

# **“That sh\*t is rude!” Religion, Picture Books, and Social Narratives in Middle School**

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## **Abstract**

While the United States has a divisive history around the separation of church and state in public school, current national and state teaching standards do include curricular objectives related to the study of religion. This paper focuses on the ways a diverse group of sixth-grade public schoolchildren engaged with religious content in their English Language Arts class. Specifically, it examines the kinds of narratives the children constructed in response to diverse works of public art and children’s picture books, including Mora’s (2012) *The Beautiful Lady: Our Lady of Guadalupe / La hermosa señora: Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Señora)*, and Garza’s (1996) *In My Family*. The children’s responses disrupt us/Other social narratives and demonstrate the importance of religious literacy in the space of public schools. They push against the notion that acknowledging religious perspectives that are not part of mainstream culture could be offensive to some children. This study reinforces that the interdisciplinary inclusion of religious content in public school not only supports state and national teaching standards, but also opens a space for children to understand the pluralistic society in which they live.

## **Introduction**

What happens when a racially, culturally, and economically diverse group of sixth- graders in an English Language Arts (ELA) class at an urban middle school discuss religion in the context of news media and Mexican-American picture books? This investigation responds to the call for educators to take an interdisciplinary approach to discussing controversial topics like religion in public schools (Noddings & Brooks, 2017). Our project facilitated the expectations of the Common Core (CC) and College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards to help “students gain literary and cultural knowledge” through the “extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures...” (n.p.). At the same time, it aligned with the state’s social studies standards, which require sixth-graders to learn about, “the impact of major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism)” on “modern cultural traditions” (State’s Department of Education, 2010, n.p.).

## **Literature Review**

Taking an interdisciplinary approach to ELA and social studies has a long tradition in elementary school instruction (Zarillo, 2011). As many students move out of self-contained classrooms

and enter public middle schools, they are expected to meet CC/CCR-Literacy standards in their courses associated with history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. It is less common for students to engage with the social studies topic of “world religions” in their ELA classes (Dávila, 2015). Nevertheless, current research demonstrates that children’s literacy and meaning-making practices are often informed by their religious, spiritual, and cultural affiliations (e.g., Juzwik, 2014; Rackley, 2014; Skerrett, 2013). Providing space for religion in literacy instruction offers a more holistic approach to education that affirms the diverse backgrounds of children, including those from traditionally marginalized communities (Magaldi- Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2014). Literacy education scholars have only recently begun to examine the intersection of students’ religious literacies and ELA instruction in elementary and middle school classrooms (e.g., Damico & Hall, 2015; McMillon & Edwards, 2008). At least one study (e.g., Lester, 2011) has indicated that in diverse communities in which high school students have been required to complete a course in world religions, local youth gain, “a greater world view of the faiths, of their friends, ...their neighbors, and the United States” (Shavelson, 2009, n.p.).

This paper contributes to the broader

conversation about taking an integrated approach toward advancing students' religious literacies as part of a public middle school education that supports democratic values (Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Moore, 2010).

### **Background and Theoretical Framework**

Our study is framed by post-colonial theory, which examines the social constructions of difference and otherness in Western societies. As described by Edward Said (1995), the Western social caste systems originated, in part, from the notion that "European identity" is "superior" when compared to "all non-European peoples and cultures" (p. 7). Socialized to presume European superiority, many Westerners have historically represented as the "Other" *non-European* culture, which includes *non-European* religions. Westerners have authorized certain views of the Other and have colonized and ruled over the Other. The historical positioning of the Other in Western society can influence some people, including teachers, to perpetuate *othering narratives* about children and families whose religious perspective are not reflected in the mainstream culture (Dávila, 2015). Members of the mainstream or dominant "us" group identify themselves by defining and re-defining who the insiders are in the "us" group and who the outsiders or "Others" are in relation to the group (Said, 1995).

In the US, othering social narratives thrive (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Feagin, 2014). Ideological in nature, social narratives take-on story qualities as they are perpetuated by members of the "us" group in advancing the "us" group's dominant values and viewpoints and in defining the attributes of insiders and outsiders (Shenhav, 2015). For instance, although the Christian population is extremely varied across philosophical, racial, ethnic, and economic fronts, many Christians assume a collective "us" insider-identity and apply the "Other" outsider-identity to non-Christian groups. The othering of Muslims in the US vividly illustrates this paradigm (e.g., Burke, 2016). In truth, religious illiteracy and intolerance has long been accepted in American culture (Prothero, 2007). Hate crimes toward non-Christian religious groups have only increased as the public actions of national political figures have amplified religious intolerance across the US (e.g., Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017). The divisive yet widespread sociopolitical myth that America was founded as a 'Christian nation' sadly helps to fuel

intolerance, which is neither fair nor Christian (Boyd, 2006; Haynes, 2013).

Given the pervasiveness of us-Other ideologies, it can be tricky to initiate middle school conversations that challenge the othering narratives embedded in the dominant social discourses (e.g., the dominant, ideological ways of thinking and engaging with the world and others) in American society (Gee, 2011). Since, "ideologies are largely acquired, expressed, and generally reproduced by discourse" (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 115), it can be difficult to recognize let alone critique the social narratives that are ubiquitous to the dominant or mainstream group's discourse.

Fortunately, reading about unfamiliar groups and situations can provide windows into other people's lived experiences (Sims Bishop, 1997) and can help readers to develop empathy toward people who seem different to them (Oatley, 2011). Without a process for thoughtfully mediating the new and/or unfamiliar content of the text, however, research also shows that the social narrative and/or unchallenged presumptions to which readers subscribe can influence their interpretation of texts, including picture books (Dávila, 2015). In this project, the scientific concept of *pareidolia* represented new and/or unfamiliar content for participants. Pareidolia regards the phenomenon in which people see or recognize in ambiguous sites and/or materials images of individuals who are deeply important to them (e.g., the face of Jesus Christ in a grilled cheese sandwich). Studies describing the inherent psychological and neurological reasons for pareidolia were recently featured in mainstream publications such as *The New York Times* (Gantman & Van Bavel, 2014) and *Time Magazine* (Waxman, 2014).

Last, our project was based on an earlier study Dávila conducted with 79 predominantly white, female preservice teachers in the same Midwestern community in which this project occurred. In Dávila's study, the local preservice teachers responded to depictions of religion in Carmen Lomas Garza's (1996) award-winning picture book memoir, *In My Family/En Mi Familia* (see Dávila, 2015). Dávila's study illustrated that while 77% of the preservice teachers intended to use the book with their future students, most were inclined to censor the sections referencing religious events in Garza's childhood. Among the preservice teachers who would discuss the religious events, some offered

inaccurate assumptions and stereotypes about Mexican-American Catholics. Some positioned Garza's religious heritage and family practices as exotic customs of the Other. Dávila's study revealed that when certain readers (e.g., preservice teachers with limited knowledge about world religions) assume a stance of superiority in describing the religious perspectives and traditions of groups to which they do not belong, they adopt pervasive and sometimes harmful social narratives that cast members of the unfamiliar groups as deviant to dominant/mainstream cultural norms (Dávila, 2015).

As a point of comparison, our project deployed Garza's same childhood memoir with middle school students in the public school district in which many of the preservice teachers in Dávila's study wanted to teach. Our project was guided by the following research question: How would a group of sixth-graders at Mullens Middle School (pseudonym), a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse public school in a very low socio-economic community of the U.S. Midwest, treat the discussion of non-dominant religious perspectives in their ELA classroom and respond to mainstream social narratives about religious "Others"? Specifically, we examine the children's responses to the inclusion of culturally relevant religious content in two award-winning works of Mexican American children's literature and the interpretation of religious stories by mainstream news reporters. By highlighting both the middle-schoolers' and the local preservice teachers' responses, this article offers divergent, intergenerational perspectives on the same religious content.

## Methods

### Participants and Setting

At the time of the study, Volz, who is of European heritage, was both a teacher at Mullens Middle School and teacher educator at the local university. Dávila, who is of Latinx heritage, was a researcher at a different university but had spent the previous four years working with preservice teachers in the same district as Mullens.

Mullens is a neighborhood middle school located in the state's largest school district, with an enrollment of approximately 50,000 students. In the 2012-2013 school year, there were

approximately 540 children at Mullens who came from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, with at least 90% of the children eligible for free or reduced lunches. In its ninth year of missing the standards for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Mullens was designated a "target" school, in which additional professional development funds were allocated to the site under state surveillance by outside observers. Table 1 describes the demographics of the school community and the ELA class that participated in this study in May of 2013.

The class included 19 students, 10 boys and 9 girls. The demographics of the class were similar to the school in which more than 90% of the children were economically disadvantaged. At least two students still qualified for ESL services.

The student population was religiously diverse. Many students were Christian and followed Methodist, Baptist and/or Catholic traditions. With immigrant families from Somalia, Kenya and Eritrea, some students were Muslim. Moreover, within the local Cambodian community, some children practiced Buddhism. Of note, to protect the students' privacy, our IRB authorization restricted us from soliciting individual students' religious affiliations.

While Table 1 captures the diversity of the student population at Mullens at the time of data collection, it does not describe the preceding demographic changes in the school community. Between the 2011-2012 school year and the 2013-2014 school year, the number of Somali students declined while the population of Latinx students doubled. The Latinx students were primarily of Mexican descent and were members of the county's fastest growing population.

Alongside the population shift, there were visible changes in the county's economic and religious sectors, especially in the neighborhood surrounding Mullens Middle School. New Mexican markets and food trucks started to appear. A local tourism company, wanting to capitalize on the rapidly changing demographics of the region started offering a "taco truck tour" in which participants visit five taco trucks and a Mexican market located near Mullens. Additionally, many neighborhood churches began offering services in Spanish and participating in an annual procession/parade on December 12, the Feast Day of Mexico's patroness, the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Table 1

*Demographics of Mullens Schoolchildren*

	Black / Non-Hispanic/Latinx	Asian / Pacific Islander	Hispanic/Latinx	Multi-racial	White / Non-Hispanic/Latinx	Limited English Proficient	Students with Disabilities
<b>School</b>	28.8%	4.4%	10.1%	5.6%	51.1%	14.3%	19.2%
<b>Class</b>	31.6%	5.2%	10.5%	21.1%	31.6%	5.2%	0%

**Curricular Context**

The faculty at Mullens was committed to cultivating children's multiple literacy and interest in reading in alignment with the CC standards. Therefore, every class period included a 5-minute read-aloud to help expose the children to a variety of genres, text-formats, and reading styles per the CC standards for ELA instruction (mentioned earlier). In addition, the students in Volz's class engaged with several Shakespearean plays (e.g., *Romeo & Juliet*, *MacBeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and *Julius Caesar*) through dramatic inquiry exercises. Their discussions around these plays included inquiries about the religious lives of friars and nuns, which prompted Volz to invite the school principal, a practicing Catholic, to respond to the children's questions. In reading other works of literature like the historical fiction novel *Night Fires* (Stanley, 2009) and the multi-voiced chapter book *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997), the children noticed that religion was an influential part of the varied lives and cultures of the US, both past and present. Thus, Volz included relevant conversations about religion in her ELA classes to support the students' understandings of the different texts. Moreover, she regularly employed picture books in her class to provide a familiar text structure and to promote students' visual literacies.

**Materials**

Aligned with the CC and CCR anchor standards for reading varied genres and works of literature from diverse cultures, we selected two picture books about a North American legend (i.e., an unconfirmed story referencing historical figures, places, or events) that originated with the Spanish conquest of the continent in the 16th century. The nearly 500-year-old legend of *La*

*Virgen de Guadalupe* is linked to Spain's colonization of Mexico and most of the U.S. territory. With an objective to indoctrinate and thereby control the indigenous peoples of the continental Americas, Spanish missionaries destroyed ancient shrines dedicated to local deities and replaced them with chapels and churches honoring Catholic saints (Badillo, 2006; Poole, 1995). As part of the conquest, they imported apparition stories of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the legend of the brown Virgin Mary (Guadalupe), who shares the same skin tone as the original people of the Americas, correspondingly emerged. In the story, Guadalupe appeared to a poor indigenous man name Juan Diego in 1531. She asked Juan Diego to convince the Spanish Bishop to build a church honoring her atop Tepeyac Hill near Mexico City, which happened to be the same location where the Nahua people honored the local goddess Tonantzin, Mother of the Gods (Anzaldúa, 1987; Badillo, 2006; Poole, 1995). In the legend, as proof of her existence, Guadalupe miraculously left her image on Juan Diego's *tilma* (cloak). Today, millions of people annually visit the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City to view what is believed to be Juan Diego's nearly 500-year-old *tilma*.

During the conquest, many Indians of Mexico accommodated the reverence of Guadalupe as a secret means of honoring Tonantzin (Badillo, 2006). Accepted as Mary, the Catholic Mother of God *as well as* Tonantzin, the Nahua Mother of the Gods, Guadalupe crossed racial and cultural borders. She eventually came to represent the mixed, *mestiza* identity of Mexico's people (Anzaldúa, 1987). What is more, Guadalupe evolved into a national and political figure whose image adorned the revolutionary banners of Mexicans' bid for Independence from Spain in 1810, and call for Revolution in 1910. In the US, civil rights activist and labor leader, César

Chávez carried a banner of Guadalupe while calling for the social justice, human rights, and fair labor practices and wages for agriculture workers. Guadalupe's legendary image is part of popular culture across North America.

For our study, we first selected Pat Mora's (2012) realistic fiction picture book, *The Beautiful Lady: Our Lady of Guadalupe / La hermosa señora: Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Señora)*. Winner of the 2013 International Latino Book Award for Best Children's Fiction Picture Book, *Señora* is one of the few children's books to situate the apparition story of Guadalupe within the structure of a contemporary realistic story. *Señora* opens on December 12, the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. On the first page, Mora invites readers into Grandma Lupita's (Grandma's) warm modern-day kitchen where granddaughter Rose and friend Terry take a break from folding bright red paper roses for the day's celebration. The girls stop to admire a statue of Guadalupe that Grandma has prominently displayed. Curious Terry asks, "Who's that pretty lady?" (p. 3). Then, Rose prompts Grandma to tell the legend of Guadalupe just as she does every year. After Grandma Lupita concludes her retelling of the legend, Mora returns readers to the contemporary home where Grandma's special cookies await Rose and Terry in the kitchen. The book validates that, for many Mexican American children, Guadalupe is intertwined with their contemporary identity, culture, and spirituality. Moreover, Terry's curiosity offers an invitation to young readers to ask questions and learn about their peers' cultural/religious worldviews and perspectives, which might differ from their own.

Second, influenced by with Dávila's earlier study with local preservice teachers, we selected Carmen Lomas Garza's (1996) picture book memoir *In My Family (Family)*. It depicts Garza's childhood memories of her *Tejano*-American family in Kingsville, TX during the 1950s and 60s. According to Garza (2012), books like *Family* "elicit recognition and appreciation among Mexican Americans, both adults and children, while at the same time serve as a source of education for others not familiar with our culture" (n.p.). Such recognition and appreciation is important because over 63% of the 57.5 million Hispanics in the US are of Mexican heritage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Two paintings from *Family* were particularly relevant. The first was "The Virgin of Guadalupe/La Virgen de Guadalupe," which is, accompanied by an overview of the legend. The second was "The Miracle/El Milagro" (The Miracle). In the narrative text accompanying the painting, Garza recounts the time her family traveled to a small ranch in south Texas because, like other Texans in the region, they wanted to see the image of Guadalupe that had recently appeared on the ranch's water tank. To view Garza's paintings of "The Miracle," select Image #16 on her webpage:

<http://carmenlomasgarza.com/artwork/paintings> gs.

Table 2 provides the description that accompanies "The Miracle" in *In My Family*.

Table 2

*Garza's (1996) Narrative description of "The Miracle/El Milagro"*

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One day my mother heard that an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe had appeared on the water tank of a little ranch in south Texas. We got in the truck and drove out to see. There was a constant stream of people making a pilgrimage to the site, bringing flowers and offerings. Not everybody could see the image, but most people could.

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Two young cowboys had shot some rattlesnakes and hung them at the foot of the water tank. They were warning people not to go into the cotton fields because there were rattlesnakes out there. I'm in the blue dress, holding my mother's hand. And there's my brother Arturo, following us.

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Materials for our project also included images from across the US depicting large-scale outdoor murals of Guadalupe and other religious figures in public spaces. Finally, our study included a video segment of mainstream television news reports about the modern-day appearances of religious figures in non-religious venues:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-MR4tLunkc>

## Procedures

We collected data over the course of our four-day unit about legends and religious images in public spaces. On Day 1, Volz introduced the concept of legends as stories with historic elements that have been passed down from previous generations and prompted students to share legends that they knew. Several children were familiar with the legends of Robin Hood, Johnny Appleseed, and/or George Washington and the Cherry Tree. Then, we established the historical context for the famous North American legend of Guadalupe, which some children knew in its entirety. We began by sharing a map of Spain's and Portugal's colonial world empires and commercial trade routes, pointing out that Portugal colonized Brazil while Spain colonized the Philippines, approximately half of South America, and nearly half on North America. We highlighted that the Kingdom of "New Spain" included colonies in Central America, Mexico, Florida, and much of the US west of the Mississippi River (e.g., Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado). We discussed how, as colonizers, both Portugal and Spain imported Catholicism to the continental Americas, including apparition stories about the Virgin Mary, and described how new religious stories and images began to circulate in New Spain about Mary's appearance to an indigenous person.(1)

As part of the Mullens' read aloud protocol for each class period, Volz then read the picture book *Señora*, highlighting for the children Mora's inclusion of the legend of Guadalupe. After, we displayed a 2009 photograph of Hillary Clinton admiring the image of Guadalupe at the Basilica in Mexico City.(2) As the session ended the children debated, without coming to any consensus, whether or not the cloak in the Basilica is a legendary divine artifact or an artistic painting.

The Day 2 sessions began with a brief review of the first day's conversations about legends and the contemporary setting of the picture book, *Señora*. Then, we showed the children an 80-second newscast (in English) from the Basilica in Mexico City where, among the thousands of people, a group of Aztec dancers were honoring Guadalupe on her Feast Day. The spokeswoman for the dancers recapped the legend for the news crew and described how significant Guadalupe is today to millions of English- and Spanish-speaking persons of Mexican heritage across

North America. Next, we asked the children if they had ever seen images of Guadalupe in their Midwest community. Several, who were not of Mexican heritage, had not only seen a local mural Guadalupe on the side of a Mexican market and community center, they had also seen her image on candles in the "Hispanic" aisle of the grocery store and in friends' homes. Inspired by the conversation, some children were excited to discuss the religious images and altars in their homes, including statues of Buddha.

Following the children's discussion, we presented a slideshow of religious images and statues in public spaces across the US, several of which included Guadalupe. The "newest" work of public art was a 75ft x 43ft mural of Guadalupe created by Texas A & M students in 2013. It is located on the grounds of a downtown cement lot in Kingsville, TX. The children's curiosity about the cultural identity of the community that commissioned the recent mural provided a natural transition to reading *In My Family*, Garza's memoir about her childhood growing up in Kingsville.

Volz first read aloud vignettes from *In My Family* and shared the accompanying paintings in the picture book. They included Garza's memories of visiting a county fair, a birthday party, and an evening of watermelon and stories on the back porch. After the children shared personal connections to Garza's stories and paintings, Volz then presented the vignettes of "The Virgin of Guadalupe" and "The Miracle," described earlier in this manuscript. Some of the children were anxious to share the links they saw between the legend and the appearance of Guadalupe's image on the water tank. As a means to prepare for an open dialogue about "The Miracle" on Day 3, we invited the children to write their ideas about the following prompts: (A) Why do you think Carmen Lomas Garza (Carmen) and her mother and brother made the journey to the ranch? (B) Why do you think Carmen tells readers, "Not everybody could see the image [of Guadalupe], but most people could? (C) Could a story like "The Miracle" take place in the Midwest? Why or Why not?

The Day 3 class sessions began with a provocative conversation based on the children's ideas about "The Miracle." Alongside of the conversation, we shared a 90-second video of a mainstream television news report about the appearance of Guadalupe on a tree in a New

Jersey community. The children discussed the perspectives of the interviewees and the slant of the news reporter. To compare, we invited the children to respond to a different newscast in which the television commentator highlighted the religious sightings of the previous 12 months. An excerpt from the conversation is analyzed in Findings and Discussion.

On Day 4, we began by recapping the development of our collective investigation into legends, beliefs, and public responses to religious sightings. Next, we introduced the scientific concept of pareidolia and examined a series of photographs in which one might recognize, for example, the features of a human face in a flower, rock formation, or a configuration of clouds. Last, we revisited Garza's vignette "The Miracle" and asked the students to assume the role of a writer for either a community-based or large-scale newspaper. We prompted them to develop a headline and opening paragraph for their article that reflects one of the perspectives held by: Carmen Lomas Garza, the mainstream news commentators, the scientists, or a person from their community. Our unit culminated with the students' reading of their own news reports.

### Data Collection, Reduction, and Analysis

In this paper, we report on the data we collected from the students' responses to the Day 2 writing prompts and from our audio-recordings of the whole-class and small-group conversations on Day 3. From the audio-recordings, we first created verbatim transcripts, following Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson's (1974) system for documenting speakers' turn-taking patterns in verbal-exchanges. Then, we collaboratively reviewed each conversation and discussed our interpretations. Second, in concert with our research question, we each coded the students' comments and verbal exchanges for instances in which they revealed *inclusive* or *othering* narratives. Upon confirming our inter-coder reliability (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000), we reduced our dataset by eliminating comments and verbal-exchanges that were unrelated to our research questions. Then, we engaged in additional rounds of analysis to identify themes within the coded dataset (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In the interest of space, we have limited our analysis to the transcript of the Day 3 classroom discussion, which offers a set of data for comparative analysis with the preservice teachers in Dávila's previous study.

## Findings and Discussion

### Can You See It?

As a follow-up to their reading of Garza's *Family* on Day 2, the children revisited the painting of "The Miracle," which was projected on a screen, and reviewed their responses to the Day 2 writing prompts, including: Why do you think Carmen tells readers, "Not everybody could see the image [of Guadalupe], but most people could"? The subsequent class conversation is documented in Table 3.

Table 3

Day 3: Response to "The Miracle".

Turn Speaker Comment		
1	Allison	On two slides ago she [author Carmen Lomas Garza] said some people could see it and some people could not see it [i.e., the image of Guadalupe on the water tank]. What do you think about that?
2	Jon	I think some people-
3	Allison	Jasmine?
4	Jasmine	For some people, they don't really believe in her so that's why they can't see.
5	Allison	So if you believed in her, and your belief system was strong you would be able to see this on the image maybe. And other people that said "well, I don't see that", maybe they didn't believe in their heart? Ok. -Jon?
6	Jon	I think that one person saw it, and then like a couple other people saw it and then some more people came but they didn't really see it, but they said they saw it.
7	Allison	So once one person said they saw it there, kind of, the news spread.
8	Jon	Yea. ... And some people was wrong.

In this class conversation, a Latina student named Jasmine suggested that within the group of people at the water tank, there were believers and non-believers. She argued that those who were unable to see the image of Guadalupe “don’t really believe in her” (turn 4). Jasmine was not alone in her thinking. In our analysis of the sixth-graders’ written responses, nearly 77% suggested that one’s faith influences one’s ability to see divine images in ordinary places like a water tank. Representative of her peers’ responses, Cheyenne (a biracial, African American / White child) surmised that Garza’s narrative about “The Miracle” suggests that, “If you believe... you’ll see; but if you don’t, you won’t”. At the same time, Raymond made a different observation. He wrote, “Charlotte’s Web has a similar story, where everyone comes to the farm after miracle message by Charlotte the Spider.” By highlighting that the classical cannon of children’s literature includes “miracle” stories in which “seeing is believing,” Raymond’s literary connection to White’s (1952) book *Charlotte’s Web* deepened the context of the children’s responses to “The Miracle.” He reinforced that such stories are, in fact, reflected in mainstream American culture.

Returning to the class conversation (Table 3), an African-American boy named Jon expanded upon the notion that being able to see the image of Guadalupe in the water tank might have been a reflection of one’s alignment with the believers’ group. He proposed, “I think that one person saw it, and then like a couple other people saw it and then some more people came but they didn’t really see it, but they said they saw it” (turn 6). Alluding to the possibility that the news of the image spread by word of mouth, as clarified by Allison (turn 7), Jon adeptly indicated that by claiming to see the image, one could include her/himself in the “insider” social group as opposed to the outsider “Other” group. We interpret Jon’s additional comment, “And some people was wrong” (turn 8), as a recognition of the power of social conformity. Regardless of their own views, people could avoid being constructed as the Other by pretending to see things the same way (literally or figuratively) as the dominant group in the social setting.

As a point of contrast to the students’ comments about Garza’s vignette “The Miracle,” at least 11% of the local preservice teachers in Dávila’s study (2015) regarded Garza’s family and community as irrational Others.

One [preservice teacher] characterized the citizens of Kingsville, TX, as superstitious outsiders by proposing that “The Miracle” “goes along with the superstitions this family and the people of this city/era believe in.” Another, who acknowledged that the appearance of Guadalupe’s image on the water tank would have been “extremely significant among a primarily Mexican Catholic people group,” argued that such events are “usually instantly deemed ‘ridiculous’ by most people nowadays.” Therefore, he proposed that it would be inappropriate to discuss the religious significance of “The Miracle” in the ELA classroom because it would “make an entire culture out to seem ridiculous.” He would pragmatically censor the vignette to prevent his students from ridiculing U.S. citizens whose religious ideas differed from dominant perspectives. Although his objectives were sincere, this participant’s remarks, alongside his classmates’ comments, are examples of othering narratives that cast Mexican Catholic people of Garza’s generation as a ridiculously irrational group of outsiders in relation to today’s typical Americans (pp. 75-76).

Unlike most (77%) of the middle school children in Volz’s ELA class who indicated that they saw a link between one’s faith and one’s capacity to see personally relevant religious figures in uncommon venues, some of the local preservice teachers were not accommodating of Garza’s childhood memory. They positioned Garza’s family and community members who visited the little ranch in South Texas as Others whose testimonies of the miraculous image on the water tank were not worthy of acknowledgement.

#### Confronting Adults’ Dominant Discourse

The next transcript (Table 4) describes the children’s responses to a CBS News (2011) segment titled “Virgin Mary, Jesus Sightings Galore” in which the commentator offers his review of the year’s religious sightings to humor a national, mainstream adult audience. See this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-MR4tLunkc>

Because we placed small audio recorders on different tables in the room, this transcript includes Jon's unfiltered response, which is not heard by other students in the class (turn 3).

Turn	Speaker	Comment
1	Allison	[To class] What do you think about those [stories about religious sightings]?
2	Students	Cheesus! Cheetos!
3	Jon	[To tablemates] That's rude. I think that shit's rude.
4	Allison	[To class] Ok. [Pause] Do you think the guy or the newscaster, did he believe in the images in the ice, in the Cheetos were real?
5	Students	NO!
6	Chelsea	He didn't.
7	Allison	Chelsea, Why didn't it sound like it in your opinion?
8	Chelsea	He was like, "Apparently, a woman came out and saw ice like the Virgin Mary." He said it sarcastically.
9	Allison	So, he sounded a bit sarcastic in how he was talking.
10	Amina	<i>Inaudible</i>
10	Allison	He like what, Amina?
12	Amina	He was like laughing in between stories.
13	Allison	And, he laughed between stories. Jon?
14	Jon	Like the Cheetos and stuff. He's like if God comes back or whatever, and the apocalypse comes it's going to be delicious. And, he said that's the news live from the spot! He was like making a joke.
15	Allison	So, he was not making very serious comments.
16	Students	Yeah.

TABLE 4

*Day 3: Response to "Virgin Mary, Jesus Sightings Galore."*

Within a second of the video's conclusion, the children voiced their feedback to each other. Jon blurted out, "That's rude. That shit is rude" (turn 3). He was distressed by the commentator's disrespect toward the people's sincere stories of religious sightings in the video clips. Later, Jon suggested to the whole class that the commentator was "making a joke" (turn 14) by pretending he was a serious, on-the-scene reporter who was giving information "live from the spot" (turn 14). Instead, the commentator sat behind a desk and diminished (othered) the people in the news clips by "laughing in between stories," which a Somali-American girl named Amina observed (turn 12). The commentator spoke "sarcastically," Chelsea noticed (turn 8), and mused that when "the apocalypse comes it's going to be delicious," which Jon mimicked for others in the class (turn 14).

The sixth-graders' collective disapproval of the news commentator's supposedly humorous end-of-year review illustrates that the dominant othering narratives of mainstream adult Americans do not resonate with the children in the diverse Mullens community.

Conversely, the local preservice teachers' responses to Garza's story about "The Miracle," described earlier, aligned with the same stance the news commentator assumed in his report. For example, corresponding with the aforementioned preservice teacher's proposition that events like "The Miracle" are usually deemed ridiculous in mainstream culture:

Another preservice teacher would pair Garza's account of "The Miracle" with the popular anecdote about a person [who] claimed to have an image of God on their grilled cheese sandwich. This trope happened to serve as the subplot of "Grilled Cheesus," an episode of the television show *Glee* that aired on October 5, 2010, to an audience of 11.2 million U.S. viewers (Grilled Cheesus, 2014). The trope also inspired the titles of the recent *New York Times* newspaper article "Is That Jesus in Your Toast?" (Gantman & Van Bavel, 2014) and the *Time Magazine* article "It's 'Perfectly Normal' to See Jesus in Toast, Study Says" (Waxman, 2014). The titles of these articles, in combination with droll television news stories about "religious sightings," clearly reinforce the idea that seeing Jesus in a piece of toast is not socially accepted

conduct. [Thus,] it is not surprising that a study participant would equate “The Miracle” with the trope about “Grilled Cheesus.” (Dávila, 2015, p. 76)

What is surprising is that the children in Volz’s class demonstrated empathy toward the interviewees in the television newscast and exercised critical thinking in analyzing the commentator’s statement. The local preservice teachers, on the other hand, would reinforce the construction of the Other among their future students. Many of the sixth-graders recognized the personal significance that seeing a religious figure holds for some people. They were also attuned to the demeaning qualities of *othering* social narratives that privilege dominant, mainstream ideas over divergent worldviews and perspectives.

### Conclusion and Implications

In this article, we have attempted to provide a window into the ways in which the children of a diverse, urban, low-income community respond to mainstream adult narratives that demean members of underrepresented groups as the “Other.” The data illustrate that the Mullens children favored inclusive narratives that accommodate and respect religious and cultural diversity as a core element of a pluralistic community. The children’s responses rejected the dominant us/Other social narrative as voiced by the news commentator and local preservice teachers. While the results of our study cannot be generalized, they correspond with the research findings described by Lester (2011), in which students living in ethnically and culturally diverse communities benefit from opportunities to learn about their neighbors’ faiths and traditions. Our study illustrates that promoting religious literacy outside of the middle school social studies classroom is a worthwhile endeavor in providing students an interdisciplinary context for recognizing both inclusive and othering social narratives about religion in a variety of texts, including picture books, murals, and newscasts.

Advancing students’ awareness of religious diversity not only aligns with the expectations of the CC/CCR anchor standards to raise students’ cultural knowledge, but also provides children the opportunity to develop a critical awareness that multiple perspectives and viewpoints can coexist in one’s local community and global society. Middle school preservice and practicing

teachers who are not accustomed to talking about religions with their students might benefit from studying the tenets set forth by the American Academy of Religion’s (Moore, 2010) *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion*, and the First Amendment Center’s (Haynes & Thomas, 1999) *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools*. Both recommend that teachers should: (a) advance students’ awareness of different religions, but neither the acceptance nor practice of any particular religion; (b) promote students’ exposure to diverse religious views, but not impose any particular perspective; and (c) should support students’ education about all religions, but neither privilege nor denigrate any religion. The Anti-Defamation League’s (2012) publication, *Religion in the Public Schools*, could prove useful to middle school educators, as well.

As the demographics of public schools continue to shift and diversify, so do the religious backgrounds of the students present in public school classrooms. Future studies could (a) examine how middle school students in other public school communities respond to the presentation of similar books and materials and (b) consider how other preservice and practicing teachers make sense of children’s books and narratives about diverse religious perspectives. They could also investigate how children from varying religious/cultural traditions respond to religiously inclusive content in public schools. Last, more studies are needed to understand the experiences of children and educators whose religious /non-religious perspectives are not aligned with dominant cultural norms and to inform the interdisciplinary ways in which diverse religious perspectives are regarded both inside and outside of public middle school classrooms. By attending to the promotion of religious literacy across the disciplines we might advance the tenets of our nation’s pluralistic, democratic society.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Note: As colonizers, the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal imported Marian legends across North and South America. The legends include images or wood, clay, or stone figures of the Virgin Mary. All of the apparition stories feature a humble and/or disenfranchised member of society. Here are just a few of the names of Marian patronesses across North & South America: Brazil: Our Lady of

*Aparecida; Costa Rica: Our Lady of the Angels; Cuba: Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre; Guatemala: Our Lady of the Rosary; Peru: Our Lady of Mercy; Puerto Rico: Our Lady of Divine Providence; Venezuela: Our Lady of Coromoto*

<sup>2</sup> See:

[http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/hillary-clinton-u-s-secretary-of-state-right-talks-with-news-photo/94949460?esource=SEO\\_GIS\\_CDN\\_Redirect#hillary-clinton-us-secretary-of-state-right-talks-with-monsignor-at-picture-id94949460](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/hillary-clinton-u-s-secretary-of-state-right-talks-with-news-photo/94949460?esource=SEO_GIS_CDN_Redirect#hillary-clinton-us-secretary-of-state-right-talks-with-monsignor-at-picture-id94949460)

