# READING WHITENESS IN POPULAR TEXTS: HELPING COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES BECOME RACIALLY LITERATE IN "POST RACIAL" AMERICA

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**Reading Whiteness in Popular Texts:**
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This essay argues that the first-year composition class and freshman seminar can serve as spaces in which college students from underserved communities develop the skills to deconstruct, analyze, and disrupt systemic racism in texts and in their lives.  Through a multi- media analysis of whiteness in the novel, *The Help*, and the films *Dangerous Minds* and *Avatar*, I conceptualize the racial misrepresentations that emerge, provide a vocabulary in which teachers and students can discuss and write about the whiteness in these texts, and suggest classroom activities that prepare and support students in their development of a critical reading practice.  This project is furthered by an exploration of how an understanding of normalized presentations of whiteness and systemic racism provide possibilities for cross racial collaboration and by including in the discussion the work of social justice scholars who define and distinguish between allies and saviors.

As a black female professor of linguistically, culturally and racially diverse

students, I recognize that *unspoken assumptions about race invariably operate in*

*college classrooms.*  Teaching and learning in a multicultural city like New York provides

for a demographic mix that *presents educators with opportunities as well as challenges*

*in establishing new discourses about race* (Heffernan & Lewison; 2005, Rogers &

Mosley 2006).  This awareness has been heightened for me in the past three years

during which time I have taught a 3-credit freshman seminar class for liberal arts

students in a community college of which critical literacy is a core component.  Last

year, I spent the first few weeks of class talking about and exploring various definitions

of literacy with my students, the majority of whom were American born people of color

or immigrants who had completed high school in the U.S.  Although most of the

students had identified literacy as the ability to read and write, a few had mentioned the importance of being able to read between the lines and understand the perspectives and messages that lay beneath the surface of a text.

Encouraged by this insight, in the following class I showed my students a montage of movie posters and asked them if they perceived any themes. On the overhead projector, Jack Sully, in *Avatar* stood in the center of the frame, his Na'vi girlfriend posed at an angle beside him while other Na'vi inhabitants could be viewed at a distance. Adjacent to this image, Kevin Costner in *Dancing with Wolves* almost fully obscured the face of a Native American. Just below was Michelle Pfeiffer thrust in front of a group of black and Latino students. I felt this image provided a particularly adept visual representation of Henry Giroux's (1998) observation that the students in *Dangerous Minds* occupy the margins while the white teacher is centered and "serves as a beacon of light" (p. 59). Not so my students. While they were easily able to identify these films, what most had difficulty recognizing and verbalizing were the ways in which the positioning of the white protagonists marginalized the black and indigenous characters that the films were ostensibly about. In fact, until prompted, none of the students mentioned race when I asked them to elaborate on the plot lines of the stories. After I left the class and reflected on a lesson that had fallen rather flat, I wondered why I had been surprised. LaGuardia Community College, where I teach, is part of the City University of New York where approximately two thirds of the students are immigrants representing 116 countries and of which two thirds speak English as a second language. Many of these students struggle to overcome the challenges presented by poverty and lack of college preparation (Arcario, Eynon, & Lucca, 2011). Why, then,

would I assume that they would recognize the hegemonic representations of race

embodied in the images?  Furthermore, in an institution in which 80% of students

require at least one basic skills course (p. 195), why would I spend valuable classroom

time discussing race?

Some might view my students' response to my lesson that day as proof that with

the election of Barack Obama in 2008 the U.S. entered a post racial era in which race

no longer holds major significance.  However, this rosy assessment is belied by the

recent onslaught of murders of black men, coupled with the growth of the Black Lives

Matter Movement.  It seems more likely that my students' inability to identify the racial

themes embedded in the images was symptomatic of a belief that it is normal for whites

to be at the center of non-white lives and that those who might have grasped this racist

implication did not have a language and a level of comfort with which to articulate it.

The fact is that we live in a society in which race is framed through the rhetoric of

colorblindness, an alternate reality in which racism is underplayed and its basis ignored

(Bonilla-Silva, 2010).  As Keffrelyn Brown (2011) has noted, this ideology permeates K-

12 schooling so that by the time both black and white students come to college, they

"bring deep gaps in socio-cultural knowledge and understanding about race to their

higher education experiences" (p. 130).  Although it has been argued that schools are

increasingly exposing students to the concept and critique of race and white privilege

(Wise, 2015), the disparity in community resources likely intervenes to affect different

students' access to an education that familiarizes them with such academic discourses.

Indeed, for many of my students, beyond its personal and interpersonal manifestations,

racism remains invisible and arbitrary, a perception that is reinforced by its portrayal in popular cultural texts.

How do we as educators of underserved students respond to this? I believe that when these students enter our freshman seminars and first-year composition classes, we are presented with a pivotal moment in which to involve them in discussions of race before they go on to specialize in majors that may not provide them with such an opportunity again. By incorporating race into our curriculum, we help our students gain crucial literacy skills that will allow them to succeed long after they leave our classrooms. Furthermore, as some educators have stated, "…engaging in discourse about race and racism may lead to changing structures and systems of oppression and marginalization as experienced by those whose realities and possibilities may be determined by the color of their skin" (Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Collin, & Brookfield, 2010, p. 4).

In response to this reality, this paper engages in a multi-media text analysis to demonstrate how college teachers can explore with their students the ways in which white normativity is sustained in and through popular texts. To this end, I examine the novel, *The Help*, and the films *Dangerous Minds* and *Avatar*. These white savior texts, which emerge from a long tradition of Hollywood movies, continue to promote an ethnocentric vision of heroic whites compelled to rescue people of color. Although there is a growing scholarship on texts of this genre (Cammarota, 2011; Griffin, 2015; Hughey, 2015; Pimentel & Santillanes, 2015; Schultz, 2014), there is rarely an attempt to connect the critique of these texts with the pedagogical implications and classroom application, especially, for teachers whose students reflect a community college

demographic.  In an effort to make that connection, I conceptualize and explore three phenomena that emerge from recurring racial misrepresentations in these texts: *Missionizing, Silencing, and Distancing.*  In doing so, my intention is to extend the vocabulary with which students and their professors can talk about race.  Secondly, I model how critical reading practices that incorporate critical literacy, critical media studies, and racial literacy can be used to analyze covert racial messages in fictional texts.  Thirdly, I offer some suggestions for classroom activities based on my own experiences teaching about race as an instructor of pre-service teachers in a graduate program and as a teacher of ESL students and liberal arts freshman seminar students in a community college.

Why these texts?  As Mathew Hughey (2015) argues in his comprehensive study of white savior films, at least 50 movies from 1987 to 2011 fall within this category.  He also marks the beginning of the "post-racial" era from 1999.  By selecting *Dangerous Minds* from this list, which was released in 1995, I wish to underscore two points: that the racial messages conveyed by this text document its existence prior to the "post racial" era illustrating it as an enduring societal issue.  Secondly, this film provides an answer to the concern I voiced at the beginning of this essay as to whether classroom time used to address race might be better spent attending to the basic literacy needs of students from economically deprived communities.  What I hope my critique of this film demonstrates is that, apart from the literacy skills students develop from viewing, discussing and reading and writing about the racial themes in this text, they have an opportunity to unpack the student teacher dynamic that is depicted.  This is of particular relevance to students, whose relationships with teachers as represented in films of this

genre often embody the trope of the white teacher as savior (Cann, 2015). Additionally, *Avatar*, another movie from this genre enables teachers to help their students recognize that even when texts contain non-human characters situated in fantastical locations, the imperative of whiteness can permeate a text, distorting and erasing the existing socio-political realities. My choice to analyze *The Help,* the novel rather than the movie, is motivated by the fact that the film version modified key aspects of the novel, obscuring the racialized messages that informed the book. Furthermore, the novel's skewed portrayal of the role of the black female domestic servant during the civil rights era can provide teachers and students with an opportunity to fill the gaps that Brown (2011) noted in students' lack of knowledge of this country's racial past.

**White Saviors Versus White Allies**

I also choose these texts because I believe they serve as exemplars of the genre of the white savior. As I go on to discuss, in all three texts the white savior initiates and makes possible the freedom of non- white people and maintains a central role throughout the novel and films. What they don't attempt to do is dismantle the systemic racism[1] that lies at the root of the predicament of the people they "save." This is why Hughey (2015) views *Django Unchained* as a white savior film. While I recognize the existence of elements of the white savior in *Django Unchained*, I feel it departs in one important respect from the typical white savior film. Dr. King Schultz, the German bounty hunter who, at the beginning of the movie, liberates Django and his fellow slaves from a slave coffle and urges the others to flee the south, is as Hughey (2015) notes,

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[1] I use institutionalized racism when being specific about the ways in which institutions, such as schools, perpetuate inequality through practices and policies. In contrast, systemic racism is employed to more comprehensively refer to the interlocking institutions, policies, practices and behaviors across society upholding race-based oppression.

problematic as the catalyst for Django's transformation and at the beginning of the film

is essentially the puppeteer pulling the strings. Yet, Schultz's death mid-way through

the movie, allows Django a certain autonomy that is absent in the other texts that I

analyze. With Schultz's death, Django takes control, fulfilling his desire for revenge. As

one critic notes, "Freedom, to Django, doesn't mean being free to go. It means being

free to stay, and to punish at will those white people who have wronged him in the past,

to make his own history in the South rather than in exile" (Johnson, 2013, p. 18).

Although Hughey does not identify *12 Years a Slave* as a white savior film, a

quick Internet browse reveals that many movie reviewers perceive it in this way. Yet

more so than *Django Unchained*, *12 Years a Slave* elides easy categorization. From

the opening credits, the story of Solomon Northop, the free African American, who is

sold into slavery, is told from his perspective. The viewer spends close to the entire

movie watching Northop survive by his wits and a determination to be free. On two

occasions Northop seeks the aid of white allies, the first time by writing a letter and

asking a white hired laborer to deliver it to his people in the north, both perilous acts that

could have led to Northop's death. Although Northop is betrayed, he remains

undeterred and tries a second time, seeking the help of another white laborer who

agrees to send a letter telling Northop's family of his whereabouts. As a result, a white

friend from Northop's previous life eventually turns up to rescue him. Despite the

constraints imposed by his enslavement, Northop asserts what agency he has, actively

working towards his own liberation. This highlights the necessity of making an

important distinction between saviors and allies. Firstly, by distinguishing between the

two, we enable students to arrive at a nuanced critique of whiteness in texts. Secondly,

recognizing that there is a fundamental difference between saviors and allies empowers students to identify areas of fruitful collaboration with others in their own lives.  This latter point is supported by scholarship that defines social justice as based on two principles.  The first is the belief that all groups should enjoy full participation in society and have equal access to material wealth and physical and mental wellbeing.  The second is the obligation on the part of privileged groups to take action to help make this become a reality (Bell, 1997; Brodio, 2000; Reason & Davis, 2005).  It is within this framework that allies operate by embodying among other qualities a desire to work "with" and not "for" oppressed people "in collaboration and partnership to end the system of oppression" (Edwards, 2006, p. 51).  In addition, we are told that allies must be willing to adopt a "silent presence" in which listening counteracts the paternalism that too often informs the white impulse to save black lives (De Lissovoy & Brown, 2013, p. 554).  Finally, it is of critical importance that allies respect the right to self-determination of oppressed people and resist the urge to take over (Kivel, 2002).  While none of the white protagonists in the films discussed in this paper fulfill all these criteria, I would argue that in the case of *12 Years a Slave*, Northop's efforts in initiating contact with potential allies along with the existence of a silent, sympathetic listening presence in the guise of the letter writer and the fleeting appearance late in the movie of Northorp's white friend, suggest ways in which the motif of the white savior can be transformed.

**Conceptual Lens**

In employing Whiteness studies, an area of inquiry that correlates closely with critical race theory, I investigate the nature and construction of whiteness and how whiteness is associated with institutionalized systems of domination (Fine, 1997;

Frankenberg, 1993; Giroux 1998; Lewis, 2004; Martinet, 2010; Rodeigger, 1999).

Historically, whiteness was invented as a group identity through which various ethnic

groups "were lumped together to create a single powerful coalition" (Jay, n.d.).  Today

Whiteness studies is an important tool to analyze racism by shifting our gaze from an

examination of how non-whites accumulate 'deficits' to one that helps us explore and

make visible the myriad ways in which whites "accumulate 'benefits'" (Fine, 1997, p.

55).  A significant point of focus that draws from Whiteness studies in this essay is

exploring how privileges that accrue from white skin are distributed unequally depending

on categories such as class and sexual orientation.  An awareness of these intersecting

group identities opens up possibilities for students to make alliances across racial

boundaries.  In this essay, in common with some who work in the field of Whiteness

studies (Giroux, 1997; Helms, 1992), I view whiteness as a social construct that is fluid,

unfixed and therefore capable of transformation.

I also draw from the work of scholars engaged in critical media literacy (Giroux,

1998; Kellner & Share, 2007: Masterman, 2001) who argue that it is imperative that

teachers guide students to read media texts as a way of helping to dispel notions of

media as neutral.  In support of this project The Center for Media Literacy (CML) has

established five core concepts, two of which are particularly relevant to the points

explored in this essay.  The principle of non-transparency underlines the constructed

nature of media and allows students to engage in a process of demystification.  The

other, that media have embedded values and points of views guides students to identify

the perspectives presented and question the messages that they receive (Kellner &

Share, 2005).  Kellner and Share (2007) argue that critical media literacy allows

students to critique ideologies and investigate how misrepresentation based on race, class, gender and sexuality often occur in media.  Furthermore, critical media literacy recognizes how audiences actively participate in making meaning of texts and can be a powerful tool that enables students "to tell their stories and express their concerns" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 9).

Paolo Freire (1985), who drew a pedagogical connection between "reading the world and reading the word" (p. 20), transformed our understanding of literacy as a practice that had the potential for promoting social justice.  Since the seventies, Freire's work has developed into a robust field in which critical literacy has been incorporated into a variety of disciplines and schools of thought, such as critical race theory, cultural studies and postructuralism (Luke, 2014).  Postructuralist reading approaches by some teachers of English in Australia were instrumental in introducing into the English classroom the kinds of questions and concerns that help students deconstruct bias in texts.  For example, in the early 2000's Bronwyn Mellor and Annette Patterson (2004) engaged in practices that made available to students' multiple readings of texts, and questioned a text's supposed transparency and neutrality (p. 20).  In considering such questions, Mellor and Patterson (2004) proposed that teachers intervene in student readings in order to facilitate class, gender and race analysis.  However, while teachers of critical literacy ask their students to consider crucial questions that are instrumental in guiding readers and audiences to examine prevailing hegemonic behavior and patterns, by themselves such questions may not equip students with the tools with which to develop racial knowledge.  This is also a challenge faced by critical media studies.  For example, questions such as "Who benefits from the text?" or "Is the text fair?"  See

Appendix A. are intended to help students deconstruct how readers and viewers are sometimes manipulated into identifying with characters that are used to support oppressive ideologies, but these questions may just as likely lead readers who have little understanding of how inequitable power relations can be masked by subtle stereotypes to misidentify sources of oppression and focus on individualistic perceptions of bias rather than institutionalized systems supporting racism.

A growing body of research suggests that a reading approach that develops racial literacy can provide specific tools to empower students to deconstruct racism in texts *(Bolgatz, 2005;* Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; *Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013; Skerrett, 2011).  This is accomplished by helping students recognize and distinguish among* unconscious bias, unintentional racism (Moule, 2003), and microaggressions (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007) as well as systemic racism (Feagin, 2006).  Most importantly, when considering classroom discourse, *racial literacy provides an environment in which race can be discussed in ways that do not personalize or demonize but rather provide the tools to apply critical and analytical skills that demystify race and empower students.*  As a teacher of English, I see particular value in Lani Guiniere's (2004) conceptualization of racial literacy, which focuses on identifying and analyzing the institutional structures that enact and support racial bias. Equally as important is Guinier's insistence that we must make visible the ways in which race is used to conceal the common interest of people across racial boundaries and justify the inequitable distribution of wealth.  In addition, Francine Winddance Twine's (2011) notion of racial literacy as a process by which acts of racism are identified and

named, exemplifies it "as a reading practice, a way of perceiving and responding to the racial climate and racial structures that individuals encounter daily" (p. 8).

Taken together, I argue that teachers can profitably draw on these approaches to guide their students to analyze the texts in the genre of the white savior.  At the same time, it is important to clarify that my proposal that teachers engage students in explicit understandings of how race is constructed in texts is not to preclude or deem as unimportant students' immediate responses to texts.  As McCormick (1994) cautions, we need to strike a balance between a view of readers as autonomous and their responses as socially determined.  Readers have agency in determining how they respond to texts, but their responses are mediated by the social context in which they occur.  This position is reflected in Stuart Hall's (1980) theory of the viewers' readings of mass media texts, which he conceptualizes as dominant, negotiated or oppositional. While dominant or "preferred" readings closely align with the producers' perspective, negotiated meanings are achieved by the viewers' ability to incorporate some of their own conflicting concerns within the message.  Most importantly, Hall recognizes that some viewers are able to oppose and resist media messages that contradict their social positionings and produce alternative readings that are empowering.

**Missionizing**

The missionary enterprise provides an apt metaphor to describe the motivation of the protagonists in each of the texts that are analyzed in this essay.  Many of the eighteenth and nineteenth century missionaries saw themselves as embodying qualities of selflessness, sacrifice and zeal.  In their desire to serve as mechanisms of social improvement there was an assumption of their ability to lead, teach, and transform the

people they sought to save (Coleman, 2007). Some of these qualities can be seen in

Skeeter, the white protagonist in *The Help* who has just returned home after graduating

from college. As the novel progresses, we learn that Skeeter had been raised by a

black maid, whose disappearance from her home while she was in college is a source

of concern to her and never satisfactorily explained by her parents until well into the

novel. What is important to know for the purpose of this analysis is that Skeeter had

developed a close attachment to the maid and this helps explain her affinity for the

black maids who work for her friends and whom they treat as sub-human. It is at a

friend's home that Skeeter first voices her dissatisfaction with the inequitable treatment

that she can no longer ignore when she asks Aibleen, her friend's maid whether she

had ever visualized life being different. Her question sets in motion a quest for self-

realization on the part of the maids that leads them, at first reluctantly, to collaborate

with Skeeter to write the story of their mistreatment by their white employers. The

novel, despite attempts to ascribe agency to the maids by assigning a more active

writing role to Aibleen, is never able to shake the sense that Skeeter has taken on the

white man's or in this case white woman's burden. This is illustrated in one scene

where Skeeter's thoughts are revealed as she works on the book: "What I do know is,

the responsibility of the project lays on my shoulders and I see it in their hard working,

lined faces, how much the maids want this book to be published" (Stockett, 2009, p.

277).

One might view Skeeter's desire to help the maids as stemming at least in part

by guilt. Gregory Jay (2005), in his description of stage 6 in the identity construction of

whites who react with guilt after being confronted with the notion of white privilege,

characterizes this as resulting in the "Missionary Position" (p. 113).  By helping the

maids, Skeeter is seen to make the ultimate sacrifice.  When she finally chooses her

sense of responsibility to the maids over her loyalty to her friends, she commits racial

treason, sacrificing her friendship with her white friends and a budding romance with an

eligible bachelor to write her book, a project that the novel depicts as fraught with

danger both for her and the maids who assist her.  Such positioning, as well as

distorting the historical record of African Americans' central role in agitating for civil

rights, can be seen as divesting the maids, who are rescued, of agency, while the

sympathetic portrayal of Skeeter might lead some readers to identity with her

representation as a white savior upon whom blacks depend for their survival.

    *Avatar*, which takes place in an extra- terrestrial zone, offers similar opportunities

to view how dominant racial ideology can be reproduced in fictional texts as white

characters missionize by taking centralized roles in the lives of non-whites.  Jack Sully,

a white paraplegic ex-marine accepts a position in an American corporation which

requires him to infiltrate a clan of the Na'vi people who occupy land that the company

wants because it contains a vital mineral resource.  If successful in persuading the Na'vi

to leave their land, Sully has been promised an operation that will give him back the use

of his legs.  By occupying an avatar, Sully eventually wins the trust of the Na'vi and the

love of one of its women.  Despite his initial ineptitude, Sully eventually acquires

knowledge of the Na'vi culture to such a degree that he conquers and rides the red

dragon, a feat that has never been achieved by any Na'vi.  As some critics have noted:

> Jake Sully, comes to the minority group culture with no experience or
> understanding, yet   manages to master all things Na'vi, not only in a very short
> time, but to a degree better than any Na'vi.  The Irving Berlinesque lesson

learned here is that, as whites, we can do anything you can do, only better. (Ketchum, Embrick, & Peck, 2011)

Like Skeeter, Sully encounters divided loyalties.  As he becomes more acquainted with the Na'vi, he experiences conflict between his loyalty to the company he works for and the Na'vi, who are portrayed as noble savages invested with the spiritual and moral qualities that the Americans lack.  Unlike Skeeter, whose sacrifice leads to no permanent disposition, indeed by the novel's end she is offered and takes up a writing job in New York, Sully, by becoming the leader of the Na'vi, unites the various clans and successfully heads off an invasion by the Americans.  In doing so, Sully sacrifices not only his allegiance with the whites but also any possibility of overcoming his physical disability as a human.

This desire to save black lives also occurs *in Dangerous Minds*, which is based on a memoir of LouAnne Johnson an ex-marine who takes a teaching position in an inner city school with a predominantly black and Latino population.  To the soundtrack of a booming rap beat, we are introduced to Johnson's students who are described by the black principal as "The rejects from hell."  Giroux (1998) in referring to the school as a "Cultural war zone" (p. 58), calls attention to Johnson's missionizing role as she enters a scene of mayhem and is confronted by hostile students who mock her conservative appearance by calling her "white bread."  As in most movies of this genre, it does not take long before Johnson wins the students around, mostly by impressing them with a lesson that displays her karate skills and rewarding student participation with candy bars and a promise to a trip to a theme park if the students acquiesce in her attempts to teach them poetry.

As a teacher, Johnson's role takes on a civilizing mission that is not present in the other texts.  This can be seen in Johnson's decision to use a Bob Dylan song, *Mr. Tambourine Man,* in order to teach the students lessons on poetic conventions, such as metaphor and simile.  This in turn is utilized as a way for the students to gain a superficial access to a Dylan Thomas poem.  At the same time, just as in the case of many African and Asian populations during the colonial era of European expansion, the students' own cultural resources are seen as either nonexistent or inimical to their possibilities for growth.  Tellingly, Giroux (1998) notes that while hip hop plays throughout the movie, it is not viewed as a resource that might lead to social transformation.

In the texts examined thus far, there is a dissonance between the white heroes' intervention in the lives of non-whites and the lack of skills that they bring.  This is evident as we saw with Jack Sully in *Avatar* and also in *The Help* when we learn that Aibleen, no less than Skeeter, has a talent for writing and in *Dangerous Minds* when it is revealed that Johnson has never taught before, so it is only their white skin privilege that can explain how the protagonists become centered in the lives of non-white people.  This is never problematized in these texts.  Rather, it is seen as normal that the protagonists should take up such positions and any resistance is quickly overcome.

**Distancing**

Distancing is one way in which the texts overcome the resistance to the white hero from those being "saved."  By distancing, I refer to a technique used in these texts to establish the white hero as the only possible ally for the dispossessed.  In *Dangerous Minds*, the principal, who is a black male, might be expected to have some insight into

his black and Latino students' lives.  However, he is represented as insensitive,

uncaring and rigid in his approach.  In contrast, Johnson is portrayed as compassionate

and creative in her attempts to reach her students.  A similar juxtaposition occurs in *The*

*Help* as a way of marginalizing Celia Foote, a white woman from a working class

background who hires Minnie, an outspoken black maid.  In her creation of Minnie,

Stockett, the author, might be accused of resorting to stereotypes.  Yet, Minnie has the

feel of reality.  In the novel, all the best lines are reserved for her and she uses them,

albeit in her head, to devastating effect against Celia.  During an interview for the job,

Celia offers Minnie a drink:

> I look at Miss Celia Rae Foote hard.  I've never in my life had a white woman tell
> me to  sit down so she can serve me a cold drink.  Shoot, now I'm wondering if
> this fool even plans on hiring a maid or if she just drug me all the way out there
> for sport (Stockett, 2009, p. 32).

Minnie's constant ridiculing of Celia and her rejection of her overtures, while

amusingly portrayed, cynically capitalize on a mutually held disdain with which blacks

and working class whites have been encouraged to regard each other (Roediger, 1999;

Wray & Newitz, 1997).  This antipathy, which was historically inculcated as a way of

compensating working class whites for their poverty with the privilege that came with

white skin, has been exploited to prevent recognition of a common interest between

blacks and working class whites (Guinier, 2004).  At the same time, it speaks to

Whiteness studies' contention that the privileges accorded white skin are unequally

distributed.  Celia is viewed as absurd by Minnie, for not knowing, despite marrying a

wealthy white man, how to put a black woman in her place.  The result is that Celia, who

has much more in common with Minnie and the other maids, is sidelined while the

upper class Skeeter is the character that the maids and ultimately the reader are encouraged to identify with.

**Silencing**

Lastly, I turn to silencing.  While this is not a new term, I use it here to refer to a device that serves to center the white hero by erasing opposition to his or her dominating presence.  A reading of these texts leads to a consideration that silencing can only effectively be employed if it is enforced by a member or members of the community being "rescued."  In *Avatar*, initial skepticism toward Sully by the Na'vi is communicated mostly by Nyetri, the beautiful and assertive woman that Sully falls in love with.  When Nyetri reciprocates his love, suspicion of Sully is left to be articulated by Tsu'tey, next in line as the clan leader and possible romantic partner of Nyetri.  However, Tsu'tey's opposition to Sully is expressed as petty male jealousy and takes the form of glares and snide comments.  At one point in the movie, Tsu'tey shouts angrily at Sully, "You are not my brother!" to which Sully responds "And I am not your enemy."  A little later when Sully's collusion with the corporation is revealed, Tsu'tey proclaims, "It's a demon in a false body!"  Yet, no one takes any notice of Tsu'tey except for Nyetri, who scowls at him, effectively putting an end to his protests.

Silencing provides an even more blatant manipulation of racial positioning in *The Help.*  In a tense scene in which the maids and Skeeter are gathered in Aibleen's house in an effort to gain the maids' cooperation in writing Skeeter's book, Gretchen, a young woman, who, in the words of Skeeter, "spoke evenly and with care, like a white person," accuses Skeeter of trying to profit from the maids.  In front of the assembled company, Gretchen reveals her anger towards whites and her belief that Skeeter is a racist when

she says, "Say it, Lady, say the word you think every time one of us comes in the door. Nigger" (2009, p. 259).

When Aibleen orders Gretchen out of her house, Gretchen calls Aibleen "dumb." Gretchen is invested with all of the qualities of the Angry Black Woman. She expresses hostility and is verbally abusive. Yet Gretchen's points are not unreasonable. Skeeter, despite the fact that she has decided to share her profits with the maids, is the one who is positioned to gain most by getting the book contract and achieving her dream of becoming a writer. The maids, as Skeeter is aware of and constantly frets about, stand to lose their livelihoods and their freedom if their involvement in writing the book is revealed. The fact that all of Skeeter's fears are eventually realized does not adversely affect her relationship with the maids. More importantly, by counterpoising Gretchen with the nurturing Aibleen, a character the reader has come to identify with, Stockett, in one fell swoop reinforces stereotypical notions about black women, absolves Skeeter of white guilt, and silences Gretchen and any misgivings that the reader might have about Skeeter's insinuation into the maids' lives.

**Discussion**

The examination of these texts demonstrates that by developing a pedagogy that utilizes critical literacy, critical media studies, and racial literacy, we enable students to recognize the constructed nature of texts and how normalized messages shift the focus away from underlying causes of racism towards one in which whites and blacks are cast in roles that reinscribe notions of superiority and dependency. In *Avatar* and *The Help,* posing critical literacy questions in our classes such as "Who is allowed to speak?' may counter this by calling students' attention to the ways in which Tsu'tey and Gretchen are

silenced and systemic racism ignored.  In *The Help*, racism is portrayed as "individual acts of meanness" (McIntosh, 1988) as Hilly, Skeeter's friend until part way through the novel, schemes the downfall and incarceration of black maids rather than, as racial literacy posits, an institutionalized system that supports white privilege.  Aibleen harbors ambitions to write professionally and Skeeter goes some way toward making this possible, yet the exploitative system that allows the maids to serve as a cheap, dispensable, reservoir of labor remains untroubled.  In *Avatar,* it is the individual white hero, Sully, who attempts to redress exploitative relationships between whites and people of color, and as viewers we are left to believe that such decontextualized responses are sufficient to address systemic racism.  Finally, *Dangerous Minds* presents a neutralized account of a well-meaning white up against a bureaucracy rather than an indictment of racial inequities in the education system.  That the movie culminates in Johnson's students imploring her to return the next semester rather than resign as she had intended, suggests that salvation is possible when whites intervene in the lives of blacks, not as allies, but as saviors.

**Classroom Application**

How might an examination of these themes play out in a classroom?  In this section, I make suggestions for preparing students to discuss racism and whiteness and scaffold classroom activities that lead to student analysis of savior texts.  Depending on the length of the course and curriculum requirements, these activities may be structured over a number of weeks or months.  If possible, instructors should delay discussing race until they and their students have had the chance to get to know each other and develop trust.  This is important even when teachers and students share the same race,

but it is especially critical when the class is comprised of multiple races and the

professor is black.  In reporting on a study she conducted of a First Year Composition

class in a community college, Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2013), an African American

educator, stated "I have learned over my 17 years of explicitly teaching about race that

including it as a topic or focus of a course can be risky."  Sealey-Ruiz goes on to

discuss Professor Lisa Guerro's belief that untenured faculty may face particular risks.

This assessment is not difficult to believe in light of Guerro's assertion that some

students are invested in maintaining a view of themselves as non- racist.  One can

imagine how this might create classroom tensions between white students and students

of color as well as with a black professor.  I have had such an experience when

teaching mostly white pre-service teachers a required course on diversity in the

classroom.  One way to reduce tension is for the class to collaboratively establish

discussion guidelines from the beginning of the semester that encourage students to

de-personalize their critiques of fellow students' perspectives and promote respect,

openness, and flexibility.

     I have also found it useful prior to analyzing white savior texts with my class to

introduce students to the idea inherent in critical media and critical literacy that texts can

be read in multiple ways.  This has the advantage of preparing students to be open to a

critical interpretation of savior texts without devaluing their own responses.  I have had a

good deal of success in my freshman seminar classes in helping students arrive at a

variety of perspectives by asking them to analyze fairy tales, such as Little Red Riding

Hood by using critical literacy questions (See Appendix A).  For example, students are

often amazed to discover the patriarchal norms and anti-feminist messages embedded

in the fairy tale and are able to write alternative and more empowering versions of their own.

Once students are ready to engage in explicit discussions of race, it is helpful to frame the work that they will be engaging in as an integral aspect of critical literacy. Presenting it in this way helps reduce the perception on the part of some students that the topic is extraneous or agenda driven. It is also important to introduce students to the idea that race primarily functions as a social construct. This makes it possible for students to address racism and whiteness in an objective manner rather than feeling forced into taking up entrenched racialized positions. Having students first write a few sentences defining what they believe race is and sharing it with a few classmates provides a basis for discussion. In my experience, most students see race as being biologically determined. One very useful website, California Newsreel, has produced a series of films called The Power of an Illusion that debunk the belief that race functions as a marker of genetically distinct groups of people. After viewing the first episode, students can reevaluate their earlier definitions. This can lead into a discussion about the real purpose of race.

Reflection is another effective means of initiating explicit discussions of race. One reflection activity that I have found useful is to have students respond in writing to one of the following prompts: Have you ever been the target of racism? / Have you ever read about or observed someone being the target of racism? These prompts allow students of all races to engage in reflection. Students may share their responses in pairs or groups and give feedback to the class. Instructors who choose to reflect along with their students and share their experience with the class convey a willingness to

make themselves equally as vulnerable as their students and model the ways in which this can be done appropriately and with sensitivity.

In order to empower students to effectively analyze racism, we can utilize their prior reflected experience of racism to broaden the discussion to one that looks at the root causes of racism. This starts with introducing the difference between individual and systemic racism. Students begin by working in groups to arrive at a definition of racism. After allowing students time to share their ideas with their group and the class, instructors disseminate information about different types of racism. There are a number of excellent Internet sources that teachers can draw upon to present this information. For example, a short video by the website Moving the Race Conversation Forward succinctly describes the difference between individual and systemic racism. Students listen for basic differences between the two types and write and share their responses with each other. As a follow-up, students can be assigned homework that requires them to research other aspects of race and racism, such as colorblindness and whiteness. These activities lay the groundwork for students to contextualize the racism that they have experienced. Students can be asked to look back at their reflections and determine whether their experience of racism had been individual or systemic, conscious or unconscious and whether they can make connections between the two types of racism.

Teachers may now choose to show a clip of one of the films analyzed in this essay, such as *Avatar,* that illustrates one of the three racial misconceptions discussed in this article, for instance, silencing. Students can work in groups to analyze the text by utilizing the critical literacy questions in listed in Appendix A (Instructors may wish to

specify the questions they feel will best draw out students' awareness of the concept). Sometimes a few students are immediately able to recognize the racial misrepresentation. When they do, the professor can label it and draw out a discussion about the misrepresentation functioning as a technique that masks systemic racism. Professors should not be surprised, however, if students do not immediately recognize the whiteness in the text. The professor may choose this time to offer a critical reading interpretation of the text along the lines analyzed in this essay in the form of a handout after first listening to and acknowledging students' personal interpretations and reminding them that a text can contain several possible readings. This may be followed-up in subsequent classes by showing students another film or novel excerpt in which the targeted concept occurs and repeating the activity until all of the misconceptions have been examined. To take this lesson further, students may decide as a class to read or view a white savior text that was not analyzed in this essay and critique it using the skills that they have acquired in class. Finally, students may be asked to consider the effect of the stories on them and others if they were written from another character's perspective. All of these activities can be developed into writing assignments ranging from literacy narratives to research papers that engage issues of race.

While I have focused this paper on the use of white savior texts in freshman seminars and first year composition classes, it is clear that the themes that these texts examine transcend disciplinary boundaries and lend themselves to exploration in a multiplicity of fields. For example, in a Film Studies class, students can engage these texts to investigate how minorities and whites have been cinematically portrayed over

time and how Hollywood has created racial stereotypes that reconstitute themselves to serve particular societal functions. English survey literature courses that explore how identities and ideologies are created and sustained through forms of cultural production, such as novels and films, share similar interests with African American studies and anthropology. Looking through their various lenses, teachers can utilize these texts to lead students into an inquiry into how groups are represented and misrepresented. More specifically, sociology and ethnic studies courses analyzing how racism is sustained through institutionalized forms can draw from *Dangerous Minds* to illustrate how minorities are denied access to an equal education despite the efforts of dedicated white teachers. Students in women and gender studies classes can explore how the intersection of race, class, and gender coalesce to differentially marginalize some women while privileging others as was illustrated in *The Help*. Finally, psychology courses, particularly, developmental, social, political and counseling psychology specializations can find much in these white savior texts to help shed light on issues such as group dynamics, stereotypes and social identity. For example, professors might ask their students to consider how the actions and attitudes of the white protagonists in these films illuminate Janet Helms' (1990) theory of white identity development.

In concluding this essay, I want to suggest that without racial knowledge and a language with which to talk about race and whiteness, we may end up inadvertently perpetuating it. Yet it should also be recognized that cultivating an ability to critique whiteness and racism in our classrooms cannot happen overnight. These are difficult conversations that require a willingness for teachers and students to work through

discomfort.  However, by building an awareness in our students that readers and texts emerge from particular social and political contexts, we create the beginning of a reading practice that allows them to question what they read and how they respond to it (McCormick, 1994; Mellor & Patterson, 2004).  My purpose in this essay is to argue that we need to provide students from poor communities with the means to reveal how the status quo is maintained by texts that conceal power relationships between whites and people of color.  It is with this knowledge that students will be able to recognize the ways in which they, like the white and non-white characters they encounter on their screens and in their books, can engage in struggles that disrupt these enduring scripts.

**Appendix A**

Critical Literacy Questions for Text Critique

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. What sort of genre does the text belong to? | 11. How does the text depict age, gender and/or racial and cultural groups? |
| 2. What does the composer of the text want us to know? | 12. Who is allowed to speak? Who is quoted? |
| 3. Why has the composer of the text represented the characters in a particular way? | 13. Who might the characters be representing? |
| 4. Whose perspective is presented? | 14. What kinds of social realities does the text portray? |
| 5. Whose perspective is missing from the text? | 15. What view of the world and values does the composer of the text assume that the reader/viewer     holds? How do we know? |
| 6. What has been left out of the text? | 16. How would the text be different if it were told in another time, place or culture? |
| 7. What view of the world is the text presenting? | 17. What does the text do? |
| 8. Who benefits from the text? | 18. What kind of person, and with what interests and values, composed the text? |
| 9. What knowledge does the reader/viewer need to bring to this text in order to understand it? | 19. What different interpretations of the text are possible? |
| 10. Is the text fair? | 20. How else could the text have been written? |

Adapted from McLaughlin, M. & DeVoogd, G. L. (2004). *Critical literacy: Enhancing students' comprehension of text.* New York: Scholastic.

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