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The Privileged Guardian Angel: An Examination of White Saviour Complex in Western Media

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Many Critical Race Theorists today are focusing not on overt forms of racism, but instead on subtler, insinuated perpetrations. These include but are not limited to visual microaggressions. Microaggressions are embedded in everyday interactions within society and serve as subconscious visual reminders to People of Colour of their inferiority and hierarchical subjugation. I argue in this paper that the White Saviour Complex (WSC), typically seen in an imperialistic sense in the West versus Africa dichotomy, can also be studied in the visual mainstream media of Western countries. Therefore, representations of WSC in media act as visual microaggressions towards People of Colour and reinforce racial and intersectional hierarchies present in Western colonial societies. This is argued in examining three case studies from USA, Australia, and Canada. This paper then addresses possible criticisms and critiques of this position through an examination of allyship in relation to WSC.

Introduction

Following the election of Barack Obama in 2008, many mainstream media outlets provided theories that American society was becoming post-racial. This, however, is highly contested among race scholars and Critical Race Theorists. Instead of boasting about the absence of racism, Hill Collins (2004) leads us to acknowledge the 'new racism' that "relies more heavily on the manipulation of ideas within mass media" (54). Instead of obvious perpetrations based on racial slurs and race-based violence, this 'new racism' relies on fundamental racial hierarchies present in society and perpetuated by everyday practices (Essed 2002, 203). Microaggressions are crucial to this 'new racism' and are defined as "forms of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the margins in their place" (Huber and Solorzano 2015, 224). *Visual* microaggressions are subsequent constructions where the racialization has a visual aspect to it, such as pictures, videos, or posters. Visual microaggressions are used to remind People of Colour that they do not belong in mainstream society by perpetuating white supremacy in order to justify the Other's

subordination (Huber and Solorzano 2015, 230). Because 'new racism' is defined as being perpetuated by mass media, looking at today's social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram is crucial to understanding the way racism still has roots deeply embedded in Western societies. In this article I focus on personal as well as corporate social advocacy campaigns on these social media platforms. These campaigns are mostly rallying cries of affluent Whites to collectively rescue the global poor. The campaigns and the subsequent actions of the privileged social media users attempting to liberate the global racialized poor (typically portrayed as 'Africa') is what Teju Cole (2012) labels as the White Saviour Complex (WSC) (Cole 2012). In his article responding to the Kony 2012 video he states the WSC is "about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege" (Cole 2012). It is perpetuated by a narrative that implies white people full of agency offering up salvation to the world in order to post "the obligatory Facebook cover photo...of the ubiquitous / emaciated / malnourished African child" (Carr 2013). However, WSC is not specific to the West versus Africa dichotomy, but instead, works within the racial hierarchies and power relations present in Western societies. While profile pictures of starving black children in the arms of a white guardian angel are prolific, I argue that representations of domestic WSC are equally as prevalent and serve as visual reassurances of white benevolence and observable reminders of the agency that People of Colour seemingly lack in society. Therefore, I argue that visual representations of WSC act as visual microaggressions on popular media sites to repress People of Colour and to reproduce power hierarchies in colonial, white dominate societies (specific examples from USA, Australia and Canada are used). Firstly, I will explain the origins of WSC and the role imperialism has in the reproductions and domestication of the phenomenon. I will then turn to three case studies, in which the WSC is perpetuated: an Instagram post by Leigh-Ann Tuohy explaining how she donated money to two black men for a basketball game, the video posted by Stacy Eden showing her defending a Muslim couple against a verbal attacker, and the poster designed by One Billion Rising that shows an Indigenous woman with a hand across her face, silenced. I will end off with a discussion of possible counter arguments by saying that these representations of WSC are simply a form of solidarity politics among dominant white discourses.

Imperialism and the White Saviour Complex

Imperialism is a central tenant to the white saviour complex (WSC) since it is one of the ways in which WSC across international borders is justified. Imperialist discourses are reproduced through elitist conversations surrounding the White Saviours. This is seen in a plethora of different examples in mass media, however, for the purpose of this section I will focus on the Kony 2012 video. This video directly supplements the imperialist conversation by inciting the US military to intervene in the Lord's Resistance Army created by Joseph Kony (Kony 2012, 15:20). This call on US military is a plea to use imperialist, militaristic powers to solve problems. Moreover, the legacies of colonialism that have caused of the power vacuums that allow warlords like Kony to exist are completely forgotten. The incitement of American military forces and rejection of historical colonialism is a such a gross reproduction of WSC because not only is it advocating for direct military intervention where a country did not ask for it but it also presents Africa as full of "barbarism and

passive suffering” while showing the White world as full of agency and empathy (Adyanga Akena 2014, 57).

Another imperialist element in WSC is an overestimation of the positive impact on the subject of aid. In Kony 2012, the commentator, Russell (2012) explicitly states that plastering posters on street corners, wearing shirts or bracelets, and sending a preprinted message to your political representative will “change the course of human history” (8:43). This is a gross overestimation on the impact of global aid and a glorification of the work done by the NGO Invisible Children (the NGO responsible for this video). It presents the young, mostly white people living in America as the omnipotent bearers of justice and peace while those so unfortunate enough to have been born in Africa as the beneficiaries of these white hearts. Imperialism is rampant in this because imperialism is practiced with the intention of producing societies similar to the imperialist ones, societies in which the Western world becomes exalted and superior (Tomlinson 2002, 3). Therefore, inherently, a positive impact is believed to be made on the subject countries and while often there is an enormous impact, it is not largely positive. Therefore, imperialism is reproduced in the falsification and dramatization of positive impacts such as the claims made in the Kony 2012 video.

Another imperialist power hierarchy at play is the overidentification with the racialized group. The narrative that a privileged, white, middle class activist from America could relate to and represent an impoverished, former child soldier would be laughable situation, if it weren’t for the fact that it has grave implications. It serves to trivialize the experiential knowledge of the racialized Other. In this case, Jacob, “our friend from Africa” (Russell 2012, 5:58), experienced horrific events in which Russell and the rest of the Invisible Children claim to understand. His victimhood is appropriated in order to be played out in the video and he is revictimized as he is forced to relive horrific memories of his brother being slaughtered simply for the reproduction of the video (Bex and Craps 2016, 36). As Russell reassures Jacob, he surely has no idea what the man is experiencing yet tries to insinuate that his life will be okay now because he has a white saviour by his side. Imperialist powers often play out this relationship, claiming to know what is going on, how to fix it, and feigning innocence in the reasons these countries are in these situations to begin with.

All of these implications serve to reinforce the imperialistic tenants of WSC when it is played out in the international community, however, the scope of this essay is on domestic versions of the complex. Therefore, while WSC has its roots in imperialism, a more appropriate label should be discussed. The term I will use is neatly defined by Young (1999) as cultural imperialism. In her book she describes what takes place as a paradoxical oppression where People of Colour are both marked out as the Other but also rendered invisible and silent (285). While not including international imperialistic discourses, domestic WSC represents aspects of it as well as the cultural imperialism just described. The objects of WSC in the following examples are not inhabitants of another part of the world, yet they are part of different social and racial groups and, therefore, cultural imperialist discourses are enacted when they are simultaneously pointed as different and silenced in conversations surrounding their own personal experiences. While studying

first the realm of international imperialism, then turning to domestic cultural imperialism, it is apparent that these two forms interact with each other to produce the ruling tenants of WSC. Imperialism and cultural imperialism then render representations of WSC to act as visual microaggressions against People of Colour in colonial white dominant societies.

Case Studies

Leigh-Anne Tuohy's Instagram Post

This case study follows the story of an Instagram post made by Leigh-Anne Tuohy, who became a small-scale celebrity after the release of the cinematic blockbuster "The Blind Side" in 2009 (Montez de Oca 2012, 131). This film follows her story as a white, upper class mother who takes in a homeless, black high school student. He then becomes a football prodigy and presently has a successful career in the NFL. While this story has its own implications of WSC, this study focuses on another incident: a recent social media post made by Tuohy. The post, uploaded with a picture of Tuohy with two black teenagers smiling trepidatiously by her side, tells a story of the black men who were sitting at a table in a fast food restaurant. After hearing a racial stereotype by a colleague, Tuohy proceeds, in her quest to prove the friend wrong, to approach the boys and demand why they were in the restaurant. After proving to her they were just trying to "scrape together" three dollars in order to afford entry into a basketball game, Tuohy graciously gives them money for two entries, bus fare, and popcorn (The Belle Jar 2015). She sends them on their way, not before coercing them into taking a glorifying photo with her, which she proceeded to instantly upload to her Instagram profile.

The perpetuation of WSC is rampant in the above event for a multiplicity of reasons. Firstly, the boys in the photo did not seek out the help of Tuohy. They had her aid thrust upon them when they were silently sitting in a corner of a fast food restaurant. They were presumed guilty and poor. With the theories of cultural imperialism used in Young's article, they were transcribed with common attributes of their race (Young 1988, 279). Money was thrust upon them, as they became the medium for a white woman to perform her morality. Tuohy's narrative is further stripped of its benevolent façade in the subsequent publication of the other, forgotten side of the situation. In this opposing narrative, one of the black teens (who deliberately remains nameless to protect his own privacy) told a Facebook user that he and his friend could have easily gotten into the game with their own money. The other friend wanted to wait for his uncle to pay for him, hence why they said they were trying to find money for the game. To add insult to injury, the game was three blocks down the street, therefore, they did not need nor receive the so called bus fare that Tuohy had allegedly provided them with (The Belle Jar 2015). When asked about the picture, he replied with:

Yeah she never actually asked for it as she was handing us the money she was like "hey you know what I think this would be a great picture" and everyone with her was yeah totally so we just kinda went along with the situation (The Belle Jar 2015).

Only later on did they realize what her intentions were. When the experiential knowledge of the teenager and his personal narrative of the event surfaced, obviously it became

further entrenched in the WSC narrative. Tuohy exploits the falsified stories of these young men to further her persona as a philanthropic white woman.

This acts as a visual microaggression because of the ways in which it is a reminder for the boys, and People of Colour, that they consistently need help from the privileged class. Not only did she share her narrative, but she also had to create a visual (therefore more pertinent) representation of the event. Cultural imperialism acts alongside WSC in the fact that the historical connotations and power relations that favour whites are completely ignored. The privilege of the rich, white woman is further perpetuated when she refuses to acknowledge this privilege and claims that racism does not exist within this interaction (Essed 2002, 210). She ignores the intricacies of the 'new racism' that Hill Collins (2004) discusses and in doing that, perpetuates the forces of power that serve to enforce white people as superior and keep People of Colour below. Therefore, in this post, Leigh-Anne Tuohy creates a visual microaggression in the representation of the WSC to remind the racialized Other that she will always be around to save the day.

Stacy Eden's Train Video

In this video that went viral in 2015 a young Australian woman (Stacey Eden) defends a Muslim couple on a train in Sydney. The couple was getting verbally attacked by a white, middle-aged woman who was making confused and racist links between the Islamic State and the women's hijab. Eden jumps in after allegedly listening to it for ten minutes, but not before turning on a recording device so that she could subsequently post it on social media (Youtube 2015). The response to the video, which was labeled 'Legend' Stacey Eden defends Muslim couple on Sydney train, was generally positive, with people praising her for countering Islamophobia and saving the poor couple (Youtube 2015). However, she was also scathingly referred to by some as "a white knight in shining armor [who] swoops in to save the day" (Nagesh 2015). I argue that the video by Stacey Eden is problematic for a number of reasons, and helps form a microaggression which all but disappears against the blatant racism of the first part of the video.

The way in which she frames the women's hijab creates a discourse void of a Muslim voice. While some discourses around the hijab do indeed cite modesty concerns as the reason for it, Muslim women have very different personal reasons for wearing this garment. The hijab is a very pious and personal part of Islam and there are many different interpretations of the Qur'an that leads women to wear it (Arabs in America 2016). As it varies greatly across the religion, it is neither right nor prudent for Eden to speak for this woman and take over the conversation of the hijab. Eden also labels her as a "poor woman" when she is responding to the hijab comment. In doing this, Eden perpetuates the woman as a helpless victim and appropriates the conversation over the hijab. She overidentifies with the Muslim woman and claims to know and understand why the woman is wearing the garment and seeks to explain it, whereas, in reality, being a white, non-Muslim, she simply cannot claim to understand at all.

The mainstream discussion following the release of this video follows the frame that she stepped in and saved this couple from being abused since they were not standing up for

themselves. However, in the video, there is a moment when the man looks as if he wants to speak, opens his mouth to take a breath but is cut off by another one of Eden's counterpoints. So, not only is she appropriating the conversation over Islamophobia but she is physically repressing the ability for them to defend themselves personally (Youtube 2015, 00:07). In flying to the rescue with her personal account of Islam she takes the voice away from the people who are actually affected and who have to deal with the repercussions. It takes agency away from the couple and, instead of supporting them she speaks over them.

The aftermath of this video furthered the entrenchment of the WSC in this situation. Eden's name was posted everywhere and talked about on every media outlet. Contrarily, the affected couple remained relatively silent and nameless, without a public voice in this issue. This is problematic in the fact that Eden directed, starred in, and produced her own narrative on the racist rants that do not oppress her but someone else completely. In doing this she appropriates the situation to further her own goals of making her benevolence a public commodity. Stacey Eden, then, is acting as a white savior and producing a visual microaggression since it reminds People of Colour that even when the conversation is directed to explicitly marginalize and oppress, the racialized voice will not be heard in the debates. It serves to reinforce the invisibility inflicted on them from all sides, even by the ones who are trying to help it. Therefore, it reinforces that when dealing with overtly racist situations, only another white person can confront it.

Poster for One Billion Rising

The last case study in this essay is perhaps the most nuanced in its reproduction of the White Saviour Complex as a microaggression. The poster studied is one in which an Indigenous woman (Ashley Campbell from the Enoch Nation in Alberta, Canada) is featured with a male's hand over her mouth with the message that Native women of Canada are vanishing (One Billion Rising 2013). Not only was her picture used without her consent but it also symbolically perpetuates Indigenous women as silent within mainstream discourses (Daniels 2016, 17). The poster revictimizes the already marginalized group in Canada and serves to paint them as a group in dire need of saving from outside sources. While the poster itself might not explicitly depict WSC, an examination of the organization behind the poster makes the reproduction of WSC and subsequent visual microaggressions very apparent.

The poster in question is a piece of advertising for white feminist Eve Ensler's One Billion Rising campaign. This campaign calls for February 14 as a day in which women from across the world dance in protest of violence perpetrated against them. In 2013, they chose to spotlight Canada to bring awareness to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement (MMIW). However, February 14 was and still is an extremely significant day for MMIW. Their own grassroots organizations have organized and participated in awareness marches on February 14 since 1990, starting first in the Downtown Eastside Vancouver (Daniels 2016, 17). One Billion Rising is rooted in white, western feminism and, therefore, the appropriations of this particular day as well as the insinuation that Indigenous women

in Canada need the help of huge, transnational movements are a perpetuation of the WSC. The poster consequently serves as a visual microaggression against the grassroots activism and Indigenous women in Canada, silencing their voices and directing people to believe in the vanishing nature of Indigenous culture and their women.

There was also backlash due to the universal language used in the poster and campaign. This language include “we all unite” with “all rape victims” in order to describe the “solidarity” of all women in the world. It is furthered with the following phrase: “[Indigenous] women can be dehumanized and disregarded, so can every woman in that country” (One Billion Rising 2013). This is delegitimizing the extreme violence Indigenous women face disproportionately to white women. Nobody else can embody and understand the use of systemic and state-led violence against Indigenous women in Canada except Indigenous women themselves. The campaign and the poster serve to essentialize all women’s experience and serve to group sexual violence as one experience, when in reality rape is a heavily politicized atrocity, especially for Indigenous women. The erasure of the politics of rape is extremely problematic. When discussing rape as something only perpetrated by civilians against civilians it erases the politics of MMIW and erases the narratives from grassroots movements that are trying to speak out. Therefore, the poster and campaigns perpetuate the racial hierarchies and whitewash deeply racialized and colonial experiences in Canada. The poster serves as a salient visual microaggression and literally depicts the silencing of Indigenous women while simultaneously speaking for and over them. This renders the Indigenous women mute in the global arena and with belief that they do not have the agency required to emancipate themselves from the universalizing discourses of white feminism.

An Ally versus White Saviour

The previous case studies and subsequent discussion of WSC can be interpreted as controversial by some. To many, WSC is just an over-labeled form of allyship. In that, the individuals and organizations mentioned above are simply trying to save People of Colour from damaging forms of oppression. Acts of unsolicited generosity, verbal defense, and campaigning are seen as ways to liberate and protect People of Colour from the ‘real’ and blatant racist practices. However, there is a line between White Saviours and allies, albeit a very thin one. While the academic literature focusing on allies is sparse, the distinction between allies and white saviours that I choose to focus on is *privilege*. One blog post suggests that the difference between being a white savior and an ally is accepting and acknowledging your privilege (Safeek 2014). None of the White people in the case studies acknowledge their own forms of privilege that allow them to be inhabit a position of aid. As an owner of thousands of restaurant chains around the country, Leigh-Anne Tuohy does not account for the historical connotations and the exploitation of human labour that allows her to inhabit a rich, colonial space dominated by Whites and used to exploit People of Colour. Stacey Eden does not acknowledge that, as an Australian-born, white citizen, she is in no danger of being further attacked or unfairly arrested for her actions on the train. In opposition the brown couple have strict mores on how they can react due to social structures and acceptable identities pertaining to their race. Lastly, One Billion Stars Rising fails to realize the intersectional violence, including systematic rape and murder that

happens not simply because of gender, but specifically because of the intersectionality of gender *and* culture *and* race *and* socioeconomic status. Confronting and admitting these privileges, according to Safeek (2014) would lead to a potentially less harmful discourse than WSC.

However, in Andrea Smith's blog she specifically states that the unraveling of privilege occurs not by people simply understanding or stating their privilege but "through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the system that enable those privileges" (Smith 2013). I argue that this framing is more destructive to cultural imperialism than the last. Even if the above case studies recognized that they are privileged because of systemic, historical, and institutionalized practices it would not change the deep-seated racial hierarchical creation that is rampant in white dominant countries. Smith (2013) goes so far as to say a confession of privilege serves to reinforce those racial hierarchies. Likewise, some scholars argued the admission of privilege (in this specific example the admission of "I am a settler") turns into a performance in which the performer is dismissing guilt specifically because 'if they are aware of it they can't be guilty' mindset (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel 2014, 16). Therefore, simply an acknowledgement of privilege is not enough to transform white saviours into allies as it only serves to reinforce the hierarchies present.

Smith (2013) does make note in her blog post of addressing privileges collectively, rather than individually. Addressing privileges individually serves to make people partake in the 'Oppression Olympics'. What she does say to do is collectively address issues regarding this oppression. This logic makes sense when returning to Young's (1988) discussion of oppression. In it she says that the word 'oppression' has been swapped for 'discrimination' in most discussion circles, which is problematic because oppression brings the collective into the conversation whereas discrimination is rooted in individual situations (Young 1988, 277). She upholds that oppression has not been eradicated with the laws and policy changes of the Civil Rights Movement, yet continues on in a collective manner in everyday interactions (279). Therefore, just as oppression should be discussed collectively, so should privilege.

This relates back to the conversation of allies and white saviours due to the fact that, to be an ally one must firstly understand (however not flaunt or perform) a privilege, but also try to dismantle the *collective* privilege that exists in institutions and everyday racisms. This needs to happen, not in trying to save the People of Colour from these institutions but by standing in solidarity with them as they do it themselves. It means not pigeonholing them to a particular activity or social class (in the case of Leigh-Anne Tuohy), not talking over them or for them in pushbacks against racist language (in the case of Stacey Eden), nor assuming all experiences are the same and ignoring the implications of colonialism (in the case of One Billion Rising). What it does mean is working with them to dismantle the very ways in which our society and culture is reproduced, and to restructure societal institutions to be more equitable in relation to one another and the land.

Conclusion

This essay has explained visual microaggressions and how representations of the White Saviour Complex in white dominate societies serve as reminders for People of Colour enforcing their otherness and invisibility. Usually, the White Saviour Complex is discussed in terms of international situations where white, rich westerners are believed to have lasting and meaningful impacts on the foreign societies that they are 'helping'. Representations of the White Saviour Complex usually take the form of white volunteers in a huddle of black, malnourished children. These representations are posted to Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sharing sites to reinforce the benevolence and agency of the white saviour in wanting to change these injustices and, more importantly, *being able to* change these injustices. Imperialism is an important tenant of WSC because of the mindset and actions it reproduces in the international society. This article takes a different approach to WSC as it examines it within the context of white dominant, racialized societies (specifically America, Australia, and Canada) and not as an imperialistic phenomenon). Although imperialism is still an important aspect of domestic WSC, cultural imperialism is brought to the forefront when discussing the particular examples of visual microaggressions previously mentioned. Although all the examples are of women perpetrators, to be clear, this is incidental and not intended to produce a critique of white women saviours only. It might, however, lend itself to the theory of the feminization of aid for disadvantaged Others. Though this is a pertinent topic, it is not in the scope of this article to address it. I end with a discussion of white saviours versus allies in an attempt to respond to what skeptics might say in relation to the case studies. In conclusion of that debate, WSC is only avoided when collective privileges are not just recognized but confronted. Therefore, defying racism does not mean performing a benevolent act or voicing personal opinions and solutions and publishing them. Allyship is a firm stance *beside* the community allied with and a helpful yet ambient role in the dissolution of power hierarchies that serve to keep them in a state of cultural imperialism.

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