

Reversal of Privilege: Deconstructing Imperialism, Racism, and Power in the Film *White Man's Burden*

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Using the film White Man's Burden (1995), this essay argues for the deconstruction of visual texts using Critical Race Theory (CRT) to illuminate imperialism and racism. Through our critique, we illustrate the various ways in which the film (when viewed as a pedagogical tool) contributes to the impetus of CRT by framing imperialism and racism as driving forces behind the benefits of racial privilege for the dominant group and the discriminatory practices directed toward racial minorities. Our analysis of White Man's Burden provides a framework for understanding the intersections of race, class, privilege, and marginalization. Through our critique, we suggest that the film creates a pedagogical space for understanding the relatively arbitrary nature of race as a social construction when the representation of race privilege is reversed.

Take up the White Man's burden
Send forth the best ye breed
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.
Take up the White Man's burden
The savage wars of peace
Full fill the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;

(Kipling, 1899, "The White Man's Burden," stanza 1)

Introduction

Throughout the world, the mass media is recognized as a prime source for information gathering. Be it television, newspaper, satellite radio, film, or the Internet, media use has become an integral part of most people's daily lives, and in many ways functions positively as a means for providing current, up-to-date information on evolving political and social issues. Furthermore with innovations such as the iPhone, PDAs, and other electronic information management devices, the mass media has become readily accessible. While the benefits of such technology are numerous, careful attention must be given to its continued role in influencing societal understandings of race and racial difference (Bryant and Oliver 2008; Entman and Rojecki 2000). Orbe and Harris (2008) argue that because of "the pervasiveness of the media...[it is] a central influence on how we come to create, maintain, and/or transform our perceptions of race" (218). While racial barriers such as the Jim Crow Laws no longer

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exist, cognitive and epistemological barriers continue to impede our progress toward a multicultural society where diversity is acknowledged, appreciated, and preserved. More pointedly, these barriers are vestiges of the historical barriers that drew the color line between people of color and whites. They have also evolved into seemingly invisible barriers that discourage efforts to engage in public discourse on the topics of race, interracial relations, and racism.

Despite the omnipresent tensions surrounding race, interracial relations, and racism in U.S. American society, we suggest that visual images in the mass media can serve as a vehicle by which to eradicate longstanding racial barriers. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as theoretical framework, we articulate how the film *White Man's Burden* (1995) can serve as form of social justice in its efforts to highlight the complex intersections of race and privilege (Gillborn 2006). More specifically, the onscreen images, interactions, and storylines serve the communicative function of creating meaning and progressive possibility within a reversed racial hierarchy. Harris and Abbott (forthcoming) argue that using CRT in diverse and unique ways illuminates oppression and further solidifies the marriage between “scholarship and social justice” (Tate 1997, 235). Similarly, Yosso (2002) contends that utilizing CRT to critique the media fosters critical race media literacy, which serves to deconstruct and contextualize media images, power relations, and systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism. She further argues that for such research to be successful, it must “address racism as an inextricable, central component to the commercial globalization of media” (Yosso 2002, 59). Likewise, Orbe and Kinefuchi (2008) argue that, “Historically, film has played a significant role in how the U.S. public has come to understand racial prejudice, discrimination, and racism” (135). To continue the exploration of the pedagogical nature of film, we have chosen the film *White Man's Burden* (1995).

White Man's Burden (1995), directed by Desmond Nakano, offers an alternate view of the racial hierarchy among blacks and whites that many U.S. Americans have been indoctrinated to accept as “truth.” Despite the film’s inability to offer a prescription for eradicating racism in a real world context and the problematic nature of certain aspects of the film’s message², we argue that critical engagement

² Like many films, *White Man's Burden* (1995) offers a flawed representation of racial prejudice, discrimination, and racism, which may be a byproduct of the movie as a form of popular culture designed for entertainment and profit. Admittedly, the film has an underdeveloped storyline and relies on problematic stereotypes. For example, although the film offers an alternative racial hierarchy, the origins of this racial structure are never addressed (e.g., were whites at one point enslaved to blacks?). Similarly, a reliance on stereotypes, such as Travolta’s character’s use of Ebonics (African American English Vernacular), undercut the film’s messages about racism and the distribution of power and wealth. Despite these among other troubling aspects of the film, we chose to focus on how *White Man's Burden* (1995) can be used as a tool to ignite dialogue about race in diverse social contexts. In particular, *White Man's Burden* (1995) allows us to explore the goals of CRT by deconstructing the media images offered in the film and contextualizing them within a broader understanding of power relations and racism.

with a visual text such as *White Man's Burden* (1995) advances the goals of CRT by serving as a catalyst dialogue about race in diverse social contexts. The film also provides a foundation on which to build a more accurate understanding of how media messages regarding power and privilege reflect systemic privileges born from unequal distributions of societal power. Extending the work of communication scholars (Harris and Abbott forthcoming), we aim to introduce “conceptual and methodological strateg(ies) [in an effort] to examine how the intersections of racialized subordination inform [racially marginalized] entertainment media portrayals” (Yosso 2002, 53). To that end, it is our hope via a critical deconstruction of *White Man's Burden* (1995) to offer a pedagogical tool where the experiences of marginalized groups take center stage to inspire conscientious dialogue about social inequality.

Critical Race Theory as a Lens

According to Ladson-Billings (2009), CRT is “a set of legal scholarship theories about racial inequality and how race functions in...society” (141). Dixson and Rousseau (2005) identify six themes that capture the essence of critical race theory (see also Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas 1995; Gillborn 2006; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Outlaw 1983; Williams 1991; Wing 1997). First, CRT recognizes racism as being “endemic to American life” (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005, 70). Despite sentiments that we are in a post-racial America³, CRT argues that racism is a part of the social fabric of America. Second, CRT “Expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy” (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005, 70). Third, CRT “challenges ahistoricism and issues on a contextual/historical analysis of the law” (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005, 70). Therefore the history of race and institutional oppression are used as an interpretive lens for understanding social issues. Fourth, CRT insists that “the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin” be recognized when law and society are analyzed (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005, 70). As such, the experiences of racially oppressed individuals and groups are critical to understanding the workings of race in general and white imperialism and racism in particular. Respectively, the fifth and sixth themes forefront CRT as an interdisciplinary framework that “works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broad goal of ending all forms of oppression” (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005, 70). These six themes were designed in response to dissatisfaction with the legal system’s preservation of social inequalities. Leading up to the development of CRT, legal scholars introduced a body of literature

³ “Post-racial” popular discourses indicate that since slavery and Jim Crow laws are no longer in practice that race and racism no longer matter in U.S. American society. However, racism exists implicitly within nearly all aspects of American life including the media representations, the judicial system, and the education system. See Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Yosso (2002) for further discussion.

known as Critical Legal Studies (CLS) to address social, political, and intellectual disparities in the application of the law.

Ladson-Billings (2009) explains that CLS “argued that legal language is a discourse that continues to perpetuate hierarchies – male over female, rich over poor, Whites over Blacks and other people of color” (88). Much like the movement to empower women in feminist scholarship was criticized for ignoring the issues of women of color (read non-white), CLS was quickly scrutinized for failing to acknowledge the racism embedded within the legal system. This criticism began the birthing process of CRT. Founding CRT scholars, including Kimberlè Crenshaw (2002) and Derrick Bell (1992), argued that the failure to acknowledge the salience of race only perpetuated dominant ideologies grounded in privilege, power, and whiteness. Applying a critical lens regarding institutional racism in education, Knaus (2009) further argues that:

Critical race theory exposes how mainstream schools promote racism through White-supremacist teaching practices, White-based curriculum, and school designs that privilege White culture by ignoring and/or denying how racism shapes the lives of students of color. Thus, ‘merit’ is framed by critical race theory as a measure of Whiteness or successful navigation of White values rather than a colorblind and culture-blind measuring stick of academic or intellectual prowess. (141)

Extending Knaus’ insight, these mainstream ideals are existent in other institutions as well, including the media. The images and ideals presented in television, film, the Internet, and other outlets are a manifestation of the value society continues to place on whiteness. As such while whiteness is viewed, treated, and accepted as the measure of normalcy, the experiences of people of color are often framed as deviant and abnormal. This framing functions to mask racialized social disparities that are a part of the everyday lives of racial minorities. By silencing the voices of the marginalized, social institutions such as education and media that have historically privileged mainstream epistemologies remain problematic, hence the cultural relevance of CRT in illuminating both racism and imperialism (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles 2009; Teranishi, Behringer, Grey, and Parker 2009; Yosso 2002).

Contrary to racial marginalization, CRT is a framework that deconstructs racism by giving voice to the experiences of the oppressed (e.g., people of color). In so doing, CRT provides a context for understanding the systemic forms of oppression borne out of a legal system that has purportedly fought for equality and justice for all. Essentially, the goal of CRT is “to address the immediate needs of those who are oppressed” (Orbe and Harris 2008, 114), which involves the use of narrative voice (Delgado and Stefancic 2002; see Delgado 1995, 2005). Delgado and Stefancic also argue that this position is critical to the advancement of social justice and change because “[t]he voice exposes, tells and retells, signals

resistance and caring, and reiterates the most fearsome power – the power of commitment to change” (80).

In keeping with the fundamental arguments espoused by CRT, Stoudt (2009) argues that the study of privilege must be further scrutinized if institutional racism is to be deconstructed. Of great importance is his observation that “[t]he absence of this critical gaze helps to normalize the structures that reproduce asymmetrical advantages and protect its benefactors from a sense of culpability or urgency towards their contributions to injustice” (8). Failure to illuminate the many ways in which privilege is preserved perpetuates the existing racial hierarchy, thereby limiting the potential for CRT and other theoretical frameworks to level the playing field. Therefore using CRT, we will deconstruct mainstream ideologies about race and privilege through the voices of the characters in the film *White Man’s Burden* (1995). It is our hope that this essay will provide further evidence of the salience and cultural relevance of CRT as “fuel for social transformation” (Calmore 1995, 317). More importantly this essay will demonstrate how, when used properly, film as a pedagogical tool in the communication classroom can “challenge students to critically ‘read’ the racism, sexism, and classism in entertainment media portrayals” of racially marginalized groups in an effort “to develop critical media literacy” (Yosso 2002, 54).

CRT and *White Man’s Burden*

Distributed by Rysher Entertainment, *White Man’s Burden* (1995) was released around the same time as *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), and *Monster’s Ball* (2001), which also tackled difficult issues related to race relations. The storyline of *White Man’s Burden* (1995) is centered on the white male lead character, Louis Pinnock (John Travolta), and his experiences as a subjugated racial minority in an America where blacks are the ruling class (Travers 2001). This “ghettoized working stiff” (Travers 2001) repeatedly falls victim to institutional racism as exhibited by the black privilege bestowed upon his racist and wealthy boss Thaddeus Thomas (Harry Belafonte). Desperate times call for desperate measures when Louis is overlooked for a promotion and is unfairly fired by Thad for gawking at his wife while making a delivery to his mansion. Having failed at every attempt to “pull himself up by his bootstraps” (e.g., hard work pays off if you work hard enough) and resolve the misunderstanding that led to his termination, Louis subsequently resorts to violence, assault, and kidnapping in response to the injustices that he and his family have been subjected to.

Movie reviewers applauded the efforts of the movie’s writer/director, Desmond Nakano, and described the film as “a thought-provoking movie” (Hewitt 1995) that examines “racism from a different perspective” (Betzold 2009). Critics described it as a “didactic political fable, which imagines an America

in which the roles of blacks and whites are reversed” (Holden 1996). Of particular importance is the assertion that *White Man’s Burden* “forces audiences to see things they might not otherwise notice” (LaSalle 1995). In another review of the film, renowned *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert (1995) argued that it “works dramatically to make visible a lot of our assumptions and prejudices.” Similarly, Anthony Lane (2006) from the *New Yorker* stated, “there’s no mistaking Nakano’s ambitions.” In addition to praise, *White Man’s Burden* (1995) also provoked criticism from some reviewers. For example, reviews suggested that the film “falls into a pattern of gross stereotyping and oversimplification” (Berardinelli 1995) with a story line that remains “frustratingly underdeveloped” (Holden 1996). Overwhelmingly, the essence of the negative critiques stem from a belief that the film’s “reliance upon archetypes and clichés . . . undercuts the film’s message” (Berardinelli 1995). For example, several critics questioned why Travolta’s character used Ebonics (African American English Vernacular) and why the poor white people blared rap music. Perhaps these criticisms partially explain why the movie grossed a mere \$3,642,175, which is significantly less than *Do the Right Thing* (\$27,545,445), *Boyz in the Hood* (\$57,504,069), and *Monster’s Ball* (\$31,273,922) (Box Office Mojo 2009; Hollywood).

From a critical race standpoint always already conscious of the power of representation, we acknowledge that Producer Lawrence Bender (*Pulp Fiction*) and Japanese-American screenwriter Desmond Nakano (*Last Exit to Brooklyn*) problematize the discourse on privilege and power by creating scenarios that appear largely improbable. Nevertheless, we use our critique to demonstrate how *White Man’s Burden* (1995) can be used to promote critical media literacy and social justice by sparking dialogue about race and racism from unique vantage points and ideally raising social consciousness surrounding oppression. Guided by CRT, we will identify specific communicative moments depicted in the film to demonstrate how the characters and storyline illuminate the complexities of privilege, power, and race. While the film fails to present a level of authenticity or realism we suggest that *White Man’s Burden* (1995), as a visual representation of a virtual reversal of privilege, provides an interesting site for examining racism and imperialism. In particular, audiences are invited to interrogate the nature of privilege however because the visual text offered to viewers presents a “virtual” reality, we are rarely challenged (or encouraged) to consider the pedagogical offerings of the film beyond entertainment.

We begin our critique of this contentious film with a very brief discussion of the genesis of the film’s title “White Man’s Burden” to contextualize the larger implications of the film’s characters and the film itself. The phrase “White Man’s Burden” comes from the 1899 poem by Rudyard Kipling of the same name. As noted by Driscoll (2009), Kipling’s conception of white privilege and entitlement was captured by the phrase and used as justification for European imperialists in the 19th and early 20th

centuries whose behaviors were inspired by the sense that they were contributing to the betterment of people of color (see also Shohat and Stam 1994). Closer examination of the poem and Kipling's argument for imperialism (and subjugation) reveals an espousal of both "paternalism and racism" and a belief that "the duty of the white man is to conquer and control, probably for a couple of centuries, all the dark people of the world, not for his own good but for theirs" (Littell and Littell 1922, 663).

Describing Herbert Schiller's conceptualization of imperialism, White (2001) offers:

[A] society is brought into the modern world system when its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping its social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system.

Therefore, in order to preserve the existing racial hierarchy where whites were in positions of power and authority over non-whites, imperialism was promoted and espoused as an appropriate framework for maintaining the racial divide.

According to Kohn and O'Neill (2006), imperialism is defined as "the paternalistic government of a 'civilized' nation over its foreign subjects" and has its origins in Europe (212). Much like colonialism, imperialism has functioned throughout history to oppress groups considered subhuman and in need of normalization in accordance with white European ideologies. Imperialism is the result of oppression on a global scale and refers to the perpetuation of Eurocentric ideologies that perpetuate systemic racism. With regard to domination via popular culture, Jan (2009) offers "cultural imperialism," which refers to "the unequal flows of film, television, music, news, and information" (71). Due to an overemphasis on whiteness as the status quo, dominant ideologies maintain "[t]his unbalanced flow" and are perceived as "a cause of cultural erosion and change" that is feared to ultimately replace the indigenous culture's ideas, images, and values (Jan, 2009, 71). As these arguments suggest, imperialism is both a covert and overt phenomenon that is central to our understanding of the functionality of film as narrative and voice. Coupling this understanding of imperialism with CRT and critical media literacy, we offer a rich and complex reading of the film *White Man's Burden* (1995) to provide audiences with a unique perspective from which to critique racism. Although the film does have its flaws and can be argued to reproduce racism, we argue that the film articulates racial and economic injustices in ways typically ignored, minimized, or invalidated when presented from the viewpoint or perspective of the "other."

Unpacking Racism and Imperialism

As a result of centuries of cultural imperialism and colonialism, the U.S. is a nation where whites are the dominant racial group. The racial hierarchy among people of color and whites, which often operates at the intersections with class identities, functions to provide dominant group members with unearned privileges, thereby limiting access to resources for racial minorities. whiteness, by definition, is

a “social construction which produces race privilege for White people by appearing ‘neutral,’ unlinked to racial politics, universal, and unmarked” (Carrillo Rowe and Malhotra 2006, 168). The benefits of being white and having access to white privilege have emerged from a social system grounded in notions of imperialism. Marable (2002) states that white privilege and whiteness are “the social expression of power and privileges, the consequences of discriminatory practices of inequality that exist today” (11-12). Peggy McIntosh (1995) uses the metaphor of the invisible knapsack to illustrate how privileged individuals, as benefactors of imperialism, subconsciously possess unearned assets to which they typically remain oblivious. Because the racial hierarchy is reversed in *White Man’s Burden* (1995), it is *black* privilege that draws attention to the consequences of an imperialistic society designed to benefit those in possession of societal power. The complex relationship between privilege and power is observed, as we will discuss, through the interactions between the main characters Louis (white lower-class male) and Thad (black upper-class male). Their respective status as the underprivileged and overprivileged depict manifestations of imperialism and social injustice in clear and distinct ways. Relying on CRT, we will deconstruct how the film serves as a pedagogical text that allows us to critique the racialized consequences of power and privilege.

According to Yosso (2002), “Entertainment media involve moving images and sounds in addition to written text, so a critical media literacy consciousness-raising project analyzes these images and sounds as text” (54). If facilitated properly, film as a pedagogical tool can contribute to social justice. By guiding students through Freire’s three-stage model of critical pedagogy, communication educators can move students to a level of critical consciousness where they are potentially compelled to look “toward changing the system as a response to experiencing inequities” (Yosso 2002, 54). Freire’s magical stage, involves students blaming inequality on “luck, fate, or God” and choosing to do nothing. Stage two, the naïve stage, occurs when students become more aware of racism and opt to place blame for inequality on self, culture or their community. They subsequently “may try to change themselves, assimilate to the white, middle-class mainstream culture, or distance themselves from their community in response to experiencing inequality at the naïve stage” (Yosso, 2002, 54) Finally, the critical stage involves students looking “beyond fatalistic or cultural reasons for inequality to focus on structural, systemic explanation” and, hopefully, achieving “a critical level of consciousness” (Yosso 2002, 54). While it is presumptuous and erroneous to believe the viewing of one media text can facilitate change, we argue that film in conjunction with consciousness raising dialogue and education can advance critical awareness of racism, sexism, classism and social justice. In the following paragraphs, we will offer a critical assessment of various scenes in *White Man’s Burden* (1995) and identify several pedagogical examples that we believe

contribute to the interconnected goals of social justice embedded within CRT and communication scholarship.

“Different Worlds”

As members of two different racial groups, Thad and Louis are observed having markedly different experiences that are directly shaped by their position in the racial hierarchy. This is evidenced in the first scene where their class and racial differences are juxtaposed visually as the camera pans across a scene of the factory assembly line. As the member of the privileged and dominant group, Thad is the wealthy owner of the chocolate factory who lives in an elegant mansion with his trophy wife. While he is enjoying the spoils of his privileged life by wielding his power among his employees, his wife lives a life of leisure and dedicates her time to charity work for impoverished “ghetto white children” in the community. Thad’s epistemology regarding the intersections of race, class, and privilege is evidenced in his discussion with guests during a dinner party when he articulates the “innate” differences between the privileged and the underprivileged. Expressing disdain for the marginalized, Thad surprisingly declares that, “[whites are] genetically inferior, or they’re culturally cripple, or they’re socially deprived. All those arguments mean absolutely nothing. The bottom line is simple: are these a people who are beyond being helped?” In this scene, his privileged standpoint is articulated through his beliefs in genetic determinism and his failure to recognize the role of systemic oppression and its effect on whites who are living a life replete with disadvantage, as observed through Louis.

The differences in their standpoints are vividly articulated as the audience is introduced to the life of Louis, the blue collar factory worker who is depicted with limited financial resources to provide for his family. Unlike Thad who lives in a spacious mansion filled with expensive luxuries and staffed with servants, Louis lives in a cramped two-bedroom apartment with his wife Marsha and their two children in an impoverished community, most likely a “ghetto.” The camera canvases the neighborhood offering images of drug deals, a strong police presence, a liquor store, prostitution, winos, and loud music; all of which are represented as points of disdain for community members.

A close examination of the juxtaposition of the characters in their respective homes demonstrates clearly how imperialism has manifested itself differently for the overprivileged and the underprivileged. As a member of the dominant culture and seemingly superior racial group, Thad has material possessions, societal power, and status that serve to define his black privilege and create a fissure between the haves and the have nots. In the case of Louis, his limited resources and access are understood to be a result of his social location as a member of the minority racial group. The scene, *“Trying to Make It,”* captures the notion of cultural imperialism by showing Louis’ son Donnie channel surfing while waiting

for his father to come home from work. The television screen is consumed by images of the dominant black group, thereby illustrating for both the onscreen and real-world audiences the degree to which dominant cultural values have been adopted and used to promote racial superiority. The messages embedded within this text communicate to audiences the pervasive nature of systemic oppression on both the conscious and subconscious level. This is emphasized repeatedly as the audience is further exposed to the contrasting lifestyles and images of the main characters. Thus despite Louis' valiant efforts to overcome systemic oppression, he remains victimized by imperialism and racism, which becomes quite contentious as he struggles against the systemic oppression with which he has become all too familiar. Highlighting the relevance of race in accordance with CRT, the aforementioned scene explicitly represents the extent to which Thad's and Louis' experiences are a result of their respective positions in the film's racial hierarchy.

"You're Fired"

This scene in the film is pivotal in that we are offered insight into the experiential knowledge of the marginalized when the power imbalance between the two lead characters becomes more apparent and oppressive for Louis. As a single income family, Louis and Marsha are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet and as a result of their economic (and systemic) oppression, Louis decides to inquire about a promotion to foreman with his boss Lionel. His perception that meritocracy is the system by which he should be rewarded for his hard work is shattered when his request is denied. His disbelief is further compounded by the fact that he is fired from the company. Lionel explains that the company "can't keep you on any more...I think that in the long-run it is best for everyone...It has nothing to do with your work."

The interactions among these characters illuminates for the audience the role that institutional racism plays in the life of the marginalized. For example, the nonverbal and verbal behaviors of his boss communicate to Louis that the history of racism continues to play out in contemporary society. Lionel ascribes to him the stereotype of the sexually deprived white (read black) male lusting after the black (read white) virginal woman. This is observed in the film when he offers the following explanation behind Louis' firing: "I do not want a Peeping Tom working in my factory...He saw you, at his house looking at his wife. Thaddeus Thomas saw you peeping at his wife." In an earlier scene, the audience witnesses Louis' accidental viewing of Thad's wife Meghan when he is lost on the backside of the mansion. He uses the servant's entrance to make the home delivery and coincidentally is in the yard at the precise moment Meghan is disrobing in the bedroom while conversing with Thad. Louis briefly glances at Meghan and immediately finds his way to the delivery door. In this instance, despite his

intentions to be a good employee and make the delivery, Louis was racially read as a stereotypical white (black) male from the dominant black (white) perspective. Thus, this scene speaks to the skepticism of CRT regarding neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness.

In response to the overt racism and classism he has just experienced, Louis succumbs to his anger and returns to Thad's home to confront him about being fired, only to be rebuffed at the gate. Thad immediately dismisses his request for a meeting and his maid relays the following message to Louis: "I don't get involved in these matters. Tell him there is nothing I can do." Thad's refusal to meet with him is evidence to Louis of his denial of privilege and power as well as the notion of meritocracy, which Louis believed would be his answer and ticket to the (black) American Dream. In this instance, Thad's character transforms into a visual representation of the systemic oppression that Louis has been trying to overcome his whole life via the bootstrap mentality. Regardless, all of Louis' hard work as a loyal employee is negated by one alleged infraction. As a result of being unfairly fired, he is further victimized when he is forced to file for unemployment. Throughout the film, the disparity in privilege and power between Louis and Thad is starkly visible especially when we observe Thad's continued oblivion to the devastation he has caused for the Pinnocks.

Mirroring critical race reflections on the invisibility of racial privilege (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995), Thad remains unaware of the actual and perceived societal power he has over the destiny of his employees as a member of the dominant racial group. This is apparent when he instructs Lionel to ensure that a different "delivery boy" be used in the future to make deliveries to his home. Recognizing his contempt for the underprivileged, Lionel interprets the coded message as a directive to fire Louis from the company. Thad's unawareness of his black privilege is further solidified when he dismisses Louis' request for a meeting. Because of his insolated life and the social distance between himself and Louis, Thad is literally oblivious to the gravity of his actions. The contrasting power differential is further magnified when the characters return to their respective lives and their worlds continue to collide.

"You're Guilty"

In this scene, the reversal of privilege and social injustice are further magnified when Louis engages Thad in a dialogue and clearly communicates to him his frustration with systemic oppression. He is repeatedly reminded of his low socio-economic status and powerlessness when he has car troubles and experiences racial profiling because the police believe he "fits the description" of an alleged bank robber. He then suffers physical abuse at the mercy of the officers who stop him, force him out of his car, and frisk him due to negative perceptions of his racial identity. This scene suggests that this racist

treatment is most likely the result of exposure to epistemologies and media images that perpetuate the belief that racial minorities are criminals, untrustworthy, and prone to violate societal rules and laws. This oppressive state of being is further evidenced as we observe the conversations between Thad and his wife. While Louis continues to experience racism at every turn, Thad and Meghan communicate, superficially, about the underprivileged, undisciplined white kids who are benefactors of the upcoming fundraiser. Rather than recognize their marginalization within a system of oppression, Thad attributes their plight to absent fathers, thus alluding to the myth of a matriarchal system being an innate part of a marginalized community.

Overall, this scene provides a narrative for viewers that draws attention to the automated and prejudiced responses we are socialized to activate when in the presence of marginalized “Others.” Like CRT, this scene calls for deep critiques to highlight the ways that neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness fuel racism. In addition, this scene marks the everyday manifestation of prejudice and discrimination. Thus despite efforts to uplift themselves and their loved ones, the underprivileged remain perpetually victimized by imperialism and institutional racism which exist in all areas of society. Furthermore, their racial identities marked as inferior coupled with the concerted efforts by the privileged to preserve their social standing function in concert to severely limit opportunities for advancement in a world where the “bootstrap mentality” remains a myth for those lacking societal power. As such, this scene brings forth the improbability of being able to transcend oppression.

“You’re Out”

Louis’ status as a minority locked within an oppressive system in terms of race and class is made even more apparent in the scene entitled “*You’re Out.*” His experiences with discrimination become more personal as he is victimized by the police and the housing authorities who are evicting his family. While his previous experiences with discrimination were racial in nature, it becomes evident that his racial identity negatively intersects with his low socioeconomic status. As racial minorities, Louis and Marsha are at an economic disadvantage and forced to live in public housing. However when they are evicted, they experience a new form of degrading discrimination. More specifically, the police objectify Marsha when she is forced to change clothes in the presence of an officer, which she insists is to be done in private. Her insistence is an attempt to preserve her human dignity and resist the unjust surveillance tactics the officers are attempting to enforce. Similarly, Louis has lost his dignity and self-respect because he has failed to be the breadwinner in his patriarchal family. This is compounded by the fact that his mother-in-law must now assume the role of caregiver and provider for his family, which propels Louis into a severe downward spiral.

The consequences or results of racist domination are also observed in this scene, specifically when Louis is repeatedly advised to try harder to find a job by unemployment office personnel despite the lack of employment opportunities available for someone with his skills and education, or lack thereof. Disheartened and angry due to circumstances beyond his control, Louis resorts to confronting Thad at his mansion. Thad's position as privileged *and* powerful keeps him oblivious to the plight of the underprivileged in general and Louis in particular. He is ignorant to the fact that Louis is his employee and is dumbfounded by Louis' decision to force himself into Thad's car by gunpoint and make him drive to the bank to make a withdrawal. In this instance, Thad becomes a hostage, in direct response to the oppression and subjugation Louis has experienced when Thad had the power in their relationship.

Louis wields his power, albeit manipulated, over Thad as they drive around the city and communicate explicitly about what Louis believes is owed to him because of his unwarranted firing from the company. In his role as an obvious victim of imperialism and racism, Louis presents a persuasive argument to Thad by offering several examples of his personal experiences of oppression which can be linked to Thad's actions and the larger system of black (white) privilege. These communicative exchanges between the characters provide audiences with an opportunity to witness the drastic differences between their experiences within the racial hierarchy. For example, Thad eventually remembers who Louis is and refers to him as the "delivery boy," to which Louis takes offense. This power differential is underscored when the control is reversed because of Louis' increasingly aggressive use of a gun. In response, Thad frantically tries to offer reparations by promising to rehire Louis, to which he responds, "Now that I have a gun, you have all the time in the world! You a fuckin' liar!!" Recognizing the obvious power shift in their relationship and out of sheer desperation, Louis assumes the role of kidnapper as he takes Thad to an abandoned house in the ghetto. Although he is opting to use violence, Louis's actions are symbolic of other forms of social justice enacted in real world contexts that aim to equalize an imbalanced world. For example, newspaper headlines frequently contain front-page stories of disgruntled employees, family members, and teens that use violence as a "solution" to their problems. While attributions are not always identifiable, media coverage of these tragedies often reveal that perpetrators typically feel they were wronged by the victims. Louis' behavior is extreme yet reflective of responses some individuals have to oppressive social conditions.

"Emerging Compassion"

The very physical altercations and volatile communication between the characters thus far in the film culminate to represent a struggle over both justice and injustice. Instead of being ignorant to institutional racism and other forms of oppression, from our perspective citizens are challenged to

become more sensitive to and aware of the experiences marginalized group members have within the dominant system. For Thad, this awareness occurs during his forced captivity. In his newfound role as hostage, Thad bears witness to the far-reaching effect that Louis' experiences with oppression have had on his life. He is also afforded the opportunity to humanize Louis when Louis discloses his disappointment with missing his son's birthday. The reality of Louis' experiences is magnified when they pick up Donnie to go to the store to buy the action figure doll Louis promised him for his birthday. When they arrive at the store, Thad learns a few lessons about racism while observing the communication between father and son. For example at the store, Louis attempts to dissuade Donnie from buying a black doll, which exemplifies the dominant ideological notion that "black is normal." Indicative of the strength of blackness (whiteness), Louis begrudgingly gives in, and consistent with the power imbalance, is reduced to accepting money from Thad in order to buy the doll.

The audience is able to witness both awareness and compassion when Thad shares his perspectives with Louis. When Donnie returns to the store, Thad turns to Louis and says, "You're a good father to [Don]. You know, I don't understand: You don't look like the criminal type." Obviously offended by the blatant stereotyping, Louis asks, "What the fuck's that supposed to mean?" Thad responds, "You got a wife, family. Got a lot to lose. I don't understand why you jeopardize that for a couple thousand dollars. It's not worth it." The ensuing argument suggests an impasse in their perceptions of privilege and power. As an obvious benefactor of imperialism, Thad fails to recognize the extent to which institutional racism has in some ways forced Louis into this predicament. He argues that "nobody forced you to do it"; however, Louis explains that, "Two fuckin' minutes of your time and none of this shit would've happened! Two minutes."

While it is highly unrealistic that a hostage and kidnapper would communicate in this fashion in the real world, this scene is of significance for the audience. It humanizes both characters, especially Louis who has resorted to violence as a result of a lifetime of experiences with institutional racism. From a critical race perspective, the extreme measure of kidnapping his oppressor can be perceived as being symptomatic of the cumulative racism that has plagued Louis all his life. He has been trapped in a system where equal access to opportunity is impeded by barriers erected by the powerful. However although his reality has been altered by the selfishness of the all-powerful Thad, he has resorted to violence in response to the omnipresence of oppression. In this vein, CRT reminds us that the experiences of racial minorities must be taken into account to understand racism and societal issues. Likewise, the film pedagogically offers an opportunity to spark dialogues concerning how systemic oppression shapes our conceptualizations of race and racism.

“Making a Break”

In this pivotal scene, Thad is in the precarious role of the oppressed as a hostage and is reacting in a way that is quite similar to Louis’ response to his situation. Both characters are, at various points in the film, victims of their circumstances and forced to respond with extreme measures. Essentially, they are attempting to escape the power differentials, at micro and macro levels of interaction, that are beyond their control. This is evidenced when Louis and Thad grab a meal at yet another local food stand after their store excursion with Donnie. Hoping against hope, Thad pleads with Louis to make a phone call to his wife, to which he responds,

Look. I didn’t mean for things to turn out the way they did... When I come to your house, I stopped the car. I was just looking for what I had coming to me, what was right. But you didn’t know who I was...I’m fucked. Either way, I’m fucked... You know who I am...I don’t think I can let you go, Thad. I don’t know if I can let you go.

Bewildered by Louis’ admission that he has no plans to release him, Thad becomes frantic and makes a botched attempt to escape. His inability to maintain control over his life is yet another example of the costs of racial oppression, in that his response is akin to the frustration oppressed individuals experience on a daily basis. In this reversal of privilege, Thad becomes the antithesis of black privilege because he is “forced” to occupy the space and role of the underprivileged. He is entrenched further in this space when he trespasses and breaks into a home to make an emergency call to his wife. He is confronted by the family and, just like Louis, Thad responds to his circumstance with violence and then flees from the home. The power in their relationship becomes even more imbalanced when Thad is recaptured by Louis during this scene.

After Thad’s recapture, they return to their hideout and begin an extensive dialogue about their status as victims of circumstance. The attempt to give voice to their experiences with oppression and marginalization only complicates their communication and makes it impossible to move beyond this impasse. While this scene is very implausible, it provides the audience with examples of persuasive arguments individuals might use to explain their responses to institutional racism and imperialism. Thad bitterly explains how he tried to justify Louis’ behavior, which he finds inexcusable since he tried to absolve the matter by offering Louis money but he refused. Creating a space for reflection, this scene underscores for the viewer the mounting frustration each man is feeling. Louis is frustrated because of his lack of resources and Thad because of his lack of awareness of his privileged status. While Louis cannot fathom Thad’s inability to comprehend his partial responsibility for Louis’ downward spiral, Thad is dumbstruck by the desperate lengths to which Louis has gone to get what he believes it due to him.

As has been demonstrated, this scene is pivotal in that we become increasingly aware of how privilege and power have created a serious fissure between two men who are competing for independence and freedom. The audience is also challenged to think critically about the arbitrary nature of racial categorization. Although not explicitly discussed by the characters or addressed in the storyline, this scene in conjunction with the others also provides a visual representation of the extent to which imperialism and institutional racism adversely affect the society these ideologies are alleged to benefit. Through the lens of CRT, then, these scenes remind us that we need to be critical of social inequalities if we are to conquer racial oppression.

“Honorable Sacrifice” and “Pride”

The final scene that we will address attempts a redemption of Louis and Thad, who have both fallen victim to the reversal of privilege. Thad becomes a sinner as he appears to be punished for his role as an oppressor while Louis becomes a savior as he tries to redeem himself as victim-turned-kidnapper. In this scene, Thad suffers a heart attack and Louis feverishly tries to administer CPR. Louis’ friend Stanley offers him step-by-step instructions on how to save Thad’s life but it is obvious that his efforts are failing. Eventually Thad begins to breathe again and Louis seeks medical help because Thad is slowly dying. Then Louis’ car breaks down once again, which leaves them stranded in the ghetto with no means for getting emergency assistance. Because the mere sound of gunfire in the ghetto does not attract the police, in desperation Louis shoots out the front window of a nearby store to trigger an alarm and bring the police to the neighborhood. Stanley abandons Thad and Louis, leaving Louis to cradle a dying Thad in his arms. When police arrive on the scene, they immediately draw their weapons when they see a distressed Thad being “attacked” by the gun-wielding Louis. Louis is eventually shot to death when he obeys police orders to put his hands in the air. It is never made clear if he is shot because he is viewed as a menacing threat to the officers or if they are threatened because he has a gun in his hand and happens to be white.

In the final moments of the scene, Thad’s subsequent actions read through CRT are similar to government efforts to absolve itself of institutional racism through reparations. In a failed attempt to absolve himself of his black guilt as a result of his privileged life, Thad visits Louis’s widow in an effort to make amends for the pain he has caused the Pinnocks. After introducing himself to Marsha, Thad says, “I came to bring you something. Your husband thought I owed him some money. I added some, thinking perhaps you might be able to use it.” With pain and grief written all over her face, Marsha stares blankly at Thad and then returns the envelope. Oblivious to his insensitivity, Thad insists that she keep it and offers her more money, thinking the offer was not enough. Marsha dryly responds, “And

how much do you think would be enough?” While the likelihood of this particular scene happening is slim, it provides “evidence,” per se, of how benefactors of privilege are often under the illusion that money solves all problems. By rejecting Thad’s offer of reparations, Marsha is highlighting the complex nature of an economically driven culture that is encompassed by the existing racial hierarchy to which she, her family, and other whites and non-blacks have fallen victim. This ideology is further complicated by Thad’s refusal to relinquish the privileges and power to which he has become accustomed. In essence, Thad’s position is symbolic of what could possibly happen if, in fact, the reversal of privilege were actualized.

Bridging Communication Scholarship and CRT

In response to the clarion call from communication and critical race scholars to engage more critically with media texts and narratives (Harris and Abbott forthcoming; Kinefuchi and Orbe 2008; Orbe and Kinefuchi 2008; Yosso 2002), we have offered a critical reading of a film that interrogates the complex relationship between privilege, power, and imperialism. While *White Man’s Burden* (1995) fails in several ways regarding its authenticity, accuracy, and arguably race consciousness we argue that it places the issue of race at the forefront and provides a foundation from which to generate consciousness raising dialogue. Using CRT as a theoretical framework, we have demonstrated how the film can contribute to the goal of social justice by presenting audiences with narratives that speak to societal oppression in a way that is markedly different from their experiences with the real world. While flawed in several ways, the film is successful in highlighting issues of privilege and power in a fictionalized setting, which increases its potential for engaging viewers in innovative dialogue.

White Man’s Burden (1995) is a visual reminder of the history of systemic oppression and its daily impact on the overprivileged and underprivileged. Although not explicitly discussed by the characters, visual images are presented (i.e., public housing, manual labor, wealth) that contextualize for audiences the consequences of subjugation, which we argue are imperialistic in nature. Systemic oppression is also evidenced by the qualitatively different experiences Louis and Thad have within this system. Louis’ repeated efforts to “pull himself up by his bootstraps” are futile and underscore the pervasive nature of racism in its truest form. Conversely, Thad remains unaware of his privilege and power until he is confronted about his role in Louis’ inability to acquire the (black) American Dream. For audience members, the juxtaposition of the lead characters is a symbolic representation of the history of oppression in U.S. American society. Although racial barriers such as the Jim Crow Laws no longer exist, this film demonstrates how cognitive and epistemological barriers impede our progress toward a multicultural society where diversity is acknowledged, appreciated, and preserved. Through the film, the

directors and producers use the characters to represent and problematize the barriers that have and continue to divide people of color and whites, making the invisible visible.

As previously noted, the reversal of the racial hierarchy is a necessary element of the storyline, in that it both provides examples of how race functions in society and challenges audience members to confront their understanding of unearned privilege and access to resources. By presenting a different reality to viewers it makes salient the ways that race is used to promote the dominant ideologies of those in positions of privilege and power. Additionally, *White Man's Burden* (1995) offers insight into institutionalized racism by comparing and contrasting the experiences of the powerful and the powerless. The audience is able to journey through the daily lives of the characters, thus garnering “firsthand” observations of the consequences of imperialism and racism. Perhaps some of the most compelling illustrations of racialized social injustice are offered through the communicative interactions between the characters in the movie. For example, Thad’s responses to Louis throughout the film exemplify how oblivious those with power are about the nature of domination, how they have come to acquire their assets, and what having those assets affords them.

Conclusion

Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, we analyzed the film *White Man's Burden* (1995) in an effort to expose social injustice regarding racism in the United States. In tandem, we note the role of imperialism as a driving force behind the benefits of racial privilege for the dominant, powerful group and the discriminatory practices toward racial minorities. Through our critique and analysis, we have identified specific elements of this film that present an alternate framework for understanding the intersections of race, class, marginalization, and privilege. Beyond our critique, we challenge scholars, students, and individuals to engage more critically with popular culture artifacts that pointedly or inadvertently raise social consciousness regarding forms of oppression (Yosso 2002). As Giroux (2000; 2004) suggests in his research, our critique is akin to the goals and aims of public pedagogy, which is concerned with “the diverse ways in which culture functions as a contested sphere over the production, distribution, and regulation of power, and how and where it operates both symbolically and institutionally as an educational, political, and economic force” (62). Film as public pedagogy contains a myriad of messages that must be read critically. More pointedly, as Tillman and Trier (2007) argue, a mass media text that recognizes the complex nature of race and other social issues is “an important public pedagogy to be analyzed—or ‘read’—for the educational discourses that it constructs and circulates to a wide national audience” (123). In this critique, we offer some evidence that film as a political form of entertainment does in fact provide an important site within which to critique the

complex nature of race. Although the stories told are often fictionalized, they can also successfully bring attention to social issues that are too often ignored, minimized or buried deeply in our subconscious.

We are hopeful that future efforts will broaden to address other forms of oppression such as sexism, homophobia, and classism that are embedded within film, television, and other forms of media. Such critiques will undoubtedly highlight how at the core of these mediated messages are strategic efforts designed to preserve imperialistic ideals of oppression, subjugation, and domination. We believe that our critical treatment of *White Man's Burden* (1995) is successful in promoting critical media literacy, which Yosso (2002), Orbe and Kinefuchi (2008), and Kinefuchi and Orbe (2008) argue is crucial for communication scholars committed to creating opportunities for social justice and change. Specifically, we offer evidence that such an approach to communication scholarship can deconstruct and contextualize provocative media images that are typically ignored by mainstream audiences. To this end, this film is an effective tool for learning about barriers that are upheld by those with privilege and the perpetuation of the existing racial hierarchy. It must be reemphasized, however, that the film is flawed in some ways that others may argue compromise its overarching purpose. However as Harris and Abbott (forthcoming) argue, using CRT in diverse and unique ways gives voice to experiences of oppression and further solidifies the marriage between “scholarship and social justice” (Tate 1997, 235).

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