

**Assessing Pedagogical Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Academy of Homiletics
Special Issue Introduction**

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The Academy of Homiletics (AoH) exists to “bring together professors and teachers of homiletics for the study of the place of preaching in theological education, for the discussion and sharing of ideas and methods, and for the fostering of scholarly research in this and other related areas and disciplines.”¹ The AoH was first convened by three white, mainline Protestant homiletics in 1965, and since that time has met continuously, growing to more than two hundred in its membership at the time of this writing, including full-time faculty, adjuncts, independent scholars, doctoral students in homiletics, and those who have retired from their teaching duties. Despite the demographic expansion of its membership over the years to include Black, Latinx, Asian, and international members as well as more expansive perspectives from other social locations, the guild has been primarily shaped by white homiletics whose methods, styles, pedagogy, and scholarship were assumed as normative.

In 2019, the AoH began a multi-year effort to understand and act upon the ways that whiteness has systematically impacted the research, practice, and teaching of preaching. This effort was initiated by Sally Brown of Princeton Theological Seminary, who, in her role as president of the guild that year, chose the theme “Unmasking Homiletical Whiteness.” The programming of the annual meeting challenged members to interrogate the ways in which institutional racial hegemony has shaped their teaching, preaching, and research.

While the AoH does not have an official working definition of whiteness, we might operate from Sara Ahmed’s work, which names whiteness as “a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience.”² Within this experience, white bodies obtain and exercise privilege through habits, orientations, and institutions in such a way that it becomes “a background of experience” for them, albeit invisibly and insidiously so.³ Schneider and Bjork-James add that there is an inextricable link between whiteness and the violence of capitalism, in that “the individual, social, and cultural meanings attached to whiteness together create a kind of white habitus: a system of enduring dispositions, tastes, practices, preferences, moral norms, epistemologies, and ideologies—all of which are deployed in symbolic and material contests for capital.”⁴

Theologian Willie James Jennings clarifies that “the term ‘whiteness’ does not refer to people of European descent but to a way of being in the world and seeing the world that forms cognitive and affective structures able to seduce people into its habitation and its meaning

¹ “Constitution of the Academy of Homiletics” (1990).

<https://www.homiletics.org/sites/default/files/assets/docs/AOH%2520Constitution.pdf>, accessed March 29, 2022.

² Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” in *Feminist Theory*, 8, no. 2 (2007): 150.

³ Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 150.

⁴ Rachel C. Schneider and Sophie Bjork-James. “Whither Whiteness and Religion?: Implications for Theology and the Study of Religion.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 1 (2020): 191.

making.”⁵ Or, as J. Kameron Carter puts it, “white signifies not merely pigmentation but a regime of political and economic power for arranging (*oikonomia*) the world.”⁶

Taking a cue from Jennings, discourse about whiteness in the AoH is less about specific people or groups of people and more about ways that white homiletics is privileged while dismissing and colonizing the many ways of being, thinking, doing, and belonging, specifically around racial and ethnic formations. Moving whiteness into the discourse of the AoH has uncovered ways that the “cognitive and affective structures” of white homiletical research, practice, and teaching were formed, how they persist as the dominant and dominating background of homiletical experience, and how the work of repair has begun and might continue. This work is essential to the integrity of the guild because, as Schneider and Bjork-James have noted, “to not substantively address whiteness in the study of religion has consequences. Not only does it reinforce an analytic division between race and religion, it also works to obscure the racial dimensions of dominant Western forms of religion, particularly Protestant Christianity in the United States, as well as the religious dimensions of white supremacy.”⁷ Sifiso Khuzwayo states succinctly that “any work of redeveloping theology and decoloniality must contend with the very base of modern theology and its casting of humanity as a reflection of whiteness.”⁸

Subsequent AoH annual meeting themes built on the work of dismantling homiletical whiteness, including preaching and trauma (2020), sparking a preaching renaissance inspired by African American preaching (2021), and reimagining the center of homiletics to embrace perspectives once relegated to the margins (2022). Many conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) emerged in various settings during this time, which helped to frame the AoH’s response to the challenge of unmasking homiletical whiteness.

To be clear, DEI is not the “answer” to the insidious problem of whiteness. Rather, it is a way to counter some of the assumptions and norms of whiteness and disrupt the hegemony that white colonialism has imposed on theological education. Inherent in this work is naming the assumptions, narrow views, and distortions of anti-blackness, colorism, eurocentrism, and americanism that are built into the existing field of homiletics. For example, a 2020 online town hall entitled “Teaching Praxis for Solidarity,” under the leadership of David Jacobsen as that year’s president of the guild, surfaced the need for a wider, more comprehensive view of the pedagogical commitments, values, and practices regarding DEI. The three town halls addressed the following areas of inquiry: research and visibility of scholarship, networking and support of emerging scholars, and teaching praxis for solidarity.

From those discussions, several key points emerged. For one, efforts to “decenter” whiteness still reify whiteness; thus, the goal must be to *dismantle* whiteness and any ideological ranking based on race. As Valle-Ruiz and Wymer point out, changing the discourse to center homileticians of color still leaves “white preaching and its dominance in the guild practically unexamined and unchanged.”⁹ Thus, what is required is work that carries out “sustained critique of whiteness and amplifies subjugated and racially minoritized practice, pedagogy, and theory.”¹⁰ This involves uncovering and naming the vast array of both implicit and explicit homiletical

⁵ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Eerdmans, 2020), 9.

⁶ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 35.

⁷ Schneider and Bjork-James, “Whither Whiteness and Religion,” 177-78.

⁸ Sifiso Khuzwayo, “Western theology’s whiteness and some liberation theologies, two sides of the same coin,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2024): 3.

⁹ Lis Valle-Ruiz and Andrew Wymer, “Beginnings,” in *Unmasking White Preaching: Racial Hegemony, Resistance, and Possibilities in Homiletics*, eds. Lis Valle-Ruiz and Andrew Wymer. (Lexington, 2022), 2.

¹⁰ Valle-Ruiz and Wymer, “Beginnings,” 2.

“tentacles” of whiteness that manifest in homiletical pedagogy and scholarship. Such a process entails naming and exiting from the universalizing nature of white, Western homiletics while embracing an agency grounded in the broadest array of traditions, viewpoints, and epistemologies.

Like other academic disciplines, homiletics plays a significant role in perpetuating and facilitating epistemological colonialism and white supremacy. For example, the books homiletics professors use, the models of preaching they teach, and the style of pedagogy they use can either directly or inadvertently continue and reinforce whiteness. As Schneider and Bjork-James note, the realities of institutionalized racism alongside white supremacist political movements and terrorism demand that scholars of religion “critically interrogate how religion is imagined and practiced by white subjects and what role white racial formation plays in shaping religious discourse and practice.”¹¹ From our perspective, this includes homiletics scholars and pedagogues as well.

Another key point that emerged is that unconscious bias and universalized assumptions often shape the formation of homileticians in profound yet unexamined ways. For instance, Ph.D. students are often traditioned into primarily white understandings of scholarship, pedagogy, and preaching practice. For established and emerging scholars alike, there is a need to develop criteria for assessing unconscious bias and embedded racism while also engaging in disciplined habits of self-critique that disrupt and dismantle the normativity of white hegemony. At the same time, homileticians must also uncover and dismantle unconscious bias, assumptions, cultural/racial/ethnic centering, and the use of non-inclusive theological language and images in the homiletics classroom as well as their own scholarship. In all, intentionality around creating spaces of interrogation and accountability regarding matters of race and identity can disrupt the normativity and universality of whiteness. This, in turn, can lead to commitments and liberative practices that deconstruct the colonized and imperialist mindset that has dominated Christian preaching for centuries.

Following the 2019 annual meeting, two scholars, Lis Valle Ruiz and Andrew Wymer, formed an AoH work group entitled “Unmasking White Preaching” that met for three years from 2020 to 2022 and resulted in the edited volume *Unmasking White Preaching: Racial Hegemony, Resistance, and Possibilities in Homiletics* (Lexington, 2022).¹² While the editors of the volume do not define “white preaching” per se, they do point to the ways that the theories and practices of white preachers and scholars of preaching have long served as “the norm, the center, or the invisible force that permeates all spaces, forcing preach[ers] of other colors to situate themselves in reference to and distinct from white preaching.”¹³ The volume contains fifteen chapters divided into two sections: Racial Hegemony in Homiletics and Resistance and Possibilities in Homiletics.

The editors state that the goal of *Unmasking White Preaching* was to “cue us to more fully identify the harm of white preaching, increase our awareness of the possibilities for resistance, and spur our imagination of alternative possibilities in homiletics.”¹⁴ They note that

¹¹ Schneider and Bjork-James, “Whither Whiteness and Religion,” 177.

¹² This publication resonates with recent work in the wider theological academy that acknowledges and seeks to dismantle the ways that whiteness has formed the study of theological disciplines and practices of ministry. This project works along these trajectories. See, for instance, Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Eerdmans, 2020); *Religious Education* 114, no. 3 (2019); HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Invisibility of Whiteness: A Homiletical Interrogation,” *Homiletic* 46, no. 1 (2021): 28–39.

¹³ Valle-Ruiz and Wymer, “Beginnings,” 3–4.

¹⁴ Valle-Ruiz and Wymer, “(In)conclusion,” 231.

the collection of voices in the volume makes it obvious that “the status quo of white-dominant homiletics is untenable” and that change is needed if we are serious about attending to “racial hegemony, resistance, and possibilities in homiletics.”¹⁵ They also call for “new structures” that model self-examination.¹⁶

It was in that spirit of self-examination that the two of us, Leah Schade and Richard Voelz, both of whom are white homileticians, submitted a proposal to the AoH Executive Committee in 2022 for a grant project entitled “Assessing Pedagogical Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Academy of Homiletics” to be funded by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. In our proposal, we noted that while collaborative conversations and narrow research projects give snapshots into the effects of whiteness and efforts toward pedagogical diversity, equity, and inclusion, the AoH did not yet have a sense of the whole of its membership’s pedagogical commitments and practices either prior to the introduction of unmasking homiletical whiteness or in response to it. There were several questions we sought to answer: In what ways have members of the AoH reshaped their pedagogy to reflect the values of DEI since undertaking the task of “unmasking homiletical whiteness” in 2019? What can we celebrate? What gaps, barriers, and opportunities lie before us as we continue to interrogate our intentions, practices, and outcomes of this work?

With the approval of the Executive Committee and having received the grant, we assembled a team of racially and culturally diverse senior scholars, Ph.D. students, and outside researchers to assist with the project. We are grateful to HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Kenyatta Gilbert, who served as our accountability consultants; Kizzy Bush-Boyd, Samantha Gilmore, Larry Morris, and Wing Yi Wong, who served on the research team; and Amanda Wilson Harper and Wayne Thompson, who were our research consultants. Together, we distributed a survey to AoH members in August-September 2022 to assess attitudes and practices for teaching diverse student bodies, dismantling whiteness, and centering diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in the homiletics classroom. We also collected syllabi from members of the Academy from 2016-2019 (pre-intervention) and 2020-2022 (during intervention) to analyze for DEI within homiletics courses.

Overall, this project sought to move the AoH beyond theoretical prospects or anecdotal, aspirational, or exemplary narratives around homiletical pedagogy and DEI toward a more realistic, data-driven picture of the on-the-ground reality in our classrooms. As a result, you will see in these articles that we have acknowledged the positive outcomes of the AoH’s emphasis on unmasking homiletical whiteness as it directly relates to homiletical pedagogy. At the same time, we have identified the pedagogical gaps, challenges, and opportunities that the Academy as a whole, smaller subgroups, or individuals might take up for study, experimentation, or implementation of DEI.

Since the AoH exists as a scholarly hub for research and conversation about the teaching of preaching in seminaries and other institutions for theological education in the U.S., Canada, and increasingly across the globe, this research project was designed to benefit teaching and learning across a wide variety of institutions. For example, seminaries and divinity schools might refer to this study to encourage their faculty across a range of disciplines to engage in efforts to diversify their pedagogy. Also, those who teach preaching in these institutions could benefit from this study’s efforts to gain knowledge of expansive resources and surveying attitudes and practices across our membership. We not only wanted to reflect an accurate picture of where the

¹⁵ Valle-Ruiz and Wymer, “(In)conclusion,” 232.

¹⁶ Valle-Ruiz and Wymer, “(In)conclusion,” 232.

AoH stands vis-à-vis unmasking homiletical whiteness in its teaching, but also to recommend resources and further steps that members might take to make good on our collective efforts to dismantle whiteness and white supremacist pedagogical practices in the homiletics classroom. Still others might take inspiration from the data collected to pursue their own questions. The data collected in both phases of this project's opening belong to the whole of the AoH and, as such, are available to those who would like to pursue research beyond the limits of this preliminary study.

At the invitation of the editors of *Homiletic*, members of our team now present a selection of the findings from our project with the hope that what we have learned will encourage the continual work of unmasking and dismantling homiletical whiteness while encouraging an expansiveness in our scholarship, teaching, and collegiality. Leah Schade and Wayne Thompson provide a comprehensive quantitative overview of the survey results as well as findings from the analysis of the syllabi ("Conducting a 'DEI Audit' to the Academy of Homiletics: Overview of Teaching and Research Practices"). Drawing on respondent comments in the survey, Amanda Wilson Harper and colleagues conduct a study of homiletics professors' experiences with DEI in their classrooms and within their institutional milieus ("Contested Commitments: A Study of Homiletics Professors' Experiences with DEI"). Wing Yi Wong critiques the narrow Black-white binary of DEI emphases that excludes other racialized voices while asserting homiletic pedagogy as a radical site of social responsibility, global justice, and theological reimagination ("Expanding Homiletic Pedagogy Beyond Colorblindness"). Rich Voelz reflects on the introductory preaching course as a site of possibility for practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion ("Introducing Homiletics with DEI Commitments: Challenges, Opportunities, and Options"). The issue is bookended by the observations and reflections of senior scholars who have dedicated their careers to interrogating and dismantling whiteness and colonialism in preaching and teaching. Sally Brown offers the Foreword, in which she considers the ramifications of her initial effort to guide the guild in examining and interrogating its whiteness. An interview with HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Kenyatta Gilbert concludes the issue, in which they discuss the fact that this research began in a political and cultural climate that villainizes the language and emphases of DEI, and that this culture persists and has intensified, especially as it relates to the pressures of the current U.S. presidential administration on higher education. They offer their wisdom and sagely advice for continuing this work in the years ahead.

We recognize, along with Schneider and Bjork-James, that "it is not enough to simply observe a connection between religion (particularly Christianity) and white racial identity. Rather, because categories of race and religion deeply inform one another, the relation of these categories to ideologies of domination needs to be theorized, discussed, and debated in ways that do not shy away from explicit discussions of both power and racism."¹⁷ This project was undertaken with the intention of fully engaging in these discussions. While we recognize that DEI is not a panacea, we continue to believe that this avenue of research is a faithful and fruitful continuation of the impetus behind unmasking homiletical whiteness. Also, approaching the project through the lens of DEI allowed us to interrogate intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and other demographic markers and to do so through categories at work in wider academic and cultural conversations.

Ideally, we hope this project will spur AoH members and the guild as a whole to continue probing the connections between homiletics and race, whiteness, colonialism, and

¹⁷ Schneider and Bjork-James, "Whither Whiteness and Religion," 177.

Americentrism. We are grateful to Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, editor of *Homiletic*, and the editorial board for the opportunity to share the findings from our research in this special issue. While we recognize both our limitations and our hopes, we note that this project establishes a baseline for future research, which we hope will continue to push boundaries and elicit even more textured and nuanced studies.

For Further Reading

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