonization: Power, Education, and Contemporary Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> See Danna Nolan Fewell, *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003) as a prime example. Her work is admittedly postmodern and integrates issues of imagination as well as raising the status of child/ren beyond empty vessels for adult indoctrination. Ultimately, the text is directed at adults and their ethical responsibility toward children. The work could be seen as complimentary to questions I am raising in this article regarding children's moral agency, and implicitly questions about adult response/obligation to those claims.

subjects.<sup>8</sup> Ethnographic research elucidates how young children engage the materiality of race and its systemic formation as well as negotiate geographic and ethnic markers related to race. Such examples take place during play, which exposes the falsehoods of current theological and child development models that portray children and their play as non-agential. In fact, children act in ways that resist colonial legacies by employing various forms of postcolonial imagination as defined by Kwok. Kwok writes, “to imagine means to discern that something is not fitting, to search for new images and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation.”<sup>9</sup> Children do this in play often reflecting what Kwok describes as movements of the imagination. She provides three categories: historical, taking on subjecthood even in the face of its denial; dialogical, a dependent and fractured existence debunking normative criteria of coherence; and diasporic, a multiply located and committed relationality.<sup>10</sup> These movements of imagination carry moral significance when they seek to resist or reinforce colonizing tendencies.

In conjunction with Kwok, Emilie Townes’ work provides a means to understand not only resistance to oppression, but also participation in oppression as an aspect of the moral imagination. The concept of the fantastic hegemonic imagination adds a dimension to the analysis not only of children’s colonizing behavior but the adults with whom they interact. Townes notion of the fantastic hegemonic imagination names a shift in emphasis and perspective away from “rational mechanisms that hold forms of oppression and misery in place” to “more heuristic forces that emerge from the imagination as emotion, intuition, and yearning.”<sup>11</sup> She pairs Foucault’s use of the “fantastic” and “imaginary” that is found in and between books “but

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<sup>8</sup> In order to keep the focus on issues of postcolonialism, I primarily engage Kwok and Townes. However, John Wall when discussing children and ethics also advances a similar notion of moral engagement as “expanding interdependent creativity” or “ethical poetics”. See, John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, See Chapter 1 for in depth descriptions of each movement of imagination that Kwok describes as well as later analysis in this paper.

<sup>11</sup> Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 18.

goes beyond to form a part of the cultural production of our realities” with Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as ideological domination. She writes,

hegemony is the set of ideas that dominant groups employ in a society to secure the consent of subordinates to abide by their rule. The notion of consent is key, because hegemony is created through coercion that is gained by using the church, family, media, political parties, schools, unions, and other voluntary associations—the civil society and all its organizations. This breeds a kind of false consciousness (the fantastic in neocultural and sociopolitical drag) that creates societal values and moralities such that there is one coherent and accurate viewpoint on the world.<sup>12</sup>

The hegemonies with which children deal include colonizing oppressions based on race and ethnicity as well as current ‘civilized oppressions’ of child education and development models. Emilie Townes concept of the fantastic hegemonic imagination<sup>13</sup> ties the role of imagination to the perpetuation of oppression providing a framework to interpret ways: 1) children reinforce colonial hierarchies through racist behaviors toward one another and 2) adult workers and parents ignore these interactions or perpetuate the “civilized oppression” of current moral agency models.

In order to position children as the subject and consider how this reshapes our understandings of moral agency, we must begin to remedy our lack of a rich understanding of children in their present lives and develop methodological approaches that answer to criticisms of essentialization. Ethnographic research is one avenue to achieve a more nuanced picture of the

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<sup>12</sup> Townes, 20.

<sup>13</sup> I am choosing to use the term Fantastic Hegemonic Imagination rather than Viruru’s term civilizing oppressions because it not only engages a systemic critique but allows for a nuanced description of how individual moral action reinforces the colonizing or oppressive structures.

lives of children by foregrounding their interactions, interpretations, and explanations.<sup>14</sup> In particular, examples related primarily to children's play provide opportunities to observe children's moral practices during an essential component of human experience and one that reflects how children view and recreate their complex social world. Children's play has been given uneven attention as agential cultural production and transformation within childhood studies.<sup>15</sup> In response, the child as individual and children as minority-group have undergone a status shift to social actor, which in theological ethics can be understood as moral actor/agent.<sup>16</sup> As well, a focus on play connects with the language and function of imagination in a manner that most adults can understand and do not have to stretch too far to recall.

Yet, not all children are the same. There is a danger of slipping into the "Western habit of 'essentializing' and 'homogenizing' human experience and the self"<sup>17</sup> in an attempt to produce a coherent narrative for ease of argument. Instead, in this paper, I will illuminate the moral quality of interactions between particular children that demonstrate their sophisticated use of race, national identity, and language in ways that complexify how colonial legacies are reinforced or disrupted. Similar to Mercer, I want "to involve 'children' as subjects in theological discourse" which means we must seek "meaningful ways to speak about them in all of their sameness and particularity. Likewise, we must have linguistic terms to advocate with and for these children in

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<sup>14</sup> See, Flewitt, Rosie, "Conducting Research with Young Children: Some Ethical Considerations" in *Early Child Development and Care*, 175(6): 2005, 553–565. Deirdre Duffy and Simon Bailey, "Whose Voice is Speaking? Ethnography, Pedagogy and Dominance in Research with Children and Young People." submitted to *Journal of Research & Method in Education*, accessed on August 1, 2013 at [http://www.academia.edu/1560969/Whose\\_voice\\_is\\_speaking\\_Ethnography\\_pedagogy\\_and\\_dominance\\_in\\_research\\_with\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_people](http://www.academia.edu/1560969/Whose_voice_is_speaking_Ethnography_pedagogy_and_dominance_in_research_with_children_and_young_people). This is not to say that ethnography is free of bias or objectifying young children in the research process. However, as these two articles suggest a flexible ethnography in line with feminist developments that seeks ongoing negotiation of consent and reflective evaluation of the researchers status.

<sup>15</sup> See Gunilla Dahlberg, "Policies in Early Childhood Education and Care: Potentialities for Agency, Play and Learning" and Ann-Carita Evaldsson, "Play and Games" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, eds. Jens Qvortrup, William A Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 228-237 and 316 – 331 respectively. Within philosophical and religious traditions, various authors have sporadically dealt with issues related to agency and children's play. A recent publication brings this to light, *The Philosophy of Play* eds. Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, and Malcolm MacLean (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013) as does *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Allison James, "Agency" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, eds. Jens Qvortrup, William A Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 34-45.

<sup>17</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 36.

the church and in the world.”<sup>18</sup> A turn to postcolonial theory along with developments in childhood studies and theological ethics, may be one way to promote children as subjects of theological discourse and redefine our categories of moral agency.

The perennial debate will continue whether subjects who do not write their own theological and ethical discourse are ever really granted subjecthood. The essentialization argument, itself, seems structured to benefit forces that seek to discredit work on subjects that disrupt the notion of a static normative subject and question the power of centralized figures controlling production of knowledge (i.e., adults, in this case). Methodologically, the aides of sociological and ethnographic studies provide a valuable resource toward particularizing the lives of children while balancing generalized insights from the research. Though this is never perfect; it is an improvement toward considering the real lives children lead. Thus, my intention is not to make *these* children (used in the narratives below), *all* children; rather, it is to create cracks in the normative claims of moral agency related to children and the role imagination has thus far played in ethics. My position is that, *these* children make it impossible to agree to claims presently perpetuated about *all* children.

### ***Descriptive Moments of Subjecthood, Imagination, and Moral Agency***

Recent ethnographic studies suggest that children as young as preschool age have a sophisticated social awareness of racial/ethnic concepts as well as utility of such concepts in ordering their worldview and making moral-decision based on it, including distinguishing different races, ethnicities, and differences among country of origin. In this article, I present the work of Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin titled, *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* which recounts unique field study research of children in their own context. In a racially and ethnically diverse day care center setting which generally represents the new demography of the U.S., children age three to five were observed for nearly a year in unstructured field observations from teacher-led games/activities to times when adults were not present. The primary researcher, Debi, was able to achieve “non-sanctioning, play-mate” adult status which

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<sup>18</sup> Mercer, 18.



means children did not react to her presence with self-policing behavior as they did to other adults such as teachers and parents.<sup>19</sup>

In most cases, racial/ethnic identification during play or learning exercises was at some point used in hierarchical value or required to fit within “clean” categories with one-to-one correspondence of racial and ethnic markers. As will be evident in the following examples, “racial denigration at the center usually targeted children of color, occasionally a white child suffered name-calling – but it was rare.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, there are examples of “American” either being modified by white or being used as synonymous with visibly white people, suggesting preschoolers have facility with racial as well as nationalist identity categories and the interaction between the two. The vignettes highlight children engaging various aspects of a moral imagination. In some cases the children employ historical, dialogical and diasporic imagination to combat oppression. Others reinforce oppression (sustaining the fantastic hegemonic imagination over and against postcolonial responses) through their racist behavior. I offer only a few short examples from the study given the limitations of an article length format.

Brittany (4 y/o, white) and Corinne (4 y/o, African/white) begin playing dolls.<sup>21</sup> In the midst of play, Brittany says she is going to make dinner and moves to the kitchen area.

Corinne picks up Brittany’s doll and calls after her, “I’ll watch your baby for you.”

Brittany immediately returns to the dress-up area, snatches the doll from Corinne and says, “No, you can’t take care of her. You’re from Africa.” Corinne frowns at her.

Brittany refuses to give the doll to Corinne, who is still holding her own doll. “I don’t

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<sup>19</sup> Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin, *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 40. I have chosen to focus on a single ethnographic study rather than present a variety of studies. This choice is shaped by the format of a journal article which requires a limitation of quotes and thus incorporation of first hand voices of children. In addition, difficulties arise when comparing different ages and geographic locations of children across studies. For recent ethnographic studies that demonstrate similar negotiation of postcolonialism and racism by children see, Ruth Woods, *Children's Moral Lives: An Ethnographic and Psychological Approach*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) and for a survey of past ethnographic and sociological literature on the topic see Karen Wells, *Childhood in Global Perspective* (Oxford: Polity, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, *The First R*, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Brittany and Corinne are acting out family contexts and the move to make dinner is framed as a gender role of the wife to cook for her husband who will be home soon. I do not have space in this article, nor did the researchers concentrate on gender based issues, for me to adequately address the interaction between gendered and racialized play.

want an African taking care of her. I want an American. You're not an American, anybody can see that," Brittany insists, frowning. Corinne frowns back, "I am too an American too. First from Africa, then America. Both." Brittany merely stalks away, leaving Corinne to stare at her.<sup>22</sup>

This is not the first time that Corinne has been faced with a white child or adult telling her what her racial identity ought to be based solely on skin color. However, in this case, Brittany does not force African American as a label unlike many adult workers at the center; instead she stresses African and de-links it from American as she employs white as synonymous with American. Corinne however holds to the complex racial/ethnic identity of being African (her parents met there and that's where she is geographically from) and American (her white father and African American mother are citizens of the United States). Corinne's response, here and in other instances, exemplifies what Kwok describes as "*historical imagination* of the concrete and not the abstract, a hope that is more practical and therefore not so easily disillusioned, and a trust that is born of necessity and well-worn wisdom" (and precocious conviction in the case of a 4 y/o).<sup>23</sup> Though Brittany attempts to dominate the situation with her use of fixed racial and citizenship categories, she is in fact the one to exit the play.

This interchange, while reinforcing notions of white, American supremacy, evidences a complex negotiation of race and national identity by both children. The postcolonial *dialogical imagination* considers challenge from "the modes and zones of contact between dominant and subordinate groups, between people with different and multiple identities." It acknowledges "the interaction between two cultures with asymmetry of power is often not voluntary and one-dimensional, but is full of tensions, fractures, and resistance."<sup>24</sup> Both children are advancing identities that are opposed to one another. Within the *contact* between Brittany and Corinne is a power play for control and status quite literally experienced as "dramatic play" and reinforcement of a tenuous connection between imagination and reality. In this example,

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<sup>22</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, *The First R*, 85-86.

<sup>23</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 38, my emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 43.

Corrine's self identification destabilizes the false reality of static colonial categories of race and national origin to which Brittany has no response other than to use what power is left at her disposal - end the play and thus not have to compromise her dominant (hegemonic) categories.

Similarly, Renee (4 y/o, White) links whiteness and American identity as a privileged category using it to justify control of property and rules of play in another contact experience.

During playtime in the afternoon, Debi watches Renee (4, white) pull Lingmai (3, Asian) and Jocelyn (4.5, white) across the playground in a wagon. Renee tugs away enthusiastically, but the task is difficult. Pulling this heavy load across loose dirt is more than Renee can handle. Suddenly, she drops the handle, which falls to the ground, and stands still, breathing heavily. Lingmai, eager to continue this game jumps from the wagon and picks up the handle. As Lingmai begins to pull, Renee admonishes her, "No, No. You can't pull this wagon. Only white Americans can pull this wagon." Renee has her hands on her hips and frowns at Lingmai. The Asian girl tries again to lift the handle of the wagon, and Renee again insists that only "white American's" are permitted to do this task. This is the breaking point, and adult intervention is now sought.

Lingmai sobs loudly and runs to a nearby teacher complaining that "Renee hurt my feelings." . . . we see the child's discretion at work. She offers no more than hurt feelings to explain her actions to the teacher.<sup>25</sup>

Like Corrine, Lingmai may have had sufficient past experiences with adults to know that reporting racist behavior would not be grounds for corrective response. Self-monitoring begins to shape the historical subjecthood of Corrine and Lingmai as a result of the response they expect from adults. In many cases children's remarks were heard by Debi and out of earshot of other teachers. The researchers noted many instances where children simply did not report racism.<sup>26</sup> Due to the role "that uninterrogated notions of race and racism play via personal choice," as

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<sup>25</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, *The First R*, 105.

<sup>26</sup> The researchers are explicit that Debi does not question the children about why they "don't tell" so as not to compromise her status as non-sanctioning adult observer. This of course raises questions about the ethics of ethnography and the role of the researcher in balancing resistance to immediate oppressions and long term gains to end oppression on a larger scale through research.

describe by Townes, we gain a much more complex picture of the dynamics of moral agency between children and adults and among children.<sup>27</sup> In turn we must rethink the ways we define not just agency, but also absolutize notions of goodness or evil via moral choice related to children. Put more bluntly, even preschool children participate in systemic racism through overt action.

The children are recorded time and again negotiating complex racial/ethnic identities as well as pushing against dominant conceptions of how skin color, geographic locations, and racial/ethnic identity are supposed to cohere via the dominant social order. In a teacher led activity designed to support diversity, Dean, a white teacher, introduces himself as from the United States, the children take their turns:

“I’m from China,” says Susan, predictably. “I’m from Korea,” an Asian boy responds. “Where are you from?” Dean asks a boy, whose name tag reads “Emile.” Before the child can reply, another teacher in the circle responds, “France.” However, Emile vigorously shakes his head no on hearing this and points to the ground. “Are you from here, Emile?” Dean asks. Emile nods and continues to point at the ground, a smile on his face. “Are your parents from France?” Dean continues, smiling at the child. “I don’t know,” Emile shrugs. Dean turns his attention to the next child in the circle. “I’m from Sweden,” a tall blond girl contributes. Most of the children seem to know where they or their parents are from but offer no detail. However, Kumar breaks from this pattern and tells a long, involved story about how he is from the United States, his brother is from Africa, and his parents are from Asia. “My dad is there now,” he adds. “Where is your mom?” another boy asks. “She’s here,” replies Kumar.

Dean interrupts him, moving on to Corinne. She heaves a deep sigh and reports, “I’m from Africa.” She waits, looking around her. “Really?” Dean replies, “Are you

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<sup>27</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 60. Townes completes this quote by adding, “. . . and communal power dynamics”, which I intentionally chose to leave off given the change in subject matter from Black women to multi-racial children. More than not, (white) adults and teachers default mode is to not hold children accountable for their racist behavior because they do not believe they are capable of it. We blame society, parents, teachers, media, etc. While those are all very powerful actors and influences on children’s lives, I want to hold onto the tension they these children are agential and creative in the very similar ways as adults.

African American?” The look on Corinne’s face is simply priceless. In a display of comical exaggeration, she rolls her eyes, shrugs her shoulders, and flops her hands into her lap in helpless resignation. “Nope, just plain old, stupid African,” she sighs, obviously wishing this activity was over. Dean obliges her and moves on without remark.<sup>28</sup>

The exercise is set up to perpetuate an understanding of race and nationality as a coherent and simplified connection between skin color and family’s geographic origin. As the researcher notes, “Given the question-and-answer format of these activities, the children learn that adults are not really interested in in-depth discussions with children, or in the racial-ethnic worlds in which they live and interact every day.”<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, the children do not modify their descriptions, as seen with Emile, Kumar, and Corrine, even when their “realities are challenges in the face of the fantastic.”<sup>30</sup> However, they to begin to shape new value judgments about their descriptions based on adult and other children’s feedback.

Each of these children are engaging *diasporic* imagination to varying degrees, when they “decenter and decompose the ubiquitous logic and ‘common sense’ that says that the cultural form and norm” that define race/ethnicity is a singular coherent identity marker based on skin color and country of origin.<sup>31</sup> Kwok writes,

Diasporic discourse is currently appropriated by peoples who may not have experienced forced dispersion, who do not share the longing for a return to the homeland, or who may shuttle between the homeland and the host land in continuous commute. It connotes at once the experience of decentered and yet multiple-centered, displaced and yet constantly relocated, peoples who criss-cross many borders.<sup>32</sup>

Many of the children, with the exception of the white, U.S. children, at the Center fit within this new diasporic discourse. Those responding in the exercise described above become diasporic

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<sup>28</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, 87-88.

<sup>29</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Townes, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 48.

<sup>32</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 45.

subjects through their own agency as they resist a “predetermined and prescribed universalism and colonial mode of thinking.”<sup>33</sup>

Even though the fantastic hegemonic imagination is the script within which the children must operate, in various instances some children saw their multiplicity and its unintelligibility within a white, American worldview as an advantage. The research points out how some children who have facility with two or more languages use their non-English speaking status to encourage adult interaction or maintain control in play situations. For example, the children purposefully misinterpreted phrases or lied about the meaning of words as a way of game playing and keeping adult attention. Most of the English-only speaking teachers did not know the use of language was inaccurate. Again, this is evidence of awareness and adeptness at employing multiple forms of postcolonial imagination while playing with constructed historical subjecthoods, in instances of contact with a dominant group, and in service of affirming multiplicity rather than collapsing it.

By employing languages such as Chinese, Spanish, Iranian, and so on, children were able to advantageously use their multilingual status to decenter the hegemonic imagination and control play with other children as well.

Ling (5, Chinese) manages to attain leadership of a play group through the use of her home language. Ling and Erin (4, white) are playing follow-the-leader with Aril (3.5, white) and Nicholas (3.5, white). The younger children are in the lead. As they run across the playground, Ling suddenly takes the lead and shouts out something in Chinese that sounds like a command. April and Nicholas stop dead in their tracks, scream, and run for the playhouse. Erin erupts in delighted giggles, doubling over with laughter. Though Debi could not hear what Ling has said, her actions appear deliberate. She and Erin consult with each other for a moment or two, then go to fetch April and Nicholas from the playhouse. Ling issues another command, again in Chinese, and the three other children race off. This was repeated several times.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 48-49.

<sup>34</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, 120-121.

As the researchers note, “a clear cultural differentiator, language enables children to select with whom they will play and what the content and direction of that play will be—both *critical social choices* for preschool children.”<sup>35</sup> And, I would argue, moral choices when employed to control who does and does not play. Other examples were not always inclusive or well received. Some children constructed exclusionary play rules by what languages children spoke. Often, children who do not speak English fluently found it difficult to make friends and engage positive adult attention. In these cases, English can be seen as having a synonymous hierarchical social value as American or white.

The few examples I have shared thus far have been marked by power dynamics among children and in response to the role of adults as teachers. One last vignette demonstrates how two children worked collaboratively to navigate language barriers representative of racial/ethnic differences. Their activities were misinterpreted by staff and parents who underestimated the agential play of children. Dao (4, Chinese) and Jason (3, Middle Eastern) develop a strong friendship over a few months. However, Dao speaks very little English and Jason does not speak Chinese. At one point Jason’s mother raises a concern that Jason is using “baby talk.” Staff members continue to comment on the boys’ friendship and how much they chatter during play. No one can explain their ability to communicate until Debi listens more closely to the two boys and hears no sign of baby talk or any language with which she is familiar. At one point, Jason responds to his mom at pick-up time in “gibberish.” It is Debi who finally reveals that the boys have created their own language. Debi asks Jason, “‘Honey, would you say that again in English?’ Jason nods quickly and responds, ‘I want to check out a book from the library before we go home.’”<sup>36</sup> After requesting Dao’s dad listen to the boys for signs of Chinese languages, it is determined that Dao and Jason mixed enough English and Chinese to develop their own language.

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<sup>35</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, 124, my emphasis. Various examples of structuring play related to languages can be found from 115-125.

<sup>36</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, 122.

If these were adults, the researchers note this activity “would likely have been interpreted as an innovated pidgin language.”<sup>37</sup> But because there are three year olds, adults assumed it was baby talk or gibberish. Similar to the fluidity that Kwok defines in the diasporic imagination, Dao’s and Jason’s “collaborative actions were not only creative but were directed toward bridging their ethnic and cultural differences.”<sup>38</sup> In this example unlike others I have named thus far, children worked collaboratively to intentionally subvert the white supremacy and American imperialism of the fantastic hegemonic imagination.

From examples provided above, it is evident that children are employing new and engaging powerful imaginations in moral decision-making related to control of play as well as the moral valuation of the self and other based on geographic and racial/ethnic categories. These children are not simply taking adult categories (or something they saw on T.V.) and implementing them crudely in their own context. In other words, the children’s actions are not consistent across play or individuals nor is it predetermined to be morally good or evil. What has emerged is not a linear picture of how children are always oppressors or oppressed based on their deployment or subversion of fixed racial/ethnic categories. Many of these children engage the postcolonial imagination most often to advance a complex understanding of their racial/ethnic self definition not allowed by the dominant white, American hegemonic imagination in which they operate. Other children adeptly employ colonizing categories to maintain their status. Others still, collaboratively bridge racial/ethnic differences to gain the attention of or subvert the control of adults in the Center. Children are manipulating, reinforcing, and disrupting constructed oppressions in similar ways to how adults engage what Townes describes as the fantastic hegemonic imagination. Yet, because these interactions are often part of imaginative play, children and the actions are relegated to second class moral standing.

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<sup>37</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, 123.

<sup>38</sup> Ausdale and Feagin, 123.



## *Imagination and Ethics*

Most current Christian ethical theories of children's moral development advocate a linear developmental model that is not only unidirectional, but traditionally conceived of as implicitly oriented toward the good. In contrast, these preschoolers actions show highly developed moral thinking and (inter)action, with quite negative, demeaning, and morally harmful consequences in some cases, and resourceful, affirming, worldview-altering consequences in other cases.

Recognition of these children's ethical behavior as creative and agential requires a major shift from considering children as "becomings" to knowing them as "beings."<sup>39</sup> That is to say, simply because a child by virtue of age and ability is by definition dependent on others and by definition less cognitively astute, she is no less a moral agent. Similar to adults, capacity, ability, and resources are always limiting factors on the exercise of moral agency not an erasure of it.<sup>40</sup> A more complex construction of moral agency would affirm that children (and adults) experience differing levels of autonomy and rational capacity throughout their lifetimes but are equally moral agents. Such conclusions also suggest that moral development most likely ebbs and flows, moving in "fits and starts," rather than following a linear line from less to more.<sup>41</sup>

If my claim and the evidence thus far is convincing, the field of Christian ethics must re-think not only descriptive and prescriptive categories of moral agency, but also the role of imagination in ethical thinking. What we see is not an either/or vision of morality, but a complex picture and motivational analysis of children's actions as well as an understanding of race as a complex mix of geographic location, birth place, skin color, self-identification, and so on. Townes may not have had children's play in mind when she called for such a shift to the heuristic forces as they relate to ethics, but I am arguing that children's play often referred to as dramatic play or inventive reality is a strong heuristic force that emerges from the imagination. One that

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<sup>39</sup> Allison James, "Agency" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, eds. Jens Qvortrup, William A Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 36.

<sup>40</sup> See particularly the discussion of burdened virtues, a theory developed by legal scholar Lisa Tessman in Traina, Cristina "Children and Moral Agency" in the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* Vol. 29 no. 1 (2009), 19-37.

<sup>41</sup> See discussion of Lev Vygotsky's work on child development in Ausdale and Feagin, *The First R*, 19-20.

may be more easily evaluated than adult forms of re-claiming connections to emotion, intuition, and yearning that we vigilantly educate against as we age.

As John Wall writes in his recent publication *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, “it is clear that children do not just passively absorb the narratives that are fed to them by adults. Rather, each child is a full human being who both is narrated by her world and narrates it anew for herself.”<sup>42</sup> For young children, the formation of self and relational engagement with the world and others happens most often through the medium of play. Unfortunately, Christian ethics is lacking in models to evaluate play and imagination as part and parcel of moral reasoning and agency. Thus, it is indeed time “to ask the difficult question of how the ways in which children think ethically should transform how to understand ethical thinking as such.”<sup>43</sup> Though Wall does not specifically connect issues of race, ethnicity and postcolonialism in his work on children’s moral agency, adult’s as well as children’s morality can be seen as deeply engaged with the postcolonial imagination both implicitly and explicitly.

For example, in most instances in the study, the children who intentionally use dominant colonial categories to gain control in play are adept at hiding the behavior from sanctioning-adults and precisely crafting it to fit the situation. It is a rare occurrence when adults can reach the status of “non-sanctioning adult observer” as Debi does in *The First R*, able to see and hear what even preschool children intentionally conceal. On the other hand, there are the blatant moments of dismissing and ignoring children of which adults, most regularly parents and teachers, are guilty. The ignoring and dismissing may be a cultivated and unconscious adult behavior, or viewed from a more active stance, it may be an explicit effort to tame children’s desires or moral disruption of the fantastic hegemonic imagination rather than encountering them as they are.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Wall, 152.

<sup>43</sup> Wall, 168.

<sup>44</sup> See Gunilla Dahlberg, “Policies in Early Childhood Education and Care: Potentialities for Agency, Play and Learning” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, eds. Jens Qvortrup, William A Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 234.

If we acknowledged the adult gains received from children's second-class, not-yet-adult status, we (adults) would have to admit that this is a violation of their (children's) humanity. Children as moral agents would mean they are "full" people, not pawns at the disposal of parents, educational systems, global corporations, politicians, and so on. Adults would have to come to see the oppression or injustice that is crucial to their own functioning.<sup>45</sup> In other words, adults would have to share their power, provide particular rights for children (all children), and develop a new more creative system of accountability.

## Conclusion

Corrine's repeated efforts to define her racial-ethnic identity as African *and* American, Kumar's attempt to describe each member of his family as having a different racial-ethnic identity, and misinterpretation of Dao's and Jason's creation of a new language are three examples from the above vignettes of adult's relative blindness to the fantastic hegemonic imagination and an active dismissal of children's play as moral. Adults often miss and are perhaps educated against noticing moments of resistance to structural evil. Time and again, the fantastic hegemonic imagination reinforces its worldview via teacher and peer response. In some sense there is no escaping the fantastic hegemonic imagination, which Townes writes can "be found in the old and the young. None of us naturally escape it, for it is found in the deep cultural codings we live with and through in U.S. society."<sup>46</sup> In working with children, we need to cultivate an awareness that even though the fantastic hegemonic imagination masquerades as structural and systemic, it is also personal and dependent on individual moral actions lived out daily.

It is in the particular, the momentary postcolonial imaginative moment, where subversion is possible. Townes offers her own concept of resistance termed countermemory. For Townes, "Countermemory can open up subversive spaces within dominant discourses that expand our

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<sup>45</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruhl, *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Townes, 21.

sense of who we are and, possibly, create a whole and just society in defiance of structural evil.”<sup>47</sup> What postcolonial imagination and counter-memory offer is recognition “that the story *can* be told another way.”<sup>48</sup> Related to children, we cannot return to false nostalgia that posits an historically inaccurate notion of children and childhood as wholly evil, innocent or pre-ethical. Instead, it is time to re-shape ideas about ethical thinking and action from a linear developmental, independent, and rationalistic process to a thick description of the role of imagination in moral growth and change.<sup>49</sup>

However, the descriptive assertion is only one step in combating oppression of children and between children. A new understanding of children’s agency may in fact be helpful, but to what end. What we see in the vignettes is a complicated mess of racism, resistance, power plays and collaboration. Postcolonial studies and Christian social ethics have always included a dimension of activism implicit to one’s methodological charge. In other words, my descriptive task is oriented to combat the fantastic hegemonic imagination on multiple levels. First, we must alter our notions of agency related to children so we more clearly see their racist behaviors as well as their creative responses. But perhaps as importantly, we can begin to move toward holding adults accountable for their participation in and perpetuation of oppression related to children. Here, I’m arguing actions (intentional or not) that reinforce racism, including direct actions by the children and indirect ambivalence in teacher activities and silencing of children in the vignettes, are an example of what Townes names as systematic, structural evil and Viruru describes as civilized oppression. An ethical response then needs to focus on both systemic structures and individual actions.

For families and educational systems concerned with justice and equality for children, the fantastic hegemonic imagination must be contested in the classroom, home, and sandbox. In order to do so, first, children must be taken seriously as moral agents. From a postcolonial

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<sup>47</sup> Townes, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Townes, 7.

<sup>49</sup> See Wall, 169-171. Wall considers what ethical thinking “as an art” could be in relation to how we respond to otherness in our lives. This investigation is similar to the concerns I raise about racialization and oppression in the vignettes.

perspective, we can begin by dismantling binaries of authority and dominance between parents and children opting instead for relational and dependent models of partnership and reciprocity. Specific to race and racism, parents would need to admit to their own participation in the fantastic hegemonic imagination and willingly assess how their ethical practices contribute to or disrupt it. One example of such interventions on a parenting level can be witnessed in the recent scholarship of Jennifer Harvey. She writes primarily for white U.S. parents, encouraging them to resist abstract celebrations of racial diversity and instead engage concrete, everyday conversations about race, racial difference and racism with their children.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly educators would need to assess practices like those described by Ausdale and Feagin that contribute to racism and colonialism in favor of learning models that attend to the impact of racism on children's lives. In the U.S. in particular, a shift in focus from liberal approaches to racial diversity (like multiculturalism or colorblindness) to racial literacy for all students would have a significant impact.<sup>51</sup> This would of course need to include evaluation of how race is described and inscribed in curricular content, textual resources, and handling of peer interactions in school settings.<sup>52</sup> As this analysis demonstrates, personal interactions and curricular content shape our imaginations from a very early age.

Going forward, Christian ethics can and should offer an even deeper analysis of how imagination, play, and post/colonial forms of racialization and nationalism interact to shape our morality. Scholarly inquiry will need to balance assessment of systemic and institutional oppression with their impact on and support by individual and group moral actions. As we engage in postcolonial and anti-racist feminist/womanist studies in religion, this is but one attempt to broaden the scope of inquiry to include children as subjects in partnership for on-going ethical inquiry.

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<sup>50</sup> See Jennifer Harvey, "Formations: Living at the Intersection of Self, Social, Spirit" weblog found at <http://livingformations.com/>. See "for whites only (like me)" and "parenting" sections in particular.

<sup>51</sup> For further discussion and specific educational interventions see, *Racism and Education*, eds. Zeus Leonardo, David Gardner, and W. Norton Grubb (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> For one example of such an assessment, see Keffrelyn D. Brown and Anthony L. Brown, "Silenced Memories: An Examination of the Sociocultural Knowledge on Race and Racial Violence in Official School Curriculum" in *Equality and Excellence in Education* 43(2) 2010, 139-154.

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