

**What Do We *Really* Mean by “White Savior?”:
A Little Due Diligence is the Minimum Requirement**

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“If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement”

Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex”¹

¹ Cole, Teju. “The White-Savior Industrial Complex.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 11 Jan. 2013, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/.

I. Introduction

Popular language use has recently featured an increase in the use of the phrase, “white savior,” but its meanings are often contested. The term roughly refers to the problematic aspects of assistance from white people to non-white people. However, there are significant disagreements as to what these aspects actually are and why they are problematic. In this paper, I will engage in a comprehensive discussion of the meanings of “white savior” and provide a critical response to the ways in which it is misused. First, I will provide a genealogical trace of the term, “white savior,” and its corresponding meanings to show the changes in its usage. This will illustrate its broad and loose nature as a blunt instrument. Second, I will introduce an alternative approach to defining “white savior” through pragmatism in philosophy of language. This will clearly define and unify the loose meanings of “white savior” based on the ways that the phrase is used and the commonly understood meanings that are attached with each use. Rather than describing what a white savior *is*, this approach will describe what “white savior”² *means*. Third, I will describe consistently recurring patterns in the use of the phrase to show which patterns in its meaning are most commonly understood, resulting in a pragmatic definition. Fourth, I will describe the inconsistently recurring patterns in the use of the phrase, “white savior,” in order to acknowledge many of the common uses that are important but do not extend as universally as the consistent patterns. Fifth, I will distinguish between correct and successful use of the term, using the consistent patterns to clarify how it could be used

² It is important to note that in the philosophy of language, a word with quotations “” refers to the actual written word or sound: it is purely referring to the signal itself. Meanwhile, a word without quotations refers to the meaning of the word. For example, take the word “blue”. Blue (without quotations) refers to the actual word as we would use it: it means the color blue. “Blue” (with quotations) refers to the mere signal, independent of the meaning. Similarly, “white savior” is a mere signal that refers to the definition of white savior.

accurately. Sixth, I will describe three general ways that common utterances of “white savior” fail to communicate helpful and meaningful thoughts about the situation to which the term is prescribed. Particularly, these failures are due to the blunt instrument’s inability to track and convey the moral complexity involved in these situations.

II. Genealogy of “White Savior”

While informal and conversational instances of the use of the term “white savior” can be occasionally found in essays, stories, and verbal conversations that date back for decades,³ scholarly discussion on the topic of white saviorism does not exist prior to the early 2010’s. The ideas and basic meanings associated with the term, however, date back for centuries. “The White Man’s Burden” is a poem that, in some ways, is an older manifestation of white saviorism. The poem, written in 1899 by Rudyard Kipling, is subtitled, “The United States and the Philippine Islands” and argues that the United States ought to colonize the Filipino people and their land. It communicates ideas of international imperialism and the Manifest Destiny doctrine. The first stanza says:

Take up the White Man's burden—
 Send forth the best ye breed—
 Go bind your sons to exile
 To serve your captives' need;
 To wait in heavy harness
 On fluttered folk and wild—
 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
 Half devil and half child.⁴

³ Theisen, Bonnie. “Love, 1966.” *America*, vol. 115, no. 18, 1966, p. 514.

⁴ “‘The White Man's Burden’: Kipling's Hymn to U.S. Imperialism.” *HISTORY MATTERS - The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5478/.

The poem expresses this “burden,” a moral obligation on white people to “civilize” or provide a racist, so called “service” to the non-white “half devils.” While “The White Man’s Burden” may harbor more explicitly racist ideas than white saviorism, the trend of a moral obligation for white people to “save” non-white people exists in both the poem and the modern phenomenon.

I will begin my genealogical trace of the literal term with KONY 2012, an event that became a catalyst for the popularization of the use of “white savior.” KONY 2012 was a digitally published documentary made by Jason Russell and his international non-governmental organization, Invisible Children. The film centered around Joseph Kony, a Ugandan warlord whom the film depicted as an evil and abhorrent man committing numerous atrocities. Specifically, he stood accused of “overseeing the systematic kidnapping of countless African children, brainwashing the boys into fighting for him, turning the girls into sex slaves, and killing those who don’t comply.”⁵ The film discussed how Kony genocidally murdered tens of thousands, mutilating their faces and lips.⁶ The film has received over 100 million views and was watched 21 million times in the first four days after its release.⁷ Despite the film’s well-intended motivations, criticism quickly followed in the first week after its publishing. Some critics claimed the film was misleading, as it implied that Kony’s forces were far greater than they actually were.⁸ In fact, credible sources seemed to indicate that Kony was no longer even in

⁵ Vidal, John, et al. “Kony 2012: What’s the Real Story?” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 8 Mar. 2012, www.theguardian.com/politics/reality-check-with-polly-curtis/2012/mar/08/kony-2012-what-s-the-story.

⁶ Russell, Jason, director. *KONY 2012. Invisible Children*, 5 Mar. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Keating, Joshua. “Guest Post: Joseph Kony Is Not in Uganda (and Other Complicated Things).” *Foreign Policy*, 7 Mar. 2012, foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/07/guest-post-joseph-kony-is-not-in-uganda-and-other-complicated-things/.

Uganda and had not been for years.⁹ After the credibility of the film came into question, many other criticisms followed. Critics highlighted that the film, like “The White Man’s Burden,” targeted the west to instigate change, specifically through action by U.S. leaders, rather than targeting African leaders to take action against the Ugandan government and their failures.

This criticism spurred Teju Cole, a Nigerian-American author, to publish a series of tweets on the topic. In these tweets, he coined the term, “White Savior Industrial Complex.”¹⁰ Soon after, he wrote an article for *The Atlantic* that explicates and expounds on his tweets.¹¹ In this article, Cole points out a few aspects about this White Savior Industrial Complex, responding to both the actions of Jason Russell and Americans who liked and reposted the video. First, he noticed that white saviors often have a good heart but fail to think “constellationally.” They fail to connect the dots that relate different patterns of oppression or power behind these atrocities. Second, Cole argued that white saviorism is a mechanism that people use to “validate privilege.” Liking and reposting a video says, “I care about oppression,” but is easy and does nothing substantive to respond other than minorly increasing the problem’s digital publicity. Similarly, anyone can visit Africa or other “developing” areas of the world and become a savior-like figure merely due to their skin color. Experiences such as these, Cole said, cause an emotional experience for the white savior that allows these individuals to feel validated in their

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Cole, Teju. “1- From Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to TED, the Fastest Growth Industry in the US Is the White Savior Industrial Complex.” *Twitter*, Twitter, 8 Mar. 2012, twitter.com/tejucole/status/177809396070498304?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E177809396070498304&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theatlantic.com%2Finternational%2Farchive%2F2012%2F03%2Fthe-white-savior-industrial-complex%2F254843%2F.

¹¹ Cole, Teju. “The White-Savior Industrial Complex.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 11 Jan. 2013, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/.

privilege.¹² In other words, they can feel okay about having wealth or other advantages because they believe that they have done something good to make up for their guilt. Cole's article was widely read, and he is often attributed with the term's rise to popularity.

At the time of the creation of "white savior" (or "white savior industrial complex"), it may have referred to a specific phenomenon. However, over the course of the last decade, the term gained multiple different meanings that manifest in different contexts. Even in Teju Cole's article, he described a very broad set of actions, intentions, and motivations that are encapsulated in the white savior complex. A clear rift began when "white savior" was used to refer to two different things. First, "white savior" could clearly refer to a selfish aspect of some form of assistance. Cole acknowledged this aspect, as he said that white Americans often visit Africa in order to become a savior: it is to "congratulate" the self. This definition is very commonly recurring amongst articles about white saviorism. One article, literally titled "What is a White Savior?" says that the "phrase refers to a white person who acts to help non-white people, but in a context which can be perceived as self-serving"¹³ This exact definition is also present word-for-word in the first line of the Wikipedia page on white saviorism.¹⁴

Second, "white savior" could also clearly refer to a savior complex with a racial element. The literal addition of "white" to "savior complex" implies this very definition. In simple terms, if a white person has some perceived superiority to a non-white person, they could feel as if this

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bakar, Faima. "What Is a White Saviour Complex?" *Metro*, Metro.co.uk, 6 Mar. 2019, metro.co.uk/2019/03/06/what-is-a-white-saviour-complex-8793979/.

¹⁴ "White Savior." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 4 Mar. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_savior.

oppressed non-white person *needs* to be saved. Specifically, this perception is that the non-white individual needs to be saved *by* the white individual: the white savior wants to “come in and save the day.”¹⁵ This definition may have been the original use, as it would explain why the phrase was created at all.

Despite the fact that they both contain a racial aspect in white saviorism, self-serving service and savior complexes are fundamentally different phenomena. The former has to do with the intentions of the savior as focused on the *needs* of the self, while the latter has to do with the perceptions of the savior as focused on the *superiority* of the self. After this rift in the definition of “white savior,” other rifts can follow easily. Specifically, focus on the “white” aspect of “white savior” reveals another question: does white saviorism solely entail racial differences, or do privilege, geographic, and socioeconomic differences qualify for the use of the term as well? The ways that people use the term indicate that the latter is the case. Some activists began to use the term as if it did not purely apply to racial differences, but also to other kinds of difference.¹⁶ The result of these widespread uses is a loose term with a variety of meanings. For this reason, it is unsurprising that a prominent news outlet published an article attempting to define white saviorism with Wikipedia’s definition: the term is incredibly difficult to comprehensively define and understand.¹⁷ Because of the vast synthesis of meanings, “white savior” can be nearly impossible to analyze and deconstruct, and must be described as indefinable through any sort of traditional means.

¹⁵ Aronson, B. A. The White Savior Industrial Complex: A Cultural Studies Analysis of a Teacher Educator, Savior Film, and Future Teachers. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, 6. 2017. p.37

¹⁶ Pigg, Correy. “White Savior: Part 1 (The White Savior Complex).” *Failed Missionary*, 5 Sept. 2018.

¹⁷ Bakar, Faima. “What Is a White Saviour Complex?” *Metro*, Metro.co.uk, 6 Mar. 2019, metro.co.uk/2019/03/06/what-is-a-white-saviour-complex-8793979/.

III. Language Pragmatism

Due to the nature of “white savior” as loosely-used phrase with broad meanings, an attempt to define “white savior” using traditional philosophical methodology would be impossible. This presents an important methodological dilemma in determining what *type of philosophical definition* to utilize. In the philosophy of language, there are two main understandings (or types) of definitions. The first is a mapping relationship, where a word corresponds to a unitary object or idea. A “Socratic” definition is the most common understanding in these cases: these types of definitions are universal and specific, often described as the “necessary and sufficient conditions” for something. For example, in order to correctly call an object “blue,” the object *must* fulfill the necessary condition that it is actually blue. The condition of being blue must also be sufficient in order to use the word “blue,” meaning that no other conditions are necessary. In the case of white saviorism, we *might* be able to say that a Socratic definition once existed. If so, this definition would basically describe the strict and unitary meaning at some baptismal¹⁸ moment where the phrase entered into language use. Based on the simple combination of “white” and “savior complex,” the term most likely referred to the phenomenon where a white person develops a savior complex while attempting to provide some aid to a non-white person. However, it is already clear that the ways people use “white savior” no longer accord with the strict (necessary and sufficient) conditions that: 1) a white assistor helps a non-white recipient and 2) the white assistor develops a savior complex. The traditional

¹⁸ Philosopher of Language Saul Kripke used the word “baptism” to mark the moment when a new word enters language use.

conception of finding the set of conditions that are necessary and sufficient to encapsulate a concept is not possible in the case of white saviorism because there are such a broad set of meanings: there would be no set of conditions that could describe the term's meaning in a unitary and absolute way. Instead, the term ought to be defined by analyzing the ways that the term is used.

The other main type of definition in philosophy of language is a pragmatist definition, which is based on use. Ludwig Wittgenstein framed language through pragmatism, highlighting that the "meaning of a word is its use in the language."¹⁹ This frames language as something fundamentally communal, emphasizing the importance of mutual understanding. In this conception, calling an object "blue" has nothing to do with some universal criteria for being blue, but rather that the quality that the object has (being blue) is in accordance with the signal we have chosen for that quality and our *understanding* that the signal "blue" has certain implications about the object. In another world the word "blue" could refer to what we call "red," and we call blue things "blue" because we have a mutual understanding that "blue" means blue.

Another important aspect of language pragmatism is Wittgenstein's concept of a "language game." A language game refers to the idea that a phrase or word only has meaning because of the context of its use: the "rules" of the "game" that is being played determines a word's meaning. In the same way that differing board games are played based on the rules available to each player, Wittgenstein argued that language is a game. Just as these board games make different constraints, abilities, and goals available to each player, each speaker also has different constraints, abilities, and goals that depend on what kind of conversation game that the

¹⁹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell, 1963. 43.

speakers are “playing.” For example, if I am talking to a child and I say that an object is blue, then the meaning of “blue” is that the object has a certain color that we call “blue.” In this case, the rules of the game are more simplistic so that both the child and I understand “blue” the same way. However, if I am talking in the context of a science experiment about light, the rules of the game have changed and “blue” has a different meaning. “Blue” now refers to a more complex quality: the ability of the object to reflect a certain wavelength of light that, when striking our retinas, causes a certain color perception. The word’s meaning is specific to the context in the conversation and serves a narrow purpose for each different instance of its use.

Due to the broad scheme of meanings and uses associated with “white savior,” I am utilizing Wittgenstein’s methodology. This means that I am thinking of white saviorism as something that we define; it is by focusing on the relationship between the term and the things that we would refer to with the term that we can understand what the term means. However, it is important to mention that Wittgenstein’s sense of meaning will not encapsulate *all* use: if I call the sky “red” when it is clearly blue, you may know what I am trying to convey, but I will not be conveying anything useful. As a result, not all uses of the term contribute to our common conception of its meaning. If I refer to something that is blue as “red,” it does not mean that I am somehow changing the meaning of blue but rather that I am impractically or incorrectly using language. No singular use determines meaning, but rather recurring *patterns* in use that demonstrate that there is some common understanding. *Consistent patterns* in use will show which meanings and connotations are almost always attached to the term’s use. *Inconsistent patterns* will show which meanings are often associated with the term, but highly depend on the context of the language game.

It is precisely because “white savior” successfully conveys meanings other than that which a singular and unitary definition can describe that Wittgenstein’s approach is important. I will trace different uses of the term “white savior” and identify these patterns in different uses of “white savior” and “white saviorism.” This involves empirical research, although it is qualitative empirical research involving specific cases and their aspects rather than quantitative analysis. I specifically consult literature from news, philosophy, sociology, and politics in order to focus on framing white saviorism and contextualizing these patterns in use. Finally, these patterns, especially in the context of their tension with ethical principles, will help illuminate the ethical dimensions of the term. Another crucial clarification is that *consistent patterns* are not necessary conditions. It may seem that a pattern that commonly recurs in almost every use would indicate a necessary condition, but this is only due to the language game. In other words, these assertability conditions (the consistent patterns) are *almost* necessary conditions *within the context of the language game*. The game relies on the communal concept of the rule within the game. This means that, on a case by case basis in conversation, we can use consistent patterns *as if* they are necessary conditions, but they cannot function this way outside the language game. In a conversation with a child, we can act as if “appearing to exhibit the color blue” is a necessary condition for “blue,” but once we enter into a conversation in the context of a science experiment, this is no longer a necessary condition. Suppose a blue light is shining on a white object. In the conversation with the child, this object meets the necessary condition. However, in a conversation in a science experiment about light, the object may *appear* to exhibit the color blue, but merely appears this way due to the lighting. The object itself does not exhibit blue light wavelengths, but white light wavelengths: it is the context of the blue light that makes it appear otherwise. Similarly, we can treat *consistent patterns* as if they are necessary conditions within

each language game, but they are not necessary conditions because these patterns do not refer to the acts of white saviorism themselves, but rather to our individual epistemic understanding when someone says, “white saviorism.”

One specific issue is the reliability of sources, as most contemporary definitions and evaluations regarding white saviorism are made by individuals without significant credentials or justification. This is partly due to the lack of literature on the actual meaning of “white savior.” In other words, many instances of use are merely saying that someone is a white savior without going deeply into why or what about them and their work demonstrates white saviorism; most of the analysis is elsewhere. However, I believe that Wittgenstein’s approach accounts for this limitation because it analyzes the patterns of use, leaving the option open that use can be wrong. This way, any one use is not highly powerful, since it is only credible if others are using the term similarly. Additionally, if one use significantly conflicts with the patterns of use, it may be an unsuccessful or incorrect use. This methodology allows for a broad definition that encapsulates the different uses while still allowing the possibility of incorrect use. Meanwhile, a Socratic definition would fall short.

I would also like to make the distinction between unsuccessful and incorrect use. Unsuccessful use is the situation where the meaning intended is not the meaning received. For example, if I call the sky “red,” I could be unsuccessful in communicating if I really meant to convey that it is blue but used the wrong word. However, I could also be incorrect. If I am trying to convey that the sky actually is red and that is not true, then I am incorrect: I have wrongly attributed the word to the object. For white saviorism, this is vitally important. Some instances of use may be misguided due to a misunderstanding of what white saviorism actually means. In this context, it is an unsuccessful use. However, an example of an incorrect use is if I

do understand what white saviorism is, but wrongly attribute it to a person or form of assistance. In other words, it is incorrect use if I call someone a white savior even though they truly are not, but unsuccessful use if I call them a “white savior” with a misunderstanding of how to use the term.

IV. Consistent Patterns in Use

“White savior” has become a loosely applied term that has meaning in a variety of situations. The term’s function largely depends on the context of the language game. Specifically, “white savior” or “white saviorism” can be thought of as having a certain use: it is a negative evaluation. Furthermore, it has context-specific rules, connotations, and meanings that become evident based on common uses of the term.

The most common recurring pattern in instances of the use of the term, “white savior,” is that someone provides (or attempts to provide) some form of assistance. This individual, hereby referred to as the assistor, is typically white. Meanwhile the individual receiving assistance, hereby referred to as the recipient, is typically non-white. This racial aspect can manifest as an inequality in contexts where the racial difference between the assistor and recipient represents and creates a real power dynamic. It may also manifest as a marker, meaning that the difference *marks* an inequality, but may not *contribute* to it directly. In other words, the difference may resemble or echo a larger global trend or historical pattern of inequality and injustice.

A racial difference, however, does not extend across all uses of “white savior.” The racial difference is *often* present, but it is not always the case; it may appear commonly because privilege is often racialized. Certain common uses clarify that this is the case: the idea of organizational or structural white saviorism does not necessarily stipulate a racial difference, but

rather some sort of power differential or perhaps even a western mode of thought. Teju Cole implied that our worry about “that awful African warlord” is basically meaningless in context of the fact that “1.5 million Iraqis died from an American war of choice.”²⁰ Here, he spoke of white saviorism as something that is perpetrated by society in certain instances. As a result of these broader uses of the phrase, a more accurate description would say that the “white” aspect of “white saviorism” does not necessarily refer to a racial difference, but rather a difference in privilege or a perceived superiority. This mentality is common in popular use, as even the hosts on the popular podcast “Failed Missionary” echoed this idea. Specifically, they described the “white” in “white savior” as referring to some sort of power.²¹ In instances of a privilege differential, it does not have to be in overall magnitude, but rather only in the context of the assistance. In other words, the recipient may have more privilege than the assistor once all areas of life have been brought into consideration, but there must merely be some degree of perceived superiority or privilege by the assistor or someone evaluating the assistor’s actions, specifically regarding the assistance or assisting relation.

It becomes clear that “white saviorism” is a language game when this Wittgensteinian way of thinking is contrasted by a more synthetic approach of merely combining different words. “White savior complex” is not solely the adjective “white” modifying “savior complex:” it is not always a mere savior complex by a white person. As I have already shown, it is much more nuanced and complex. Similarly, “white savior” or “white saviorism” is also distinct from “white saving.” The concept of “saving” does not inherently carry a negative moral standing. In

²⁰ Cole, Teju. “The White-Savior Industrial Complex.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 11 Jan. 2013, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/.

²¹ Pigg, Correy. “White Savior: Part 1 (The White Savior Complex).” *Failed Missionary*, 5 Sept. 2018.

fact, many may argue that it carries a positive one. Even “a white person saving” may not carry a negative moral connotation, yet “white savior” and “white saviorism” do. Because this negative connotation is a common understanding present across different patterns of use, it must be a necessary rule (within the language game) that “white savior” implies a negative view of the acts or individuals that the term is being used to describe. This elucidates the nature of the term as a *negative moral evaluation*. Thus, the term describes a certain negative disposition towards a person and their actions. As a result, an important aspect of defining the evaluation includes determining the circumstances under which the evaluation is correct; in order to use the word correctly, we must understand when a negative disposition is justified. This also means that white saviorism must be understood as an *ethical phenomenon*.

It is integral to the Wittgensteinian methodology that meaning is use.²² For this reason, it is important to clarify that the loose nature of the term implies that there is no essential white saviorism. In other words, there is not anything that *is* white saviorism in any essential, universal, or metaphysical sense, but rather that it is merely a contingent phrase whose meaning depends on the context of its use. This contrasts some of the common language that its used: phrases like “engaging in white saviorism,” “the role of white savior,” or “white savior complex” all imply some sort of essential or coherent identity that white saviorism embodies. These sorts of descriptions make it easier to use the term, as it creates a personified concept to be described. However, the complexity and broad scheme of uses of the term make this conception very difficult to coherently understand. While the above conditions (i.e. there is some form of assistance, there is a perceived power dynamic or inequality between the assistor and recipient,

²² Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell, 1963.

the term carries a negative evaluation, etc.) may seem like necessary conditions that fit with a Socratic or metaphysical “necessary and sufficient conditions” definition, they are not. Rather, the assertability conditions (the rules of the language game), if they are commonly understood, can function like truth conditions in the context of the language game. In other words, we can use the phrase as if it carries the truth condition of a negative evaluation. However, it is important to acknowledge that the phrase only carries this condition because we have a common understanding that it does so. There is not anything metaphysical in this conception that *is* a white savior or a white savior complex, but rather this conception holds that “white savior” is merely a *term* that carries certain meanings, connotations, and uses based on the context and circumstances of its utterance. There is no unitary or coherent role that is the “white savior,” but rather the term merely describes a loose collection of qualities and characteristics. The specific qualities that the term refers to in any given use depends on the context of the use.

V. Inconsistent Patterns in Use

This section will lay out six commonly occurring patterns in use that are not consistent across all uses but are important as they are often appealed to as justifications for using the phrase.

Unduly Selfish Motivations

The first pattern is the presence of unduly selfish motivations of the assistor. Motivations are particularly difficult to evaluate and elucidate, but criticism of inappropriate selfish motivations is common in the literature on white saviorism. One such argument is that selfish motivations improperly affect the assistance itself, resulting in self-serving aspects in assistance. This indicates that white saviorism occurs due to selfish motivations in situations where the

assisting individual places their own beneficence over the non-maleficence principle to not harm or their attempt to provide assistance to others. This factor would be present in situations where the service is ultimately driven by the desire to “congratulate” one’s self or to “be thought well of.”²³ It also accords with the common definition of referring to a “white person who acts to help non-white people, but in a context which can be perceived as self-serving”²⁴ In these situations, the individual places their own desire for gain above the needs of the clients.

Shift in Narrative

A second common pattern is a shift of narrative from the suffering individuals to the “heroic” act of the savior. An example of this could be the assisting individuals posting a picture on social media of young children surrounding them.²⁵ Some critics have even coined the term, “Tinder Humanitarian” to describe people who advertise their online dating profiles with pictures of them providing some form of assistance to disadvantaged populations.²⁶ While these may initially seem like harmless photos to share, they shift the center of attention to the savior rather than the instance of suffering to which they are responding, as the assistor is often literally in the physical center. The photo then communicates, “look at this great deed that I did” rather than “look at this important instance of suffering.” Similarly, this is often the case with celebrities,

²³ Cole, Teju. “The White-Savior Industrial Complex.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 11 Jan. 2013, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/.

²⁴ Bakar, Faima. “What Is a White Saviour Complex?” *Metro*, Metro.co.uk, 6 Mar. 2019, metro.co.uk/2019/03/06/what-is-a-white-saviour-complex-8793979/.

²⁵ Awad, Amal. “When the Saviour Becomes the Story.” *Topics*, 2016, www.sbs.com.au/topics/voices/culture/article/2016/04/28/when-saviour-becomes-story.

²⁶ Iqbal, Nosheen. “Tinder Has Reduced Romance to Seven Shades of Cliche | Nosheen Iqbal.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 28 Feb. 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/28/tinder-romance-cliches-profile-pics.

such as when numerous white celebrities declared, “I am African.”²⁷ Critics claimed that events like the “I am African” phenomenon can often become opportunities for celebrities to be praised for their actions rather than to highlight an instance of suffering or to purely serve without recognition.²⁸

Ignorance

A third pattern is ignorance in situations of assistance. In other words, assistors respond to a situation based on what they think is best, removing autonomy from the recipients and their community. This often involves a sort of arrogance that one knows the needs of others better than the people who have those needs themselves. This aspect is fundamentally rooted in paternalism, providing insight on justification for interference with the autonomy of the individuals providing assistance.²⁹ This becomes more complicated than mere paternalism, however, as the individuals receiving assistance probably lack the same autonomy that the assistors have. This inequality in autonomy places more emphasis on retaining the autonomy of the assisted individuals. A failure to listen often results in a lack of understanding, so these two factors are often simultaneously present. The emphasis on autonomy is relevant here as well, as it reflects the power structure often present in white saviorism, especially from a western assisting person to a non-western assisted person. The individual or community receiving

²⁷ Staff, The Root. “White Celebs Announce, 'I Am African'.” *The Root*, The Root, 12 Jan. 2017, www.theroot.com/white-celebs-announce-i-am-african-1790863296.

²⁸ Taylor, Lin. “Star Humanitarian or White Savior? Celebrities in Africa Spark Online Furor.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 1 Mar. 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-aid-whitesaviour/star-humanitarian-or-white-savior-celebrities-in-africa-spark-online-furor-idUSKCN1Q14YJ.

²⁹ Dworkin, Gerald. “Paternalism.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 12 Feb. 2017, plato.stanford.edu/entries/paternalism/#NormIssuA.

assistance usually does not have a voice (or their voice at least is not heard), so white saviorism often reflects a failure to restore autonomy and dignity by giving them a voice.³⁰

Exploitation

Exploitation in white saviorism refers to some scheme of unbalanced benefits between the assistor and the recipient.³¹ Exploitation may occur due to selfish motivations, but also sometimes occurs without the assistor knowing. Either the assisting individual could gain something while the assisted community does not, or the assisting individual could gain far more than the community that they are assisting. For example, service learning could easily be misconstrued or misapplied as white saviorism if exploitation occurs. In this type of scenario, an individual could gain a valuable line for their resume or an educational experience without providing anything significant to the assisted people. The gain for the assistor is far greater than the gain for the client. However, like the case for selfish motivations, we may conceive of certain situations where an inequality of benefits could be justified. From a Rawlsian³² perspective, it could be justifiable to provide aid while personally benefitting more than the recipient if it maximizes the reduction of suffering for the least advantaged group in society.

Savior Complex

³⁰ During my time in South Africa, a friend's host internship organization build a jungle gym for a local impoverished township, hoping that it would provide a safe place for children to play. Instead, members of the organization returned a few days later to find the jungle gym destroyed, as families had taken the parts to bolster their shelters. This organization, in a good faith, attempt, failed to understand what the needs of the community were.

³¹ Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990. 54.

³² Philosopher John Rawls proposed that society adopt the maximin principle, where the distribution of primary goods is arranged to maximize the wellbeing of the least advantaged group in a society. As a result, a Rawlsian may argue that unbalanced benefits are justifiable if the act of assistance helps to maximize the wellbeing of the least-advantaged group.

White saviorism is also sometimes described as a mere “savior complex” within the context of assistance with a power dynamic or inequality. This is where a connection with the more common concept of a savior complex arises: similar to how an individual with a savior complex feels the need to save others,³³ the assistor may be said to feel as if the recipient is incapable to save their own self due to some inferiority. This pattern is common in uses where the assistor may take on a “complex” that compels them to believe that they ought to save others from their suffering, specifically due to their own superiority.

Superficial Work

Some instances of the use of the term “white savior” references some form of response that is superficial: it does nothing tangible to really aid anyone who is suffering in any real way, yet the “assistor” feels like a hero or social justice warrior, nonetheless. These instances are commonly on social media, such as the Kony 2012 viral campaign, or voluntourism.³⁴ Some articles have raised issues with this, claiming that it communicates that awareness is a sufficient response,³⁵ whereas nothing is truly done to learn about what the real issue is or respond to it in a tangible way. This could also be used as a justification for not acting further, as someone could use their perceived-sufficient aid in order to deflect guilt for or feel validated in their own privilege.

VI. Correct Use and Justifiability

³³ Sarah, Benton. “The Savior Complex.” *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-high-functioning-alcoholic/201702/the-savior-complex.

³⁴ Rosenberg, Tina. “The Business of Voluntourism: Do Western Do-Gooders Actually Do Harm?” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 13 Sept. 2018, www.theguardian.com/news/2018/sep/13/the-business-of-voluntourism-do-western-do-gooders-actually-do-harm.

³⁵ Dudman, Jane. “The Power of Political Awareness.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 11 July 2007, www.theguardian.com/society/2007/jul/11/guardiansocietysupplement1.

As I have already described in the section on language pragmatism, an important distinction in a pragmatist conception of language is between correct and successful use. If an individual is referred to as a “white savior,” the success of its use depends on whether or not the person(s) hearing the utterance understands what the speaker means. In other words, if you understand what I am referring to when I call someone a “white savior,” then my use has been *successful*: I conveyed that which I meant to convey. Correct use, however, depends on whether or not the meaning conveyed by my utterance accords with reality. The meanings, connotations, and ideas conveyed by the use of the phrase, “white savior,” imply a negative moral evaluation. Therefore, if the deeds or practices referred to as “white saviorism” are actually morally objectionable, then use is *correct*. If the practices are justifiable, however, then it is not useful to describe those practices as “white saviorism:” it conveys something incorrect or faulty about those just practices. This use would be *successful*, but *incorrect*.

Referring to justifiable practices as “white saviorism” is impractical for multiple reasons. First, the alignment of justifiable action with a negative moral standing will not promote the perpetuation of these practices. In other words, labeling a virtuous or otherwise justifiable action as morally reprehensible will prevent these good acts from being done on a widespread basis. If a certain population needs some form of aid, it would not be useful to stifle that action by wrongly attaching a negative evaluation to it. Second, a justifiable action in reality contradicts the negative evaluation in “white savior.” As a result, the commonly understood connotations of “white savior” could be skewed by a contradiction between its use and its meaning. If use *is* meaning, then our use cannot be said to be successful if it contradicts the common meaning. Furthermore, it would not be useful to further disillusion this term, as it already has a broad scheme of uses and meanings. It would be practical to preserve the remaining coherency in the

term's use. For these reasons, the phrase "justifiable white saviorism" is meaningless: "justifiable" implies proper moral action, while "white savior" implies improper moral action. In simpler (but less precise) terms, if the actions of an individual are justifiable, then they are not a white savior.

VII. Incomprehensibility of "White Savior"

The complexity of the structural and social context in certain forms of assistance is another pattern in instances of white saviorism. However, unlike the other patterns, this pattern shows the inability of an ambiguously broad and blunt instrument like "white savior" or "white saviorism" to accurately and usefully describe moral, social, and political complexity in certain cases. I will present three types of situations where this incomprehensibility occurs: egoism misuse, structural misuse, and plural misuse.

1. Egoism Misuse

One way that "white savior" is unable to track moral responsibility is through its failure to acknowledge and track the morality of interests or intentions of agents involved in assistance. Specifically, this occurs in the context of self-interest. I have already established unduly selfish motivations as an inconsistently recurring pattern in uses of the phrase "white savior," but it is not the case that self-interest dictates moral impermissibility. In fact, it is a widely accepted idea in moral philosophy that sometimes it *is* permissible to provide aid with self-interest, while sometimes it is impermissible to do so.³⁶ This is not a controversial distinction and the

³⁶ "Egoism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/egoism/

deliberation on permissibility of self-interests in certain cases is a common and ongoing debate. This is what I will refer to as egoism misuse: “white savior” is used to refer to some agent because of the presence of selfish motivations but does not track these motivations or acknowledge the possibility of their justifiability. These same selfish motivations could result in individuals working hard to respond to instances of suffering, resulting in high quality and widespread aid. Scholars who emphasize actual, tangible aid and would probably argue that this is a good thing, and therefore is not an instance of white saviorism. In other words, this pattern is often used in situations where an individual’s own selfish desires negatively impact the quality of assistance provided. However, it is conceivable that an individual could gain genuine happiness from seeing the relief of suffering or feeling the gratitude for an act of kindness that they did. If this emotional response is not present, it might even make us wonder if the individual providing assistance truly cares about the situation at hand. The desire for this response may be somewhat self-interested but is certainly not frowned upon.

2. Structural Misuse

“White savior” does not capture the moral nuance of situations where responsibility lies with a collective group, structure, or organization. Suppose that one day, you walk up to a river and notice a drowning child come down the river, flailing in the water.³⁷ A few minutes later another child appears, also drowning. You recognize that the children are incapable of escaping the river on their own and that they are approaching a waterfall downriver. Three forms of assistance may be needed here. First, the *immediate assistance* of pulling children out of the

³⁷ This parable is adapted from a similar one popularized by activist Saul Alinsky in the 1930’s.

water is needed: this is where you are right now. However, a few children have already skipped past you, so a safety net could be constructed in order to prevent these children from slipping through. This would constitute a second form of assistance: *a safety net*. Third, someone could head upriver in order to locate why the children are falling into the water and prevent them from entering the river in the first place. This would be *preventative*: it would be aimed at dismantling the harmful structure. This aid could be described as not individual nor structural, but rather as aid to the structure. For a practical example, South Africans may provide individual support and government aid to black South Africans through a socioeconomic safety net, but they must also dismantle apartheid: they must improve the structure itself. People typically use “white savior” to refer to forms of assistance that would fall into the first category: immediate assistance. However, I have only analyzed the types of cases where the assistor is an individual. If the assistor is a collective, such as an organization, institution, or structure, the implications may change. The same justifications may be present (exploitation, ignorance, shift in narrative, etc.), but our conception of responsibility changes: a body is responsible, not an individual. This is what I will call the structural misuse: rather than it being an individual who is responsible for the so-called acts of white saviorism, it is a structure that is responsible.

A natural response to a structure bearing the responsibility for some wrongdoing may be to refer to the organization as a white savior or to say that “structural white saviorism” has occurred. However, this implication quickly becomes problematic. People in the west tend to have difficulty with conceptualizing collective responsibility,³⁸ so they typically use individuals as the base unit instead. In other words, we decompose societal constructs, structures, and organizations into individual actors with individual responsibility. Even Iris Marion Young’s

³⁸ Young, Iris Marion. *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford University Press.

Responsibility for Justice, arguably the most coherent conception of collective responsibility in the contemporary west, breaks organizational and collective duty/responsibility down into the duty of each individual: the individual is the base unit.³⁹ However, if we try to break down an organization's responsibility to an individual level by identifying responsible individuals within the organization, it may not always work.

Suppose that a college student is volunteering with an organization whose policy or procedure has white saviorist aspects. Let's suppose that this student is familiar with white saviorism and has noticed many of the patterns mentioned earlier: perhaps the student even took a class as a prerequisite so that they sufficiently understand the issue and the historical background of the area. The student enters the organization, not wanting to arrogantly assume that they know what is best, so this student trusts the experts in the organization. By avoiding many of the patterns often present in white saviorism, the student is supposedly doing all that they can, yet engages in the harmful, white saviorist policy. Now, suppose that this harmful policy was created by five individuals who hold some position in this organization, each contributing an aspect. However, each individual's aspect on its own was harmless: it is only when these aspects were combined that they became harmful. It would not follow to hold these five people individually responsible for isolated actions. The student may even recognize the problematic aspects of the organization's procedures or policies, but their role itself is one of submission and inferiority to the experts: there is a power dynamic not merely between the student volunteer and the recipient of the assistance that the student is providing through the

³⁹ Iris Marion Young introduced a conception of collective responsibility that was forward-looking and relied on each individual's duties to the collective issues regardless of whether or not they helped cause these issues.

organization, but also between the student and the organization itself. As a result, it does not seem to follow that the student who is serving with the organization is responsible. In this case, it may seem reasonable to hold the organization responsible. If the individuals involved do bear that responsibility as well, it is not due to their individual action but rather to their involvement in the organization. Referring to the organization as a “white savior” is not useful: the utterance merely labels the phenomenon as negative by evaluating it as such. It may already be clear that the organization’s procedure is problematic. However, the use of the phrase does not apply to the situation. The utterance’s implied moral evaluation of the organization evokes a response that we are incapable of achieving: the implication is that the organization is responsible, yet we are incapable of coherently conceptualizing what that actually means in a practical sense.

3. Plural Misuse

If an individual is providing immediate assistance through an organization that has white saviorist motivations, intentions, or practices, it may appear that the individual should be called a white savior. For example, suppose that, like the previous case, an individual is volunteering with an organization. However, in this case, let’s suppose that multiple agents are somewhat responsible. Many health organizations that create pop-up clinics in rural areas utilize student volunteers to make up for the lack of health professionals. Suppose that in one instance, many non-white clients need a certain minor procedure, but there are not enough health professionals to perform the procedure for everyone who needs it. Suppose that a white student volunteer is told by the professional that, if they feel comfortable with performing the minor procedure after observing the professional, they can do so. This situation creates a clear ethical dilemma: the client needs a certain procedure, but an unqualified volunteer performs it. From this lens alone,

the volunteer appears like a white savior. The volunteer shares *some* responsibility, as they voluntarily provided some form of assistance that they were not qualified to do. The supervising mental health professional shares responsibility as well by allowing the volunteer to perform procedures when they should not. The organization might also be partially responsible if they continually allow this action to occur. Responsibility here is unclear: the student would not have done the act if the supervisor had not given permission, but they still made the choice to do so. The volunteer in this case is somewhat responsible by knowingly facilitating morally questionable procedures, the professional supervisor is somewhat responsible by giving the volunteer permission to do something they should not, and the organization may be somewhat responsible due to various factors as well. This is what I will refer to as plural misuse: there is more than one agent who is responsible.

A natural response would be to call both agents white saviors, but this evaluation would not be comprehensive or useful for describing the moral complexity and social circumstances present in the scenario. If the agents who hold responsibility are both individuals, one might appear like a white savior, while the other may not. In the above case, the volunteer appears like a white savior, as the volunteer is the person actually doing the tangible, problematic act. The supervisor is just as culpable but does not fit into our common conception of “white savior” due to the lack of clear and palpable wrongdoing. In this situation, “white savior” might usefully describe the student in some respects but fails to acknowledge the situation comprehensively. Merely calling the student a white savior ignores the responsibility of the supervisor, who cannot as easily be described as a white savior as well. Thus, the term, “white savior,” would not track the moral complexity when multiple individuals share responsibility.

If an individual and a structure (whether it be an organization, government, or set of cultural standards) share responsibility, a similar phenomenon occurs. “White saviorism,” in instances of these complex social circumstances, reflects the conflict between two strands of liberal thought and our inability to respond to this conflict due to our conception of individual responsibility. One strand of thought comes from what many call the “‘new’ liberalism,” but emphasizes that our identities and social circumstances impact our actions: the existence, meaning, and impact of the deed is a product of the doer’s social circumstances. Another strand is from classical liberalism and the Enlightenment, specifically with roots in the influence of thinkers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant. This strand of thought has given us the idea that we are individual actors and that each deed is morally isolated. This strand tells us that society is a collection of individual people with individual rights and responsibilities and that we are capable of moral action if we think carefully enough to understand and know what to do. In other words, the existence, meaning, and impact of each deed are not dependent on the characteristics or circumstances of the doer: each deed is an isolated moral act. Due to the negative connotation present in “white saviorism,” the implication that an individual is a white savior necessarily presupposes the capability to not be a white savior. Because of the implicit moral evaluation involved, the implication is that a white savior could have done otherwise to avoid this negative moral judgment: something about the specifics of their individual deeds warranted this evaluation. This is where the contradiction between the two strands of thought arises: the assistor’s deeds are taking place in context of certain social, political, and local circumstances, yet we evaluate these deeds as if each act is morally isolated with a singular, individual agent responsible. The criteria for identifying and evaluating moral acts are different: the evaluating of moral acts is done on an individual and isolated basis, yet the acts that are

identified for evaluation are often acts with both individual and structural cause. The evaluation of “white savior” here fails to acknowledge the moral nuances of the complex situation.

VIII. Conclusion

“White savior” is a loosely used blunt instrument that is often misused. This paper discussed the meanings of the term and provided a critical response to misuse of the term. The term has seen significant changes in its meaning over the past decade, resulting in a large set of uses and meanings rather than a coherent one. Language pragmatism helps to solve this problem by analyzing the use of “white savior” rather than some criteria for its definition. Instead, this approach describes what “white savior” *means*. Splitting patterns of use into consistently and inconsistently recurring patterns in the use of the phrase shows which patterns are most commonly understood, while acknowledging many of the common uses that are important but do not extend as universally. While I aimed to cover the topic of white saviorism as comprehensively as possible, there are many other concerns and topics to discuss. The subject itself often results in dominant discussion of the motivations, intentions, actions, etc. of the assistor rather than focus on the instance of the recipient’s suffering. This makes some discussions of the problem, including mine, guilty of some of the same offenses of which white saviorism is often guilty: the narrative is about the assistor rather than the recipient. This creates a meta-conversation issue, where we must create ways to discuss the problem without further perpetrating it. Another area for further research is through Teju Cole’s stipulation that white saviorism is often used to validate privilege. In order to fully exhaust the origins, causes, and ramifications of this aspect, Judeo-Christian morality and individual guilt may be important

topics to consider. This paper was unable to encapsulate aspects such as these. Nonetheless, as a result of the many meanings of “white savior,” this paper addressed the many ways that common utterances of “white savior” fail to communicate useful information due to its failure to track the moral complexity of situations of aid. This reveals the slight irony of this paper’s epigraph: I began with Teju Cole’s quote, “if we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement.”⁴⁰ Cole meant this to refer to the assistors interfering in lives of the recipients, but the idea extends far beyond this context. Nearly all action interferes in the lives of others to some extent, especially if such action is prescribing a negative moral evaluation to another individual. These evaluations, due to their powerful nature and often unclear meanings, have real impacts on assistors who are serving in their communities and could negatively impact fruitful forms of assistance in the world which could ultimately hurt the recipients. This makes it vital to use the term correctly and acknowledge when the term is not comprehensive of the situation at hand. When we refer to an assistor as a “white savior,” we interfere with far more than just the life of the assistor: a little due diligence is the minimum requirement.

⁴⁰ Cole, Teju. “The White-Savior Industrial Complex.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 11 Jan. 2013, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/.

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