

The Savior Trope and the Modern Meanings of Whiteness

The media and the cinematic racial order are basic to the understanding of race relations in any society.

—Norman Denzin, “Symbolic Interactionism, Poststructuralism, and the Racial Subject”

Color-Blind Sided: The Curious Case of Sandra Bullock

As she accepted the 2010 Oscar for Best Actress for her role as Leigh Anne Tuohy in the 2009 film *The Blind Side*, Sandra Bullock gushed, “There’s no race, no religion, no class system, no color, nothing, no sexual orientation that makes us better than anyone else. We are all deserving of love” (“Oscars 2010” 2010). The film, based on a true story, centers on the Tuohys, a white, Republican family in the Deep South who adopt a homeless African American teenager named Michael Oher. The Tuohys, and especially the formidable Leigh Anne, teach Michael valuable life lessons and the sport of football. Because of their help, Oher excels on the field to such a degree that he earns a scholarship at the University of Mississippi and a career in the NFL. *The Blind Side* garnered wide attention from reviewers and prize committees, including a nomination for the Eighty-Third Annual Academy Award for Best Picture. Commentators hailed Bullock’s performance (which also received the Golden Globe Award for Best Actress and the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Leading Role) as her best work to date. The *Chicago Tribune*’s Michael Phillips wrote, “The star is Sandra Bullock, whose character, Leigh Anne Tuohy, is conceived as a steel magnolia with a will of iron and . . . righteous gumption” (Phillips 2009).

But some commentators did not join the applause. They saw the movie as another instance of a “white savior film”—the genre in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, nonwhite character from a sad fate. In one example of this perspective, the day after Bullock received her first Oscar, movie star Vanessa Williams appeared on ABC’s

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The View and broke from the daytime television script of apolitical pleasantries to state, “It brings up a theme for black folks, that, okay, here’s another white family that saves the day. In terms of another black story that needs a white person to come in and lift them up.” Interrupting Williams with a color-blind retort, Barbara Walters stated, “I have to disagree with you. . . . It was a wonderful story, and it was a story of closeness between two races, so I don’t agree with you” (Deane 2010). The mildly cross interaction between Williams and Walters demonstrates how the prism of race and cinema refracts our worldviews. Despite dissent from some, many on both sides of the color line seemed to largely adore—to the tune of \$255 million—*The Blind Side*.

But mere days after Bullock embarked, Oscar in hand, on a journey toward increased stardom and accolades, news broke that Bullock’s husband, Jesse James, had had an extramarital affair with neo-Nazi pinup girl Michelle McGee (a woman with white-power and swastika tattoos adorning her body) and that Bullock and James had adopted (in January 2010) a young African American boy from New Orleans. Bullock’s interracial adoption and husband’s flirtation with white supremacy prompted a storm of public debate. Some saw Bullock’s move as kind-hearted benevolence, whereas others were a bit more skeptical, such as the author of the following editorial in the *Chicago Defender*:

Now Bullock can be both the female victim icon and the liberal white heroine at the same time. . . . Essentially we have a woman being praised in the national media for adopting a Black child and attempting to raise him for a time with her neo-Nazi husband. . . . Just because someone is white and rich doesn’t mean they know what’s best for an African American child, especially when they clearly aren’t too concerned with sharing a bed with white power fanatics. (Johnson 2010)

The dustup over, and slippage between, Bullock’s reel- and real-life interracial drama reflects the uneasy place of the white savior motif in our contemporary world. It captures public attention and drives contentious debate in venues far beyond movie theaters.

Given the diverse locations in which the white savior resonates, the anxious allure of saviorism has saturated our contemporary logic. This trope is so widespread that varied intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by a logic that racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemption (nonwhites). Such imposing patronage enables an interpretation of nonwhite characters and culture as essentially broken, marginalized, and pathological, while whites can emerge as messianic characters that easily fix the nonwhite pariah with their superior moral and mental abilities.

While some might argue that such racially charged saviorism is an essentially conservative, postcolonial device that rationalizes right-wing paternalism, I argue that it knows no political boundaries and is pliable to contradictory and seemingly antagonistic agendas. For example, the left-leaning and Pulitzer Prize–

winning journalist Nicholas Kristof admits to the intentional use of the savior motif in his journalism. In the *New York Times*, Kristof penned the following:

Very often I do go to developing countries where local people are doing extraordinary work, and instead I tend to focus on some foreigner, often some American, who's doing something there. And let me tell you why I do that. The problem that I face—my challenge as a writer—in trying to get readers to care about something like Eastern Congo, is that frankly, the moment a reader sees that I'm writing about Central Africa, for an awful lot of them, that's the moment to turn the page. It's very hard to get people to care about distant crises like that. One way of getting people to read at least a few [paragraphs] in is to have some kind of a foreign protagonist, some American who they can identify with as a bridge character. And so if this is a way I can get people to care about foreign countries, to read about them, ideally, to get a little bit more involved, then I plead guilty. (Kristof 2010)

And ironically, the conservative journalist David Brooks decries the white savior motif as an overdrawn plot device. In reviewing the 2009 film *Avatar* in the *New York Times*, he writes:

It rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic. It rests on the assumption that nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades. It rests on the assumption that illiteracy is the path to grace. It also creates a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism. Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration. It's just escapism, obviously, but benevolent romanticism can be just as condescending as the malevolent kind—even when you surround it with pop-up ferns and floating mountains. (Brooks 2010)

The trope of the white savior has saturated popular imagination and casual conversation on blogs (Gates 2012), on Twitter (Cole 2012), in newspaper op-eds (Lange 2013), and on television. The sketch comedy television show *MADtv* (Leddy 2007) even parodied the genre in the skit “Nice White Lady”:

White School Administrator: Forget it. These are minorities. They can't learn and they can't be educated.

White Schoolteacher: With all due respect, sir, I'm a white lady. I can do anything.

Feeding off both use and ridicule, the trope survives and sets off controversy with each new manifestation, especially in cinema. Whether arguing over the content of the films themselves, the evaluations of film critics, the meaning-making of these films by a heterogeneous consumer public, people wrangle over the site and suitability of the white savior and stake out a position along

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the spectrum of evaluations: good to bad, progressive to racist, and stereotype to true story. The repetition of heated debate over every film that showcases a white protagonist attempting to save a person of color might lead one to think that a major step either forward or backward in race relations is at stake when the curtain goes up.

Using this background as a touchstone for analysis, I set out in this book to investigate the full circle of white savior films: from their cinematic content to their reception by professional film critics, to their consumer base and interpretation. But first, before we investigate the synthesis of race and saviorism, what is this thing we commonly call “white”?

Race and the Modern Meanings of Whiteness

“Race,” wrote the famous anthropologist Ashley Montagu, is “man’s most dangerous myth” (1942). Contemporary scholars now assert that race is a “social construction”—a set of ideological beliefs, interactive practices, and institutional locations, used to justify the division of people by arbitrary phenotypical features and the unequal allocation of resources and privileges. Viewing race as a social construction means that it is not a naturally occurring or essential human characteristic. Rather, race is an invented category that, over time, people have come to treat as verifiable, real, and the cause of serious consequences, what sociologists call a “social fact.”¹

A long literature on the evolution of the concept of race and the division of humanity into racialized categories need not be summarized here. For my purposes in this book, the key concept is that whiteness perches atop the racial hierarchy in the United States (and arguably, almost everywhere else), reserving a host of material and symbolic privileges.² Given this position, whiteness

1. The origins of the concept of race grew out of the synthesis of colonialism, globalization, and early philosophical and scientific thought about human variation (Smedley 1993). For example, the belief in divinely decreed or biologically derived racial differences rationalized the transatlantic slave trade, the extermination and removal of Native Americans, the barring of Asian immigrants from the United States, and the belief in the innate superiority of whiteness from Hitler’s Germany and Pinochet’s Chile to South African apartheid and the Jim Crow United States. But these racialized interactions have not always been around, and they are not preordained. Ancient societies failed to divide people according to physical differences (they generally established in- and out-groups by way of citizenship, religion, status, and language usage) (Snowden 1983: 63). Moreover, race holds no genetic reality (Graves 2005). Recent advances in molecular biology and genetic mapping have enabled the expedient study of population differences (Bliss 2012). Still, race is imbued with a special potency we might call “common sense.” Most people believe that race holds a biological reality. And when people define a situation as real, the situation will be real in its consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572). We live in a racialized society in which racial meanings, expectations, and institutions differently constrain and enable peoples’ lives.

2. Examples of material privilege include better access to higher education or safe neighborhoods in which to live, and symbolic privilege includes conceptions of beauty or intelligence that are conflated with whiteness but that implicitly exclude the intellectual

is associated with either normativity or idealism—linked sets of behaviors, achievements, and statuses to which all who desire social and economic mobility should aspire (Hughey 2012).

This white normativity is often hidden in plain sight. As scholars Nelson Rodriguez and Leila Villaverde write, “Whiteness has historically been appropriated in unmarked ways by strategically maintaining as colorless *its* color (and hence its values, belief systems, privileges, histories, experiences, and modes of operation) behind its constant constructions of otherness” (2000: 1). Because whiteness can be akin to an invisible “knapsack” of privileges (McIntosh 1988), contemporary white dominance and privilege often go unquestioned (at least by most whites) or are justified in reference to whites’ supposed possession of “good values,” such as a strong work ethic and commitment to sovereign individualism. Rather than recognize such values as the result of half a millennium of a social order heavily slanted in one group’s favor, this view assumes the inherent superiority of whiteness. The sociologist Ruth Frankenberg maintains, “Whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it” (1993: 228–229).

Because race, and thus whiteness, is a socially derived category, the meanings and privileges we assign to it and different racial groups are not static. Economic, legal, social, demographic, and cultural tremors sometimes shake the foundations on which these categories are built and create confusion within or between groups. As a result, the dominant racial group might seek to shore up those foundations (Doane 1997a). For example, recent years have seen a string of social shifts that many whites interpret with apprehension and anxiety. Media outlets increasingly report census projections that whites will lose their majority status in the United States by 2050 (“Minorities Expected” 2008). In concert with these findings, a June 2011 report blazed across national headlines to inform audiences that “more than half of the children under age 2

contributions or aestheticism of people of color. That even economically vulnerable white working class can reap the benefits of whiteness was a point recognized early in the twentieth century by the pioneering sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois: “The white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them” ([1935] 1999: 701). Today, whites are often assumed to be the standard, or normative, group and the identity all should assimilate into and aspire to resemble and to which society’s central institutions cater: from examples as mundane as “flesh”-colored Band-Aids (when is the last time you saw a dark brown Band-Aid?) to the wide representation on television, in radio, in newsprint, and on the Internet of white people as positive leaders of, and central contributors toward, civilization (even now, in the age of Obama, when is the last time you saw more than a handful of black political or social leaders portrayed in mainstream media?) (McIntosh 1988).

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in the U.S. are minorities, part of a sweeping race change and a growing age divide between mostly white, older Americans and fast-growing younger ethnic populations that could reshape government policies” (Yen 2011). These demographic changes come at a time of increased worry over the perceived normalization of economic instability in the housing, stock, and loan markets and increased overall unemployment levels amid the white working and middle classes. Moreover, recent years have been marked by concern over illegal immigration manifest in nativist laws and policies in states such as Arizona, Georgia, and Alabama; a rising discourse opposing affirmative action; and a largely white Tea Party that exhorts us to “take our country back!” This angst was highlighted in a March 2010 *Time* article titled “The White Anxiety Crisis” by Gregory Rodriguez:

Despite the extraordinary progress of the past 50 years, the sense of white proprietorship—“this is our country and our culture”—still has not been completely eradicated. . . . This [white backlash] won’t take the form of a chest-thumping brand of white supremacy. Instead, we are likely to see the rise of a more defensive, aggrieved sense of white victimhood that strains the social contract and undermines collectively shared notions of the common good.

A year later, CNN ran the story “Are Whites Racially Oppressed?,” documenting that 44 percent of Americans believe discrimination against whites is equal to bigotry aimed at blacks and other racial minorities. The article began:

They marched on Washington to reclaim civil rights. They complained of voter intimidation at the polls. They called for ethnic studies programs to promote racial pride. They are, some say, the new face of racial oppression in this nation—and their faces are white. . . . A growing number of white Americans are acting like a racially oppressed majority. They are adopting the language and protest tactics of an embattled minority group. (Blake 2011)

By 2012 the first black presidency, in Barack Obama; the first female Speaker of the House, in Nancy Pelosi; the first Latina member of the Supreme Court, in Sonia Sotomayor; and the news that nonwhite births accounted for more than half of all U.S. births led many to an interpretation of these circumstances that was shaded with a fear of disenfranchisement. “Take our country back!” could be a poignant yet ultimately futile battle cry among a new white minority. Simply put, more and more whites regard themselves as oppressed and are creating a varied social backlash against the racial “others” who they believe are the new oppressors. Many whites interpret the changes in the racial landscape as threats to white normality, privilege, and culture—a culture that some understand as inherently superior and moral. Yet, despite the ominous tone that threads together this worldview, the white backlash is far from

new. Such discourse was present when whites discussed slave revolts during the eighteenth century, when whites resisted the handful of newly elected black congressmen during Reconstruction, and when whites disapproved of the civil rights movement (Doane 1997b; Gallagher 2003; Wise 2009).

But the notion of a white backlash may somewhat oversimplify, and even obscure, a fundamental characteristic of white racial identity. While some whites rebel against recent civil rights gains, some fight to protect them. In fact, some whites, regardless of their political or ideological stances, are trying to settle what it means to be white in a time of rapidly changing racial demographics, virulent racial discourse, and apocalyptic and nihilistic messages about the future of the nation and white people. Many whites are in the midst of a crisis of meaning inherent to the very character of whiteness. That is, whiteness is not so much *in* crisis as it is an identity constructed *as* crisis. Whiteness is perpetually a crisis of legitimation given that it must constantly engage in the Herculean feat of claiming a superior and righteous subject position regardless of the external changes around it. In so doing, the foundational sense of white superiority actually sows the seeds of its own frailty. As Alastair Bonnett writes, “Whiteness has often been experienced as something very vulnerable, as an identity under threat. . . . [T]he fragility of whiteness is a direct product of the extraordinary claims of superiority made on its behalf” (2000: 39).

These social, political, economic, and demographic changes to the U.S. racial landscape certainly roughen and fracture what was once smooth terrain for the unfettered travel of white racial superiority. These social undulations, while hardly mountainous changes to the racial order, threaten uncontested white dominance. And while these cracks may result in only slight tremors that barely shake our racialized social order, many whites experience these vibrations as a cataclysmic earthquake that threatens to collapse the house in which they lived as blatant lord and master.

During a time when some perceive an assault on white racial superiority, mainstream media narratives of triumphant white do-gooders should not surprise anyone. As the *Atlantic*’s Teju Cole (2012) writes, “From [Jeffrey] Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to TED, the fastest growth industry in the US is the White Savior Industrial Complex.” Such stories—especially mass-produced, reviewed, and consumed cinema—appear to support our collective reinterpretation of whites as sentimental interracial benefactors. No longer, so we are told, are whites the racists of Jim Crow. Now they stand on the side of racial righteousness. White actors such as Tom Cruise as advisor to post-Meiji Japanese samurai in *The Last Samurai* (2003), Matthew McConaughey as civil rights lawyer in *A Time to Kill* (1996) and *Amistad* (1997), Emma Stone as Southern girl writing a munificent exposé in *The Help* (2011), and Sandra Bullock as steel magnolia mentoring a homeless black child in *The Blind Side* (2009) all represent characters whose innate sense of justice drives these tales of racial cooperation, nonwhite uplift, and white redemption. These narratives help repair what is truly the most dangerous myth of race—a tale of normal and natural white paternalism (Hughey 2010).

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Whether helping people of color who cannot or will not help themselves, teaching nonwhites right from wrong, or framing the white savior as the only character able to recognize these moral distinctions, these films show whites going the extra mile across the color line. In a climate in which many whites believe they are victimized, feel fatigued by complaints of racial inequality, and hold a latent desire to see evidence of a postracial era of reconciliation, films that demonstrate a messianic white character certainly resonate. These interracial depictions of friendly and cooperative race relations thus eschew any blatant dispatch of white supremacy. Rather, they rely on an implicit message of white paternalism and antiblack stereotypes of contented servitude, obedience, and acquiescence. Whiteness emerges as an iron fist in a velvet glove, the knightly savior of the dysfunctional “others” who are redeemable as long as they consent to assimilation and obedience to their white benefactors of class, capital, and compassion. But from where did this modern cinematic trope emerge?

A Genealogy of the White Savior

Terms such as “noble savage,” “manifest destiny,” “white man’s burden,” and “great white hope” refer to previous iterations of the complex relationship between the tropes of the white savior and the dysfunctional and dark “other” in need of saving. A “trope” is a recurring cinematic motif that conveys a specific and poignant symbolic meaning (Manchel 1990: 134). Films are often driven by tropes that then come to define particular genres, whether stories about an outsider teacher in an urban school or a lone cowboy in an exotic land. Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon explain in *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* that the white savior genre is recognizable through the presence of a white person as “the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival” (2003: 33). Examples include *Conrack* (1974), *Glory* (1989), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Dangerous Minds* (1996), *Sunset Park* (1996), *Amistad* (1997), *Music of the Heart* (1999), *Finding Forrester* (2000), *Hardball* (2001), *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Half Nelson* (2006), *Gran Torino* (2008), *Avatar* (2009), *The Blind Side* (2009), and *The Help* (2011), to name just a few.

Producers, critics, and audiences often present these films as straightforward and impartial narratives about heroic characters, intercultural friendships, and the humanistic struggle to overcome daunting odds (usually “based on a true story,” to boot). Yet they are sites of both purposeful ideological labor and implicit explanations about race so normalized as common sense that many may fail to recognize them as ideological. To unpack the nuance of the present-day white savior trope, one must dig into its earlier manifestations. Hence, it is necessary to identify its origins to gain purchase on the assumptions and cultural logic that drive its modern incarnation.

Race is a relational concept. It holds meaning through the identification and division of people from one another. Especially in the North American context, the meanings of race remain structured by a white-nonwhite

binary. The logic of hypodescent (the one-drop rule) and the conflation of whiteness with both superiority and normality helped create a racial order in which nonwhiteness (particularly blackness) was understood as impure and inferior.

Against this backdrop, the predecessor to the modern white savior trope emerges in tandem with the character of the “noble savage.” The term first appeared in John Dryden’s *The Conquest of Granada* (1672) as an idealized picture of “nature’s gentleman.” This character was thought worthy because it was unspoiled by material developments and the trappings of modernity. It was often billed as a nonwhite, indigenous, and exotic savage that the white explorer would discover on his colonizing mission. “In the Eurocentric imagination of the eighteenth century, Africans and indigenous ‘new world’ peoples were said to have noble qualities: harmony with nature, generosity, child-like simplicity, a disdain of materialistic luxury, moral courage, natural happiness even under duress, and a natural or innate morality” (Hughey 2009: 564). This racialized idea fit well with the romanticized and uneasy belief that a burgeoning industrial society was moving away from its time-honored roots, thus losing touch with humanity’s true moral instincts. With growing colonial contact and an increasingly media-saturated world, the notion of a white messianic penetrant of a naturally pure and unspoiled culture of noble savages slowly trickled into the popular imagination. Soon the characters of the noble savage and the white colonizer became staples of popular culture and an all-too-seductive device by which racial difference and interaction were interpreted.

In the United States, the term “manifest destiny” came to symbolize a synthesis between racial and religious paternalism. Coined in 1845 in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (J. Pratt 1927), the notion of manifest destiny carried with it the implicit assumption that white Americanness was exceptionally virtuous and was divinely inspired to spread that virtue to others, even if against their will. This ideology was practiced, most notably, in white attitudes toward black slaves and in the westward expansion that would “save” Native Americans from themselves. Hence, the policy of “Kill the Indian, and Save the Man” (R. Pratt [1892] 1973) was instituted as indigenous land was stolen and Native Americans were forced to attend schools designed to strip away their cultural practices in order to “civilize the savages.” Such white racial saviorism was protected and propagated in the legal and policy positions of the time as well as within the dominant and de facto assumptions regarding interracial interactions. White domination vis-à-vis white racial paternalism—a move from the iron fist to the velvet glove of white supremacy—was rationalized through “racial stereotypes (the cognitive aspect), metaphors and concepts (the deeper cognitive aspect), images (the visual aspect), emotions (feelings such as fear), and inclinations (to take discriminatory action)” (Feagin 2006: 27). Whites were socially constructed as heroic and virtuous saviors, a framing that Ronald Takaki (1979) calls “virtuous republicanism”—concentrated repositories of an 1800s Protestant ethic that carried purchase relative to nonwhite pathologies and problems in need of white control.

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As the nineteenth century closed, Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden" (first published in *McClure's Magazine*) further refined the notion of a white savior. Written for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and altered to address the U.S. acquisition of the Philippines from Spain in the Spanish-American War, the poem received mixed reaction. Some thought it direct praise of white colonization over darker-skinned nations. In this rendering, the "burden" is the moral responsibility of white men to rule over darker and dysfunctional people for their own good. As a result, many came to see the poem as emblematic of racism, colonization, and white superiority complexes that continue to frame the world in terms of a stark civilized-savage dichotomy. Others saw the poem as a satirical critique and tongue-in-cheek parody of the prevailing racial and cultural imperialist attitudes of the day. Regardless of the debate, the phrase came to symbolize an increasingly taken-for-granted weltanschauung: a world populated by dysfunctional people of color thought unredeemable without righteous white paternalism.

As a vociferous movement for human rights and decolonization by people of color in the United States and in nations under the yoke of American and European control gained momentum, the white savior took on a more sinister shade. As the first black heavyweight-boxing champion, Jack Johnson (1908–1915), gained fame and the ire of white America, some demanded a white boxer reclaim the title. As a series of white boxers tried and failed to beat Johnson, they were each labeled the "great white hope." These challengers were, in many ways, propitious white saviors. The black possession of the heavyweight belt was thought an unnatural and dangerous situation that would encourage social equity, threaten to debunk the myth of white superiority, and even cause race riots. In fact, the 1912 U.S. Congress was so convinced that images of Johnson pummeling his white opponents would cause race riots that they passed legislation making it illegal to transport a fight film across state lines (with the penalty of a \$1,000 fine, a year in prison, or both) ("Cinema" 1940).

Since the days of Johnson, the term "great white hope" has been repeatedly used in relation to white challengers to heavyweight champs, such as Joe "the Brown Bomber" Louis in the 1930s. In particular, Nazi boxer Max Schmeling's twelfth-round defeat of Louis prompted Adolph Hitler to claim the victory as proof of Aryan supremacy. The trope continued into the 1980s as Larry "the Hitman" Holmes fought Gerry Cooney in a fight so racially charged that both white supremacist groups and black activist organizations claimed they would attend the match. While these white challengers were not white saviors in the conventional sense—in that they directly sought to beat, rather than help, people of color—they labored to reproduce a social situation in which whites would occupy positions of paternalistic authority over people of color. In this sense, the "great white hope" became a personified trope for white racial anxiety. A moribund white supremacist order required a racial savior whose very social presence promised to cement white racial clout and control, which would in turn reestablish an order premised on the expertise of white benefactors and the gratitude of nonwhite recipients.

The Widespread White Savior

Scholarship interrogating the diffuse iterations and evolution of the white savior has flourished since the middle of the twentieth century. Historians have demonstrated how the white savior was a very real character during the formation of the United States. The historian James Axtell finds that Native people saw soldiers, missionaries, and teachers as a troubling presence. Upon capturing some of these white interlopers, they would often return them to their American and European kindred because they “in general regarded their white saviors as barbarians and their deliverance as captivity” (Axtell 1975: 62). Similarly, myriad studies in fields as diverse as religion, environmental conservation, education, and politics have pointed to the troubling nature of the concept of the white savior and the damage done by those who have seen themselves suited to such a label. Given its religious foundation, saviorism is often discussed favorably. But now it is commonly understood as a seductive and likely harmful and dangerous orientation toward ministry. Tim Sisk, the director of the Office of Christian Outreach at Wheaton College, states, “We try to do cross-cultural training. We want [graduates] to go out there not with a white savior mentality, but as a learner, sometime who can learn from other cultures and be a better person” (quoted in Riley 2005: 159).

Environmental conservation and protection advocates also now recognize prior missteps in use of the white savior device:

Diverse iconic figures in conservation such as Theodore Roosevelt, Jacques Cousteau and Jane Goodall have played starring roles in wildlife films in order to communicate their respective views on conservation. The common narrative of these films represents a reoccurring motif, or trope, in wildlife film that has evolved over time and prominently persists today—the trope of the Environmental Savior. This trope is justifiably condemned in its predominant form in mainstream wildlife film for casting a white westerner as environmental savior in a foreign ecosystem. (Winston 2010: v)

Others have found the white savior trope to invade educational pedagogy. Connie Titone discovered that some white teachers did “not see any difference between rightness and whiteness” and adopted the identity of a “white savior” in which they teach “African American, Cajun, and Vietnamese adolescents to succeed academically . . . [.] assimilate into mainstream ways of speaking and acting, learn the given Eurocentric curriculum, gain access to the social and economic system as it was, and thus be successful” (1998: 161–162). Moreover, programs such as Teach for America have increasingly come under fire for reproducing a neocolonial practice in which first-time white teachers hone their skills on dark-skinned at-risk students, all under the logic of a controlling form of charity (Seward 2010).

In the realm of politics, the white savior proves so flexible a device that it is used across the political spectrum of red and blue. For example, Reynolds

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Scott-Childress finds that artistic depictions of Abraham Lincoln relied on the trope of the “white savior above. Lincoln’s acts of abolition and the slave’s initial awakening are really two separate narratives . . . between great man and lowly slave” (1999: 33–34). In stark contrast, the founder of the American Nazi Party, George Lincoln Rockwell, writes, “Future generations will look upon Adolf Hitler as the White Savior of the twentieth century, and the Fuehrerbunker in Berlin as the Alamo of the White race” (quoted in Thayer 1968: 27). The white savior is a device so malleable that it can frame the nearly ultimate benefactor of people of color in the personage of Lincoln or as the definitive white supremacist of Hitler. The trope has also been used by nonwhite cultures when discussing their light-skinned political leaders, such as the Mexican leader Álvaro Obregón, who has been “described as the ‘white savior’ and compared to Hernán Cortés” (Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Roseblatt 2003: 218).

Expanding to the larger geopolitical realm, understandings of Hawaii and its incorporation into the United States have been fraught with the “narrative that portrays [Father] Damien as the white savior of powerless Hawaiians who improved conditions of unfortunate ‘lepers’ and tragically died from the disease himself in the process” (Moran 2007: 226). Such a story justified white efforts to dominate Hawaiian political systems and created a hallowed image of the sacrificing messianic white father-savior who gave his life so that Hawaiians would be better off. In contemporary political discourse regarding U.S. political intervention in foreign lands, scholars have recently demonstrated how “policymakers and corporate media have consistently named their aggressive, illegal military interventions into Haiti (among many other countries) as ‘saintly’ and ‘noble.’ . . . This propaganda perpetuates the paternalism of white supremacy that depicts the United States as the white savior of a childlike Haiti” (Malott 2011: 131).

Over time, the white savior metaphor has stabilized and reduced the complexity of an array of interracial and intercultural interactions into a digestible narrative of redemption, individuality, and sacrifice. As witnessed above, increasing numbers of scholars and stakeholders now recognize and critique the prior and continued usages of the savior motif as a mechanism to legitimate and rationalize asymmetrical social relations. But when it comes to film, many still maintain that such evaluations are unfounded and that criticisms of white characters as white saviors fail to see film as harmless entertainment (Shaw 2008). Hollywood film, as a relatively recent and extremely popular media form, offers a prescient opportunity to examine how the savior metaphor works in relation to contemporary understandings of race, particularly that of interracial interactions.

White Saviors on Silver Screens

What role does film play in white racial meaning-making and in repairing the myth of inherent white racial superiority? Given the trepidation, disquiet, and anomie experienced by whites’ place and purpose in the age of Obama, some

might find it strange to turn to cinema. However, the social practice of consuming film has proved an efficacious strategy for promoting economic stability, stabilizing national identity, and endorsing both implicit and explicit racial messages since the first films appeared. Indeed, entertainment and consumption have often been officially hailed as a solution—or at least a distraction—from the problems of the real world. Terry Cooney thus writes in *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s*, “Whether films offered visions of order restored, affirmations of work-centered values, or celebrations of a culture rooted in the mythic American village, they also held out images of competing worlds that might be entered through mimicry or consumption” (1995: 39).

During the Great Depression, when nearly 25 percent of the country was unemployed near its peak in 1933, approximately 60–70 million Americans still packed theaters each week. In 1935 President Franklin Roosevelt stated, “During this Depression, when the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time, it is a splendid thing that for just 15 cents an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby and forget his troubles” (quoted in Wellington and Valenti 2007: 101).

As film stepped into the 1940s, and the United States moved into World War II, the Hollywood film industry sputtered because of the loss of foreign markets but then quickly rebounded domestically with film advances in sound recording, special effects, cinematography, and use of color. After the war, Hollywood had its most profitable year with then all-time highs in theater attendance (Dirks, n.d.a). Yet in 1944 Dr. Lawrence Reddick, the curator of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature of the New York City Public Library, surveyed one hundred films from the beginning of silent films to the 1940s, finding over 75 percent of them to be “anti-Negro” (Reddick quoted in Leab 1975: 3).

The 1950s era of McCarthyism and the birth of the Cold War generated fear that Communists lurked behind every corner. The House Un-American Activities Commission targeted many in Hollywood, which prompted the creation of anti-Communist films such as *Invasion, U.S.A.* (1952), *Red Planet Mars* (1952), and *Walk East on Beacon!* (1952). These films coalesced a sense of U.S. identity qua hyperpatriotism, while fears were temporarily alleviated through the entertainment afforded by the 10.5 million television sets that graced U.S. homes by 1950 and the new trend of drive-in theaters (of which there were approximately four thousand by 1959) (Dirks, n.d.b).

Films from the 1960s reflected the signs of tremendous social changes and contested cultural practices. The one-screen “picture palaces” adorned in art deco gave way to the birth of the multiplex theater (the first built in 1963) that seated hundreds with multiple showings of different films (Dirks, n.d.c). These theaters broadcast films taken from race-based literature, such as Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), one of the first white savior films. These films gave 1960s audiences an overt cinematic take on race relations not seen since D. W. Griffith’s film

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Birth of a Nation (1915), based on the novel *The Clansman* (1905) by Thomas Dixon Jr.

As the 1970s took hold, the blaxploitation genre emerged as a reflection of social discontent over racial inequality or a new marketing strategy for bringing blacks to theaters. Melvin Van Peebles's X-rated, confrontational cult film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) caused controversy for its militancy, explicit sex, antiwhite sentiment, and violence. The same year, a more palatable black hero emerged in the Gordon Parks–directed *Shaft* (which many called the black version of Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*), which was a counterbalance to the trope of the white savior. Approximately two hundred blaxploitation films made it to theaters throughout the decade (Dirks, n.d.d), and the genre catapulted many black careers and forced audiences into watching a take-no-nonsense black character who refused to kowtow to whites (Entman and Rojecki 2001).

In possible reaction to the explosion of on-screen diversity from the previous decades, the 1980s bore witness to the first group of white savior films, such as *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *A Dry White Season* (1989), *Glory* (1989), and the Indiana Jones trilogy (1981, 1984, 1989). Moreover, the rise of HBO and Showtime via cable television, the creation of the VHS tape, and the proliferation of movie theaters with multiple screens across the United States placed cinematic narratives about race and whiteness in the mainstream (Gray 1995). This trend continued in the 1990s, a decade marked by a proliferation of “race films,” leading some scholars to view televisual media as a dynamic medium receptive to public demands for diversity and empowerment (Gray 1995; Nama 2003: 24). Despite this increased diversity, other scholars note that black characters were still locked in stock caricatures of black stereotypes, leading the media scholar Robin Means Coleman (2000) to call the 1990s the “Neo-Minstrel Era.” Along with the release of black stereotypical films, the pace quickened on the production of rather overt white savior films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), *Amistad* (1997), and *Music of the Heart* (1999). The frequency and popularity of white savior films only increased in the 2000s as several films and their lead actors were nominated for Academy Awards: for Best Actress, Halle Berry in *Monster's Ball* (2001), Rachel Weisz in *The Constant Gardener* (2005), and Sandra Bullock in *The Blind Side* (2009) and for Best Picture, *Crash* (2005). *Avatar* (2009) garnered nine Oscar nominations on its own and was domestically the highest grossing film of the year.

How and why did these movies resonate in recent years? Consider that since the 1980s there has been a kind of racial schizophrenia in the United States. On the one hand, various institutions began a process of resegregation. The continued effects of racial segregation, years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), contributes to negative outcomes for nonwhites (Massey and Denton 1993). Such enduring inequality manifests in racialized effects in gentrification and home mortgage lending, health disparities, unemployment, and the wealth gap, to name just a few. On the other hand, many now remark or believe

that the United States has reached a postracial state in which racism is either dead or the providence of only a few bad apples (Hughey 2011). Especially after President Obama's election, many claim that race plays little to no role in people's everyday lives (except when "politically correct" policies discriminate against whites). Especially among whites, many seem weary of even discussing the continued legacy of racial inequality and seem to suffer from a kind of racial fatigue.

Given the cultural abyss between our dominant postracial discourse and the very real material results of racial inequality, cinema is an important site for publicly accessible and entertaining narratives that reconcile these competing stories. In fact, because of the hypersegregated character of the United States, few within its borders spend substantive time interacting with people of different racial or ethnic groups (Massey and Denton 1993). This point is particularly true for whites. Eighty-six percent of suburban whites live in communities where the black population is less than 1 percent (Oliver and Shapiro 1997), and "according to the 2000 Census, whites are more likely to be segregated than any other group" ("Race Literacy," n.d.). As a result, popular films that highlight interracial interactions offer the public, especially whites, a view of experiences they will rarely have in real life. In the absence of lived experience, films are often understood as accurate reflections of reality, especially when the film begins with the caveat "based on a true story." The historian George Lipitz notes that films about past race relations "probably frame memory for the greatest number of people" (1998: 219), and Vincent Rocchio, a communications scholar, writes, "The contemporary status of race in mainstream American culture is intimately bound to the process of representations within and through the mass media" (2000: 4).

During unsettled times of conflict, cultural producers "face the challenge of presenting 'collective' sentiments among the tensions, struggles, and crises of contested norms" (Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie 1997: 444). Hollywood has responded with a cadre of racial redemption stories in which blacks and whites reach across the color line to supposedly help one another. In this light, white savior films emerge as powerful cultural devices that attract, seduce, and command the U.S. public in a time of unsettled understandings of race, racism, and racial identity. In a climate in which many whites believe they are unfairly victimized and losing dominance, many people are exhausted with talking about race, and there is a latent desire to see evidence of interracial reconciliation and amity, films that showcase strong, kind, and messianic white characters assisting nonwhite, down-on-their-luck characters deliver just the right touch.

The white savior film is an important cultural device and artifact because it helps repair the myth of white supremacy and paternalism in an unsettled and racially charged time. The white savior film perpetuates, in subtle and friendly terms, the archaic paradigm of manifest destiny, the white man's burden, and the great white hope. As the film scholar Daniel Bernardi writes, "Cinema is everywhere a fact of our lives, saturating our leisure time, our conversation,

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and our perceptions of each other and of self. Because of this, race in cinema is neither fictional nor illusion. It is real because it is meaningful and consequential; because it impacts real people's lives" (2007: xvi). Whether in *Dances with Wolves*, *Finding Forrester*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Gran Torino*, *Freedom Writers*, *The Last Samurai*, or *The Blind Side*, the based-on-a-true-story message is strikingly similar and provides a roadmap for the navigation of race relations.

The Circuit of Meaning: Content, Critics, and Consumption

In three chapters that follow, I investigate the production, distribution, and consumption of the white savior film. These three aspects of film are a part of a feedback loop, or what the cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls a "circuit of culture" (1997: 1).

Chapter 2, "White Savior Films: The Content of Their Character," relies on a content analysis of fifty white savior films produced in a recent quarter century (1987–2011). The chapter highlights the central pillars that uphold the white savior motif. The question that guides my content analysis of these films is how do the dominant messages of these films manifest and what are their visual and discursive structures?

In Chapter 3, "Reviewing Whiteness: Critics and their Commentary," I examine how the dominant racial meanings of North America become manifest in the cultural form of film reviews about the fifty films covered in Chapter 2. In specific, I examine a large number (2,799) of film reviews culled from not only mainstream print-based sources such as the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the *Washington Post* but also web-based sources such as *Reeling Reviews* and *Rotten Tomatoes* and the race- or gender-specific sites *Black Flix* and *The Movie Chicks*. I then observe the dominant racial patterns manifest in these reviews in relation to changes in U.S. race relations measured by descriptions of events involving African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/Hispanic Americans, racial relations, and hot-button racial topics such as affirmative action, civil rights, and hate groups as listed in the *New York Times Index* (1987–2004). By exploring the relationship between the interpretive community of film reviewers and perceptions of U.S. race relations, I come to ask: How do variations in race relations relate to the interpretive strategies used to understand racialized films?

Chapter 4, "Watching Whiteness: Audience Consumption and Community," affords a view of how audiences make meaning of white savior films. Relying on interviews with eighty-three people and eight focus groups who watched three white savior films, the chapter examines how interpretations of this genre vary or align in patterned repetition and how different demographic positions influence audience meaning-making; how audiences accept, reject, or modify the dominant meanings of these films; and how their interpersonal interactions affect their interpretations of this cinematic genre. Accordingly,

I ask: How do demographic, contextual, and social variables relate to various audience interpretations of white savior films?

Having investigated the production, distribution, and consumption of white savior films, I turn in Chapter 5, “The Significance of White Saviors in a ‘Postracial’ World,” to driving home the global and domestic significance of white savior films in a growing neoliberal context that is punctuated by discursive claims of being either postracial or color-blind. I highlight how—woven throughout the content, critics, and consumption of white savior films—the import and centrality of race (particularly meanings of white paternalism and contented black servitude) are often downplayed, made invisible, and even contested. Of consequence, given the globalization of Hollywood film, their images labor to disavow the existence and effects of modern racism, which in turn allows the perpetuation of racial hierarchies and reconsolidation of white racial interests across the world.