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Abstract

Humanitarian aid work, service trips, and missionary volunteer opportunities are ingrained in much of Western society. Situated at the intersection of visual culture and rhetorical studies, this thesis uses a postcolonial feminist lens to explore how the online discourse of white saviorism came to be accepted and valorized while making invisible the imperial undertones of humanitarian work, and what strategies or efforts are being made toward disrupting this trend. I look at images and posts by current Peace Corps volunteers on Instagram to explore the performance and ethical substance of today's humanitarian. Additionally, I examine ironic representations of this discourse through the Barbie Savior Instagram account and explore how the use of comic framing both critiques and contributes to this discourse. I contextualize current humanitarian trends and incorporate work from critical whiteness theory to develop the concept of white saviorism. Some of the major communicative shifts in how we visually document humanitarian acts and suffering on the body stem from visual culture scholarship to today's digital media research. Through this foundation, I explore how service for others is increasingly becoming a personal branding technique for individuals online and this branding both a performance to be viewed by others and a process in which one crafts the self into the role of the white savior. Rather than land acquisition, domination over others, or relieving suffering, today's white savior is aimed at creating their best image and brand. The morality found in service for others is not in the act of service itself, but in the framing, photographing, and publicly posting that act on social media, which drives today's white savior. I conclude that decolonization and communication can come together through both academic research and social media practices to name white saviorism for what it is, debunk the humanitarian myths that perpetuate the white savior fantasy, and decenter Western logics within the discourse.

Branding White Saviorism:

The Ethics and Irony of Humanitarian Discourse on Instagram

By

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B.A., University of Northern Iowa, 2010

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Communication and Rhetorical Studies

Syracuse University

May 2019

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In the Rwandan language of Kinyarwanda, there is a phrase “Buhoro, buhoro” which means “slowly, slowly” and is used to express one’s feelings toward managing life’s ups, downs, twists, and turns one at a time, step by step. It was a mantra I used during the process of writing this thesis, and my time overall as a graduate student at Syracuse University. What seemed slow, and sometimes agonizing in the moment, has now come to pass and I can only attempt to express my gratitude for the faculty, staff, family, and friends who helped me through each step along the way.

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Introduction

At the age of 22, I boarded a plane to Kigali, Rwanda, where I pledged to serve twenty-seven months in the U.S. Peace Corps as a Community Health Volunteer. Almost a decade later, reading through journal entries and blog posts written during that time, I see the idealistic understanding and perspective I held toward the work I thought I'd be doing. At the time, I eagerly posted photos, reflection essays, video slideshows accompanied by music, and general observations to my blog every couple of weeks when I could obtain internet access. Sharing this experience online was expected so that friends and family in the U.S. could follow along on my journey. While my blog posts were upbeat and often humorous, my personal journal entries depicted a very different side of my experience. The energy I exhibited for "helping" others, feeling "called to serve," living in Africa, learning a new language, and changing the world slowly drained as I realized what few qualifications I possessed for being there and how my presence may in fact have the opposite impact I had originally envisioned. What I imagined my experience to be and what was actually unfolding did not match up. Despite support and encouragement from people back home, I began doubting this approach to international development. Why did I think it was my responsibility or right to show up in a foreign land and solve their problems? What knowledge, skills, or expertise did I possess for solving such problems? Does this community even want to pursue western development goals or standards? Nine months in, I was on a plane back to the U.S., fulfilling merely a third of my intended commitment. Of course, I blogged and posted photos about that, too.

This moment was a rupture for me. A rupture in what I thought I wanted to do with my life and a rupture in who I thought I was or supposed to be. I didn't have the words to describe this rupture at the time, which made what was happening extremely difficult to process and

understand. At one point after returning home, I had a conversation with my cousin, Rose, about her roommate who was earning her license in Social Work and working at a school in the south side of Chicago. Rose used the term "white savior" to describe the actions and beliefs of her roommate, but in a very cynical way. This was the first time I had heard the term white savior and it became the first piece to the puzzle of what would become years of searching, gathering, and assembling words to help make sense of my ruptured state.

I open with this detailed description of my experience to provide a local point of entry to a much larger conversation. The notion of serving others is nothing new. Humanitarian aid work, service trips, and missionary volunteer opportunities are ingrained in much of white, American and European culture. However, the reasons why people do this work and how they communicate those efforts to others has shifted. When I think back on my own experience, I question how the notion of international service became not just a career goal for me but branded a lifestyle and way of being that I desired for myself. Increasingly, I see more people online participating in this discourse of humanitarianism with little regard to how they are transforming or impacting the lives and communities where they serve.

This led me to do this project and focus on how social media impacts the discourse of white saviorism. Specifically, in this thesis I look at images and posts by current Peace Corps volunteers on Instagram categorized by the hashtag #HowISeePC. Through analyzing these posts, I explore the performance and ethical substance of today's humanitarian. Additionally, I examine ironic representations of this discourse through the Barbie Savior Instagram account, in which images center the plastic doll as a fictional humanitarian subject. I look at the intertextuality and metacommentary posed by the creator behind the Barbie Savior account to understand how the use of comic framing both critiques and contributes to this discourse. Thanks

to social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and Tumblr, people can instantly share their experiences abroad to a mass audience. While this may seem like normal behavior today, I claim that service for others is increasingly becoming a personal branding technique for individuals online and this branding is two-fold: it is both a performance to be viewed as a humanitarian by others and a process in which one crafts the self into the role of the humanitarian. Further, there are significant racial and cultural issues within the discourse that often go unnoticed or uninterrupted. I am interested in understanding how the online discourse of white saviorism came to be accepted and valorized while making invisible the imperial undertones of humanitarian work, and what strategies or efforts are being made toward disrupting this trend.

I situate my research at the intersection of visual culture and rhetorical studies with a postcolonial feminist lens. In what follows, I contextualize current humanitarian trends and incorporate work from critical whiteness theory to develop the concept of white saviorism. Next, I draw on visual culture scholarship to map out some of the major communicative shifts in how we visually document humanitarian acts and international development needs. Finally, I explain the methods and theoretical framing used for my research, followed by a brief outline of the remaining chapters of this thesis.

Humanitarianism and the White Savior Complex

While there are clear connections to missionaries and colonialists, scholars have traced how a "plethora of forces derived from the era of empire…are operative in, and productive of, what we take as our natural, 'altruistic' desire for development" (Heron 52). Humanitarian efforts are embedded in American and European culture. In her book, *Desire for Development: Whiteness,*

Gender, and the Helping Imperative, Heron details the formation of the bourgeois subject as a way to understand how humanitarians and development work became what they are today.

Heron describes the production of the bourgeois identity as white, male, European, and tied to disciplining practices that distinguished them as being "truly white," including owning property, rationality, self-mastery, and moral regulation (29). To further distinguish himself, the bourgeois subject expressed signs of sympathy, benevolence, or acts of charity toward those less fortunate, which placed him in "deeply imbricated relationships with the very Others he wished not to be like" (29). Middle-class white women were not considered full bourgeois subjects but held responsibility for upholding morals and order within the private, domestic sphere by volunteering, participating in philanthropic efforts, and helping the underserved, poor classes. From these origins, Heron points to the key features that remain operational in today's humanitarian-driven society:

> The ongoing discursive validation of Northern, white, bourgeois superiority, planetary consciousness, and morality collaborate with modernity's enduring idea of progress as universally valued and the purview of the West/North to produce a sense of *entitlement and obligation* to intervene globally on the part of bourgeois subjects, to such an extent that these manifest as twin dimensions of the bourgeois self in the late twentieth century (emphasis original, 37).

In other words, there are ideological continuities emerging from colonial times, that perpetuate this ongoing need felt by white, middle-class Americans and Europeans to individually alleviate global suffering.

Today, short term mission trips, service-learning study abroad programs, and volunteer tourism or "voluntourism" opportunities are advertised to teens and young adults through both

religious and secular messaging that offer a chance to "do good" while traveling around the world. It is estimated that each year there are over 1.6 billion volunteer tourists, spending more than $2 billion around the globe (Kahn). Recent female graduates ages 20-25 and students taking a gap year make up the largest portion of voluntourists, pushing voluntourism into one of the fastest growing industries in travel (Kahn; Rutledge). In the U.S., over 60 percent of these voluntourists are middle class and over 75 percent are college-educated (Toomey).

These opportunities target American youth by glorifying the adventures of international development and humanitarian work, offering life-changing experiences, and framing cultures and communities as unable to solve their own problems. Some scholars claim that many millennials struggling to find jobs in the current American economic climate turn to volunteer opportunities abroad to enhance their resumes (Gunnarsdottir and Mathers; Hanchey, "All of Us Phantasmic Saviors"). Gunnarsdottir and Mathers claim that the subjectivity within voluntourism is seen by young millennials "not in terms of the unequal geopolitical relationships that they critique, but as an appropriate form for them to develop their own skills base" (Gunnarsdottir and Mathers). Similarly, Nisha Toomey writes about this shift "from acknowledgment of human vulnerability and of the distant Other's suffering as a cause for our action, to a disposition oriented toward the self" (Toomey 166). Toomey, Gunnarsdottir and Mathers frame the issue of serving abroad as an exclusive shift from initial concern for solving real, global problems to a performance that publicly demonstrates to friends, family, and potential employers how motivated, cultured, and global one is. Although these authors offer important insights about the motivations for development work, I find this either/or proposition to be quite limiting and believe the issue is, and always has been, more nuanced.

With the rise of social media, the self-serving side of humanitarianism is glaringly apparent. Yet, I argue that humanitarianism has always been a project of the self and this project is twofold. In this study, I explore what appears to be a sort of double turn of outward and inward self-branding in humanitarian discourse. The former describes actions people take that are directed outwards, projecting one's identity or self-image to an audience that participates or fits in the discourse. This is the most common understanding of branding that comes to mind, the idea of marketing, promoting, or presenting oneself to a particular group. The latter refers to Foucault's notion of care for the self, in which humans turn themselves into objects of study based on certain knowledges or truths they aspire to attain (Foucault, "Subject & Power"; Bernauer and Rasmussen). To do this, Foucault describes various technologies of the self that allow people to transform their physical, mental, spiritual, and behavioral selves for the purpose of fitting oneself in to a certain state of being or ethics. Here, self-branding means the practices one does to the self to fit into the discourse of humanitarian, such as travelling, volunteering, wearing certain clothing, and taking selfies.

In short, humanitarianism involves an intricate web of publicly representing one's self and privately working on one's self to fit the discourse. Emerging from bourgeois subject formations and colonialists to today's short-term mission trip participant or Peace Corps volunteer, the trend of helping others and doing development work is not slowing down anytime soon. However, in the twenty-first century, humanitarianism is being called out for its problematic, racist, and selfish notions through the naming of the white savior complex.

White Savior Complex

Saving others requires acknowledgment of their suffering and believing that one can, and should, fix that suffering. Author Teju Cole describes the white savior complex as an ongoing reality for Africa especially:

> From the colonial project to *Out of Africa* to *The Constant Gardener* and Kony 2012, Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected. It is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied. Many have done it under the banner of "making a difference."

From Superman to Princess Diana, saving the world and helping others is a narrative most people are well acquainted with. Whether it is an epic, fictional tale of heroism or a true report on the news does not matter because in American and European society, Superman and Diana are participating in a similar project: white saviorism. To understand what white saviorism is and how it works, I describe what I determine to be its three main components. The first is the mythical genre, trope, or narrative that is often found in film, books, and stories. The second is the ideology behind white saviorism that includes colorblind ignorance and individual exceptionalism. Finally, the third component is the behavior and actions of the white savior in everyday life. I view these three elements as connected and interdependent, like distinct points in a system that are constantly influencing and being influenced by one another.

To begin, the myth of white saviorism focuses not on pursuits of justice but, as Teju Cole writes, on “having a big emotional experience that validates privilege” (Cole). We see this depicted in novels, memoirs, movies, and theater repeatedly. In his book, *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption,* Michael Hughey defines white saviorism as a film genre that

portrays a character "whose innate sense of justice drives tales of racial cooperation, nonwhite uplift, and white redemption" (7). From *To Kill a Mockingbird* to *Avatar,* Hughey points to the white savior genre in fifty different films spanning twenty-five years. He argues that the white savior is employed to "repair the myth of white supremacy and paternalism in an unsettled and racially charged time" (15). It is the naïve idealism that drives narratives like those found in *Freedom Writers*¸ in which a young, white, female teacher "saves" the lives of black and Latino kids in Los Angeles through her compassion and dedication.

But this myth doesn't just occur in fictional stories or inspiring memoirs. It is used in journalism, mass media, and daily news stories. In her work on how police shootings are covered in the media, Nicole Maurantonio argues that "journalists' use and subsequent circulation of white savior mythology in the face of yet another traumatic shooting of a black man by a white police officer offered a message of hope, progress, and white redemption, anchored in a vision of a 'post-racial' present" (1131). The way these stories are framed and reported tells us a lot about our culture and society. Maurantonio describes how the myth of white saviorism relies on "racial cooperation, and inclusive victimhood" to construct a narrative that shows that "good" triumphed over "bad" (1132, 1142). These stories center the experience of the police officers, supposedly equally traumatized by the experience, who set themselves up as people trying to do the right thing, keep the community safe, and emphasize this had nothing to do with race. However, when African Americans are incarcerated at the rate of 2,300 for every 100,000 black people and white people at the rate of 450 people per 100,000, these numbers represent a different narrative than the myth perpetuated by such news reports (Taylor 211).

This first component of white saviorism as a mythical narrative or genre is so normalized in American culture it often goes uncriticized and continues to get recreated, reinvented, and

revived. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o claims that there is an interdependent, reciprocal relationship between communication and culture, both simultaneously producing and reproducing each other. While focusing primarily on language, he argues that "how people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture" (Thiong'o 16). For audiences consuming the white savior myth, it often sets up an "us" and "them" dichotomy that distinguishes the roles and agency of, for example, white police officers versus black people or immigrants, or people in the Global North versus the Global South. These stories can further perpetuate the myth that white people can and should individually attempt to save others simply because they feel empowered and entitled to do so.

The second component in developing a full understanding of white saviorism is to look at the philosophical beliefs that drive the mythical narrative and one's own behavior. Like humanitarianism, the ideology that constructs white saviorism is intricately connected to and woven within white supremacy. The white savior blissfully ignores this, instead pledging a multicultural, colorblind perspective that they are a "good white person" who is "trying to do the right thing" by helping others (Riggs). In her work on social justice pedagogy, Barbara Applebaum asks the question "What can it mean for white people 'to be good' when they can reproduce and maintain a racist system even when, and especially when, they believe themselves to be good?" (5). She points us to the white moral virtue of color-ignorance as the "belief that race no longer matters in the United States and that racial inequality will disappear if we just stop referring to race" (18). Applebaum's work in the classroom speaks directly to white savior ideology of colorblindness, in which white ignorance and complicity go hand-in-hand.

White saviors promote colorblind values such as global sisterhood or brotherhood, a belief that all people are equal, connected, and should be treated compassionately. Of course, this

flattens the material, systemic differences between races, erases the historical economic struggles and violent acts against people of color, and ignores the boundless privileges white people benefit from regularly, including border crossing, agency, and mobility. Further, colorblind ideology of white saviorism suggests that without the connection to the Global North, people in the Global South would remain helpless. Nancy Cook writes how this frame implies people "cannot emancipate or develop themselves, but rather must rely on benevolent Westerners to supply ideas and implement programs that both organize social chaos and initiate progressive social change" (137). Showing compassion and empathy while ignoring the structural obstacles that people of color and people in the Global South face is fundamental to white saviorism.

Further, the notion of American exceptionalism contributes to white savior ideology, constructs humanitarianism as "unquestioningly positive," and drives many young Americans to go live and work in foreign countries, despite lacking the skills or qualifications to do so (Hanchey, "Constructing 'American Exceptionalism'" 234). Jenna Hanchey describes how being a white savior "incorporates both the idea of national autonomy found in the conceptualization of aid, and the idea of superiority found in American exceptionalist ideology" (Hanchey, "All of Us Phantasmic Saviors" 4). In "Constructing 'American Exceptionalism': Peace Corps Volunteer Discourses of Race, Gender, and Empowerment," Hanchey provides a provocative analysis of returned Peace Corps volunteers' reflections that demonstrates how acts of service are U.S.-centric, racialized, masculinized, and often patronizing. For example, volunteers speak about issues in the communities they served as things that "Americans have the ability to help fix through empowerment" and Hanchey argues that this discourse of empowerment requires a view of the local community as "monolithic and unchanging" (243-244).

It is important to note that white saviors may not always be white in skin color. Rather, one's national identity and other non-racial privileges, such as class or gender, often sets up a dichotomous relationship between those who are "saved" or "helped" and those who do the "saving" or "helping." There are certainly people of color who volunteer, go on mission trips, and serve in the Peace Corps. However, when influenced by the neoliberal, empowering ideology that suggests Americans can and should go fix other country's problem in the name of service and progress, it is evident that white saviorism can occur in all races. Many volunteers are trying to "do the right thing" and give back to those in need, while completely ignoring the neocolonial undertones their work produces.

The third and final component of white saviorism is how it manifests through one's actions and behaviors. Kathy Hytten calls out personal acts of kindness or giving as individualistic and under the illusion that they are powerful enough to alleviate collective suffering caused by existing systems of oppression. In short, "charity is not the same thing as justice" (Hytten 69). This perception that individuals can help because of their exceptional status, actions, or abilities is disconnected from political intention or understanding, is often "paternalistic, patronizing, and pathologizing," and only creates short-term impact (75). Hytten argues for those in positions of privilege or power to work with and learn from the oppressed, in solidarity. Individual acts of charity cannot build a community that analyzes power from the point of view of those at the margins. Rather, collaboration and collective action are more inclusive steps toward transforming, disrupting, or disabling oppressive systems. Both Hanchey and Hytten point to the individual, neoliberal mentality that drives white saviorism. When people perceive themselves as exceptional, they lovingly but ignorantly believe that they are the ones to solve the world's problems.

Service learning, studying abroad, volunteering, mission trips, humanitarianism, and transnational adoption are all opportunities in which many people in the Global North actively participate. Organizations like Teen Missions International target youth with colorful websites and brochures describing service trip options, filled with images of American teenagers playing soccer with or giving piggyback rides to smiling kids in foreign countries. Quotes from past participants gush about their "unforgettable, life-changing" experiences as "phenomenal blessings" and the "adventure of a lifetime!" ("2018 Mission Trips"). Non-religious groups such as Peace Corps target young adults and older audiences with similarly flashy videos and personal narratives that convey the value of volunteering, taking on new challenges, exploring new cultures, and "making the most of your world" ("Make the Most of Your World"). This narrative tells Americans that helping others is fun, easy, and in many ways, self-serving.

In a study on white benevolence by Nancy Cook, participants vocalized their personal desires for doing international development work because they "wanted to feel worthwhile," that this type of work fulfills something inside them and that they are there "for selfish reasons. The job opportunity is great" (emphasis original, 128). Overall, Cook found that her participants were driven by this notion of finding their own sense of agency and using humanitarian work to empower themselves professionally. This final component of the white saviorism framework speaks to how the mythological narrative and ideology manifest in physical, material, active ways. Whether it is digging wells or adopting children, donating to aid campaigns or posting photos from one's volunteer trip abroad, these behaviors center whiteness, perpetuate an "us" versus "them" dichotomy that erases the agency of local people, and focus on the experience and outcomes of the individual "savior."

With the three main components of myth, ideology, and behavior, I recognize white saviorism not as a stagnant event or structure, but as a system with moving parts. This system evolves over time and space to adapt to the needs of the present moment. From historical acts of colonization to today's police shootings and from justifying short-term mission trips to transnational adoption, white saviorism continues to frame society in the Global North.[1] It centers, privileges, and gives agency to Americans or Europeans while displacing, silencing, and erasing all others. As Angela Davis writes, "it is essential to resist the depiction of history as the work of heroic individuals in order for people today to recognize their potential agency as a part of an ever-expanding community of struggle" (Davis and Barat 2). If we are to ever disrupt white saviorism and change the discourse, it requires white people diligently unveiling the myth, challenging the ideology, and behaving with a self-reflexive, critical perspective. None of this can be done individually or personally. Rather, it requires a collective understanding that ultimately shifts and disrupts the local and global structures that keep white saviorism in place. One place we can do this is on social media, where the discourse of white saviorism is told through visual images and self-branding practices. Next, I trace the origins of this discourse and how shifts in representation bring us to today's online practices of white saviorism.

Discourse of Suffering in Visual Culture

In order to understand how people today communicate through posting images on social media about humanitarianism, volunteering, and development work, it is necessary to contextualize where the discourse emerged from. First, representations of suffering have long been a staple in

[1] I chose to use the terms Global North and Global South in this study, not to further a binary, but because Western and non-Western, First World and Third World, don't fully encompass the groups I am referring to. However, Global North and Global South are not perfect either. Many humanitarians work in Eastern European countries and parts of Asia that are well above the equator. Yet, the dominant groups that appear in my case studies represent the Global North and Global South relationship.

humanitarian discourse and charity campaigns due to the emotional reactions from audiences. I am interested in looking at the relationship between one's own suffering and the suffering of Others in the context of ethical practices in photography. Put differently, how and when is representing suffering an ethical practice and how does this change over time? In this section I trace scholarship from visual culture to understand how suffering was originally represented by viewing the Other, evoking emotions of pity and sympathy in the audience, and resulting in little to no action from spectators. Next, I discuss two interconnected shifts that changed how we view and represent suffering. One shift is seen in how the framing of images evolved, from viewers and photographers both being outside of the frame to moving inside the frame and in front of the camera. This changed the way suffering was represented, formerly by viewing the Other to now experiencing suffering *with* the Other. The additional shift involves moving away from the use of negative appeals to positive appeals, from portraying suffering as pitiful to inspirational and hopeful. The evolution of this discourse points to how today's development volunteers visually represent their experiences by centering the self, borrowing on the suffering of Others to portray their work solely as good, positive, and optimistic.

For the past several decades and into the present, humanitarian, charity, and missionary discourse capitalizes on people's emotions as a way to spread awareness of the issues, get people involved with a cause, and primarily to raise money. News stories often feature images or video of devastation, starvation, or chaos to shock or draw out sympathy and pity from viewers. Visual culture scholars are well versed in analyzing historic photography and paintings that depict these various states of suffering. For example, in Kevin Carter's iconic photograph *Vulture Watching Starving Child,* he attempts to capture the devastation and pain inflicted on children's bodies during famine, and in return, Carter's images are received by audiences in the Global North with

accolades and awards (Brown). Carter is never in the frame himself and photographed the suffering of Others to publish and circulate within various news outlets. The problem with these types of images, Kimberly Juanita Brown writes, is that they perpetuate stereotypes and further the visual narrative of the "evils of war and famine" and the "good of the witness" (183). These critical observations reveal the political and social implications that such images have on spectators. The discourse of suffering repeatedly appropriates the Other's pain and is entrenched in racial politics, typically framing stories or photographs from the point of view of the sympathetic humanitarian and exploit the subject enduring some form of suffering.

When viewing images that portray suffering bodies and communities, Americans traditionally do so at a safe distance, placing themselves as the innocent spectator. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes, "so far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence" (102). Images may spark sympathy or pity, but often our reactions stop there. Michalinos Zembylas explains how suffering caused by socio-economic violence and poverty "is problematically assumed to be alleviated by empathetic identification and generosity, that is, pity, a feeling that does not lead to any action" (507). Similarly, Sherene Razack writes how "watching (or looking away because we cannot bear it) can help to convince us that whatever is happening cannot be stopped, that there is an inevitability to the horror that absolves us of further responsibility" (389). Having pity is enough to alleviate the spectator's own guilt and displace any potential obligation to solve the material problems causing the suffering. Speaking to Carter's photography specifically, Brown describes how this never-ending desire to depict and consume black bodies in pain or suffering enables a kind of photographic humanitarianism. Responding emotionally to an image of suffering, without an intent to act on such feelings,

reinforces the privileged, voyeuristic perspective that remains separate from the suffering taking place. In this case, it is as if representing the suffering Other is deemed ethical when it serves a white, Global North audience.

Judith Butler argues that we should "consider the way in which suffering is presented to us, and how that presentation affects our responsiveness" (63). What is the context of the image and the subjects inside the frame? What, or who, is missing or outside of the frame? What cultural norms are being perpetuated through images that show suffering? How are these images staged for political or social purposes? Butler calls for spectators to think critically about the ways suffering is depicted or even marketed to us as ethical.

Alternatively, does a less passive and more active response to images of suffering necessarily change the ethics of the practice? Are images further ethically justified when they result in greater attention, accolades, or donations? In looking at popular media, including journalism, celebrity advocacy, televised charity concerts, and news corporations, Lilie Chouliaraki notes a move to a "post-humanitarian" style of messaging that features "low-intensity emotions and short-term forms of agency" (108). In other words, this shift breaks away from centering pity to motivate audiences to act and moves toward emphasizing simple, timely modes of activism like online donations. This new approach, Chouliaraki claims, "acknowledges that compassion fatigue lies not so much in the excess of human suffering that transcends our individual capacity to feel for or act on it, but rather in the excess of discourses of morality around which we are called to organize our feelings and action towards suffering" (120). Because of the internet and social media, charities and non-profits can now reach their audience instantly and cast a wider network of potential donors, volunteers, and advocates. This saturation of post-humanitarian messaging also means that the racial stereotypes, neocolonial ideology, and

gendered messages so often found in humanitarian aid campaigns are also viewed by more people and at quicker rates than ever before. So while the ideology behind much humanitarian aid communication remains outdated, racist, and even sexist, consumers may no longer be affected or notice the problem because there is simply so much of it that it is deemed normal.

This speaks to Sontag's previous analysis from *On Photography*, that images of suffering distributed through mass media direct public attention and consequently numb us due to the hyper-saturation of such images. In a critique of her own claims, Sontag argues later that we live in a "society of spectacle" in which every situation must be sensationalized in order for us to pay attention. "People themselves aspire to become images: celebrities. Reality has abdicated. There are only representations: media" (109). The consumption of images has actually sparked the production of new images. This change in Sontag's argument reveals the first shift in the broader discourse of how the framing and production of images has evolved. Previous scholarship focuses on mass mediated, iconic images within the discourse of suffering and center the position of witnessing. Today, we see images within the discourse produced by individual citizens in everyday life. Witnesses are no longer passive but actively place themselves within the frame. Professional photographers like Carter are not necessary because anyone with a smartphone is a click away from adding to, circulating, and participating in the practices and discourses of suffering. These new additions are on a peer-to-peer level, distributed through social networking sites and mediated platforms that allow for users to simultaneously produce, consume, and judge the images.

In addition to framing, the second broader shift in the discourse comes from how emotional appeals are strategically moving away from negative to positive representations. Chouliaraki writes that early humanitarian charity ads and documentaries negatively depicted the

raw realities of suffering, especially by showing victims of famine or war. The negative appeals center the victims' bodies and "establish a social relationship anchored in the colonial gaze," evoking emotions of guilt and shame in the witness as they "acknowledge [their] historical and personal participation in perpetuating human suffering" (Chouliaraki 58, 60). The aim of negative appeals is to shock audiences in the Global North into action while further portraying sufferers as "passive, unaware, quasi-human" (58). However, this messaging motivates audiences to address the symptoms rather than the root or systemic causes of such suffering.

Newer images within both NGO campaigns and by individual volunteers, tourists, or development workers are rapidly turning away from capturing moments of suffering and pain toward a more positive appeal. These images take on a very different tone than Carter's photography or the stereotypical charity campaigns featuring starving children. Instead, they focus on the joyfulness and smiles of local people, children surrounding or being held by white volunteers, and the beautiful scenery in the Global South. Chouliaraki claims that this strategy continues to rely on portraying the authentic reality of suffering but does so in a way that centers the subject's agency and dignity rather than victimhood. Focusing on one smiling child makes the image seem personal and simultaneously empowers individual viewers to respond. Shifting away from shocking destitution to positive, "hopeful self-determination" imagery creates a benefactor/beneficiary relationship, in which viewers believe they are seeing gratitude in the images of the sufferer and feel empowered to respond with empathy. In my own analysis, I claim that positive appeals are also a personal branding strategy enacted by the white savior.

Overall, these shifts in the discourse of suffering impact both the production and response to humanitarianism. Chouliaraki points out the link between communication practices and humanitarian intervention in the mid-1980s to the present. She writes how positive imagery

"appears to empower distant sufferers through discourses of dignity and self-determination…[but] simultaneously disempowers these sufferers by appropriating their otherness in western discourses of identity and agency" (63). More specifically, when it comes to images posted to social media, poverty and suffering are presented as joyous opportunities to fulfil the white person's humanitarian fantasies. In many ways, these shifts that center the humanitarian within the frame and move away from negative appeals toward positive appeals could be viewed almost like before and after images that justify the interference of the white savior.

Methods and Chapter Overview

In this study, I draw heavily on visual culture and rhetorical criticism and place my research in conversation with scholars such as Jenna Hanchey, Cara Finnegan, Susan Sontag, Kimberly Juanita Brown, John Lucaites, and Robert Hariman. I use scholarship from critical and rhetorical theorists Michel Foucault and Kenneth Burke to ground my analysis, yet I view my research as interdisciplinary, drawing on digital culture scholarship, critical whiteness theory, and postcolonial feminism throughout each chapter. Further, I incorporate non-academic texts from artists, photographers, and creative professionals to add a pragmatic depth and understanding to my objects of analysis.

My method stems from visual studies' scholar W.J.T. Mitchell's notion of not asking "what does this image mean?" but rather, "what does this image want?" In other words, I aim to go beyond critique and instead find what it is about the images in white savior discourse that resonates with people. For my analysis, I scrolled through thousands of posts on Instagram that were tagged with #HowISeePC, a hashtag associated with current Peace Corps volunteers serving all over the world, and the 116 images posted on the Barbie Savior Instagram account.

These images are accessible to the public and are representative of the larger discourse of missionaries, voluntourists, humanitarians, and development workers. I am also fully aware that by selecting an object that directly connects to my own personal experience, this tells the reader as much about me as it does about the world and discourse I attempt to dissect (Bal). I do this with intention, to simultaneously understand the discourse of white saviorism specifically in the Peace Corps and reflect on my participation in it.

The photos and posts that I ultimately selected to analyze were based on two things. First, due to the nature of the platform, looking at images for Chapter 1 involved infinite scrolling and because of this, I ended up with a sampling of images that are recent, posted publicly within the last two years despite the fact that the hashtag dates back five years. Second, I selected posts for both analysis chapters based on how they represented the larger patterns of the discourse. With each image, I look at the framing of the photograph, the arrangement of subjects, and how bodies are posed in certain ways. I trace the patterns that emerge, especially in the angle the photograph was taken and the foreground/background balance and arrangement of objects or subjects. I look for repetition in subjects' appearance across diverse individuals and the ways in which the physical, visual, and ideological aspects of white saviorism become conventionalized. Beyond the photograph, I conduct an intertextual analysis of the captions, hashtags, and user comments associated with each post. I aim to understand the ideology at work in the discourse and argue that notions of racism and neocolonialism are unintentionally perpetuated. My focus throughout this research is on the creator's performance of white saviorism rather than their intent or motivation for what they are doing.

It is also important to note the ethical dilemma of reproducing the images that I discuss and critique throughout this study. I intentionally chose not to reproduce Carter's iconic image of

the child being watched by a vulture in this introduction because doing so would re-appropriate the suffering child for my own academic argument. In this regard, I find myself positioned alongside Sontag when she describes how images of pain and suffering shock the spectator but "are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us" (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 89). Sontag is pointing out the need for contextualization and historicization when it comes to witnessing images, responding to them, and learning from them (Stern). However, as you will see in the chapters that follow, I do include screenshots of select images and posts that illustrate the claims I am making. Although these images do not depict the horrors of famine, war, genocide, or torture, the act of reproducing them could be viewed as a form of violence on the innocent, nameless subjects inside the frame. Some scholars do this intentionally. For instance, Mark Stern finds there are theoretical and pedagogical opportunities in reproducing images, "to situate viewers into a line of thinking where our autonomy, our identity, and our ideas of self and safety are shown to be relational attributes contingent upon others in the world" (176). Still, this decision is unsettling to me. While I do think it is necessary to show you, the reader, what this discourse looks like and feels like, I am hyperaware of the fact that in doing so I am negating part of my own argument: that this discourse fills a self-serving purpose. For those posting the image, it serves as a performance for their own identity and for me, it serves as evidence for my academic thesis. This contradiction is not lost on me as I, along with scholars like Stern and Sontag, continue to grapple with the line of what is ethical and informative or harmful and appropriative in visual culture.

Chapter Overview

While I've described some of the broader shifts within the discourse of suffering and humanitarianism in this introduction, the chapters that follow focus on the specific practices at work within online performances of white saviorism. Today's volunteers, missionaries, voluntourists, and humanitarians continue to rely on positive appeals and inserting themselves into the frame. However, rather than simply evoking emotions in the audience, they now borrow from others' suffering for the purpose of self-branding. In Chapter 1, I look at images publicly posted on Instagram and tagged with #HowISeePC to understand the current trends, practices, and behaviors of today's humanitarians. I analyze images of volunteer selfies, both alone and with others, vast landscapes of the areas in which they live, and physical or mental changes throughout their service. I also look at how the use of others' bodies are objectified for self-serving reasons and I theorize this through what I call the *white savior gaze*, which simultaneously appreciates and appropriates people in the Global South as a means to curate one's online personal brand as a global citizen and humanitarian. Broadly, I am interested in the ways social media and the notion of self-branding get entangled in individuals' pursuits of "doing good" in the world. That is to say, I am asking, how does service for others function as a branding technique for white saviorism? What racial and ethical issues are raised by the person posting, the subjects within, and the viewers who consume these images? Through primary research of online humanitarian discourse and secondary research drawing on digital culture scholarship and Michel Foucault's project on ethics, Chapter 1 examines how self-branding functions both outwardly as a performance to an audience and inwardly, by doing work on the self. I conclude that self-branding is not just a representation of one's moral or ethical framework but that it is *the* ethical substance of today's white savior.

In Chapter 2, I explore ironic representations of white saviorism on Instagram that seek to disrupt the discourse through critiquing images like those portrayed in Chapter 1. I look at the satirical Instagram account Barbie Savior and ask, what impact does irony have on the self-branding aspect of white savior discourse? Using a fictitious subject and comic framing, Barbie Savior mocks, parodies, and satirizes the discourse in over-the-top ways. Through an intertextual analysis, I discuss three rhetorical strategies that Barbie Savior's creator, Emily Worrall, uses in order to achieve what Kenneth Burke refers to as a "perspective by incongruity." These strategies include mimicry, satirical composition, and hyperbolic representation. Through these techniques, Worrall is able to expose the seams of the discourse of white saviorism, calling out its ambivalent, self-centered, problematic nature. However, as Worrall aims to critique and educate both producers and consumers of the discourses (who are often one and the same), she simultaneously relies on, and therefore perpetuates, the discourse. Rather than studying her failure or success in this regard, I argue that creating an ironic brand of white saviorism draws on the exact same practices, behaviors, and tactics as those who curate their real self-brand. Applying a comic frame on top of this furthers the ambivalence within the discourse yet makes a serious point: that people can juxtapose fiction with reality to curate the illusion of being the perfect humanitarian, missionary, or development volunteer.

In the conclusion, Chapter 3, I discuss moving toward decolonizing online discourses and representations of white saviorism. Briefly, I introduce examples of current social media accounts and groups that are actively engaged in such work and point toward the ongoing need for critical interventions by both academics and non-academics alike.

While my experience in the international development sector was brief, the conflicting thoughts and beliefs I had at the time still linger. Additionally, my time in the Peace Corps was

on the cusp of smartphone technology and the social media boom of the last decade. I may have had to put in more time and effort to capture, upload, and share my photos, videos, and blog entries than today's volunteer does, but there are bits and pieces of my personal archive that demonstrate how effective and powerful white savior discourse can be in persuading young, idealistic, American audiences. The trend of documenting this type of experience was already growing into what we see today. By becoming aware of this trend and actively studying it as scholars, critics, and social media users alike, we may move one step closer to disrupting the discourse and even further, the behaviors and logics of white saviorism itself.

Chapter 1: Branding the White Savior Self(ie)

Since its founding in 1960 by President John F. Kennedy, the U.S. Peace Corps has sent more than 235,000 American volunteers to 141 different countries in the name of service and global friendship (Peace Corps). The Peace Corps aims to promote peaceful cultural exchange and help countries in need of training. How the Peace Corps communicates its mission and persuades Americans to join has evolved over the years. Original 1960s video footage from Kennedy's speeches and interviews with the initially appointed Peace Corps Director, Robert Sargent Shriver, portray the Peace Corps as way for Americans to dedicate their skills and talents to foreign service. Though open to both men and women from the start, many early video clips show mostly white men training for the physical and technical requirements of "the corps" in an almost militaristic way (Peace Corps, "Sargent Shriver Promotes"). Aware of potential imperialist implications yet also at a time when fears of communism were at their peak, Shriver spoke to the way volunteers empower local community members to take ownership of the needs in their own communities and stop short of simply doing the work for them (Peace Corps, "Sargent Shriver Speaks in New York").

While the mission and goals have remained unchanged over the decades, the emergence of social media has allowed Peace Corps to change the way they communicate their messages and in doing so, has shifted the face and ethical substance of today's Peace Corps Volunteer. Rather than relying on presidents, directors, or other organizational leaders to sell their mission, today Peace Corps embraces the perspective of individual volunteers to tell the story of what Peace Corps is. In more of a peer-to-peer form of communicating, the shift to using social media allows Peace Corps to reach potential volunteers in an interactive, participatory way that was not available to them before.

It is this shift in not only how Peace Corps communicates its mission, but how individual volunteers visually represent their experience that interests me. The digital images posted by Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) are representative of a broader trend of online white saviorism, in which taking a selfie in the Global South and posting it to Instagram becomes part of the experience of doing development work and perhaps nearly as important as the volunteering itself. Due to the nature of social media, most young adults are familiar with the practices and behaviors used to brand the self, or to carefully curate how one is represented online and appeal to audiences for social gains. It is this connection, where acts of humanitarianism such as volunteering in the Peace Corps, meet self-branding behaviors online, that guides this chapter. In a society where individualism and authenticity are celebrated and highly valued, helping others and "doing good" becomes a performance to build one's own personal brand. To contextualize why Peace Corps makes for a useful case study, I open with the shifts that brought us to today's visual, digital, individualized notion of development work.

Today, with 1.5 million followers on Twitter, 427K likes on Facebook, 142K followers on Instagram, 19K YouTube subscribers and over 6.9 million views of their videos, Peace Corps is clearly present and highly visible on most platforms of social media. However, just five years ago, many government entities did not utilize these various forms of social media to reach their audiences (Strain). In a 2014 pilot study to increase followers of what was then a regional Peace Corps Instagram account, and to communicate a day-in-the-life snapshot of a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV), Leslie Strain created the #HowISeePC campaign, where select PCVs would "take over" the @PeaceCorps account and post about their experiences. Strain writes how "Peace Corps just didn't have that kind of content coming out. Yes, [volunteers] had their own blogs, but readership was confined to their circle. The takeovers and #[HowISeePC] were an

easy way to bring together the 1000s of volunteers, and also showcase the work they were doing beyond traditional press releases" (Strain). Quickly, Peace Corps understood how Instagram in particular was a unique outlet for branding their mission and recruiting more volunteers. Today, Peace Corps continues to highlight certain images that show volunteers performing what is deemed socially and culturally appropriate or acceptable humanitarian action, behavior, and service. For example, recent posts on their Instagram account, @PeaceCorps, show a volunteer cooking in Malawi, a volunteer farming in Guatemala, another volunteer with a child on his shoulders, sunsets in Indonesia captured by a volunteer, and an image of buildings in China captioned by a volunteer about how their experience "has been more rewarding than I could have ever dreamed"(@PeaceCorps, "Curious How to Prepare"; @PeaceCorps, "This Photo Was Taken on My Last Morning"; @PeaceCorps, "@peacecorpsmalawi Environment Volunteer"; @PeaceCorps, "Standing among Thriving Tomato"; @PeaceCorps, "My Experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer"). Images that do not include volunteers as the focal object feature local community members or spaces in the various countries of service. These photos are accompanied by captions with quotes from current volunteers, descriptions of the work being done by volunteers, or asking spectators if they can imagine themselves in the shoes of the volunteer who captured the photo, as an appeal to recruit more volunteers to Peace Corps. They alter the framing to make the message fit for selling the mission, recruiting new volunteers, and most importantly, centering the individual volunteer experience.

Although Peace Corps quickly learned how to engage with audiences on Instagram to brand and sell the experience of volunteering, there was yet another shift that brings us to the present moment. Individual PCVs have long captured and documented their experiences with photography, journals, slideshows, letters, and videos. However, it wasn't until the mid-2000s

that volunteers could post updates, write blogs, and send emails back home in real-time. Again, with the emergence of social media, plus the technology of Wi-Fi and the smartphone to access such media, individual volunteers took over not just the @PeaceCorps account but the entire brand-building aspect of Peace Corps. What began as a week-long campaign controlled by Peace Corps through selecting distinct volunteers and cherry-picking photos, grew and evolved over the years to the over 84,400 public images tagged with #HowISeePC on Instagram.

Using Peace Corps as a case study, this chapter examines how white saviorism is normalized and valorized in American contexts and even further, how it is a way for individuals to brand the self. To do this, I situate my research at the intersection of visual culture, postcolonial theory, and digital culture. I begin by looking at the notion of self-branding through digital culture scholarship and use Michel Foucault's project on ethics as a framework to introduce how branding has morphed from an outward act to a practice of care for the self. Next, I analyze images on Instagram tagged with #HowISeePC through the theme self-branding with one's body by looking at volunteer bodies pose, transform, and represent racist, colonial ideologies. Further, I explore how bodies of others are objectified for self-serving purposes by the volunteer, using what I call a *white savior gaze* that blends care of the self with white (colonial) feminism. Through this careful analysis, I identify patterns and demonstrate shifts in the discourse in order to conclude that self-branding is not just a representation of one's moral or ethical framework but that the act of working on oneself through branding is the ethical substance of today's white savior.

Self-Branding and Ethics

The practice of posting images on social media about one's experience volunteering abroad is a project of the self. In the introduction, I traced the way representations of suffering have shifted regarding framing and appealing to spectator's emotions. While previous images of humanitarianism focused on the pain and suffering of others from the viewpoint of the witness, the new representation involves inserting oneself into the frame and posing in a positive light with the one who is suffering and impoverished. This newer representation is a form of borrowing on the Other's suffering for self-serving, self-branding, and self-transformational purposes. Further, these shifts have aligned with changes in online, digital, and social media practices. In this section, I explain the origins of self-branding and draw on Foucault's discussion of care of the self to lay the groundwork for what these shifts mean in relation to the discourse of white saviorism. I argue that the newer practices of social media and representation ultimately change the ethical substance of what it means to "do good" or serve overseas in groups like the Peace Corps.

The term self-branding originally stems from self-help rhetoric from the early nineties but is now used to define the process in which people choose how to perform their online identity (Gandini). Drawing on media historian Jeffrey Pooley, Brooke Erin Duffy writes that "from self-improvement literature to ad pitches that promised consumers salvation through self-expression, the message of the therapeutic ethos was clear: 'The best way to work on yourself is to consciously cultivate an authentic persona'" (120). To brand one's self is to carefully construct a representation of not just who one is but who one strives to be. This image and brand is primarily for others to view, witness, and consume. The desire to appear real and authentic, using the aesthetics of social media and the logics of marketing, drives self-branding (Duffy). This

conscious cultivation in combination with social media allows people to choose, alter, make, and re-make themselves online.

While economic capital is the aim for traditional branding, self-branding is an "investment in social relationships with expected return for the acquisition of reputation" (Gandini 123). In short, self-branding is the development of a public image for the purpose of cultural and social capital. Pierre Bourdieu describes cultural capital as "educational qualifications and intellect" and social capital as that "which can exist as a title of nobility but often reflects relational networks" (Duffy 22). Social theorists point to social capital especially when it comes to the gains individuals expect through self-branding, where one can invest in relationships and expect something in return, such as comments, shares, likes, or followers. Developing a strong, quality self-branded image online can help people promote themselves for potential jobs, relationships, or pure popularity. It stems from the idea of marketing a product but rather than selling an object, the idea is to curate one's self in a way that is desirable for either social or professional gains.

Sarah Banet-Weiser similarly writes about how idealistic forms of selfhood, as defined by specific cultures, thrive in online social networking sites. Because of the nature of social media, which allows for users to be both producers and critics of their own and others' branding methods, she argues that the metrics by which one is measured are similar to those used in traditional marketing or branding, such as "evaluation, ranking, and judgment, and with the ideal of visibility in mind" (Banet-Weiser 57). In her book *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture,* Banet-Weiser discusses branding in both a marketing/consumer culture and now as a social media culture. She describes how "branding impacts the way we understand who we are, how we organize ourselves in the world, what stories we tell about ourselves" (Banet-

Weiser 59). Brands and branding are all about creating a culture that includes a certain experience or lifestyle that people desire to obtain. Further, Banet-Weiser argues that authenticity, or the attempt to *appear* authentic in our lives on and off-line, is now a brand in and of itself.

Rather than commodifying products or merchandise, we now look at how the self *is* the object to be packaged, branded, and consumed. Self-branding entails creating a narrative about who we are as individuals. Similar to what Erving Goffman defines as the front stage of his dramaturgical metaphor, people perform for an audience through what they choose to post online. Whether people are posting about the mundane, day-to-day activities or sharing snapshots from a recent vacation, images tend to highlight something that is visually interesting and aesthetically appealing. These brands and images of ourselves are almost always filtered, referring to what Duffy deems "the culture of vigilant self-monitoring on social media" where we "internalize directives to brand the self with resolve: we un-tag unflattering photos, we build credibility through 'friend' and 'follow' counts, we harness our online personae to pithy self-descriptors that function as digital sound bites" (187). On social media, people want others to see the most positive, interesting, and unique side of themselves. Ironically, the performative nature of social media and self-branding leads to highly conventionalized visual representations of the self.

The story that is told through one's own social media activity is often a performance of the individual's interests, values, or morals. Drawing on Foucault's project of ethics and caring for the self, Banet-Weiser writes about how "self-branding is positioned by marketers and brand managers as the proper way – perhaps even the necessary way – to 'take care of oneself' in contemporary advanced capitalist economy" (54). For Foucault, care of the self includes "not

only the need to know (to know the things one does not know, to know that one is ignorant, to know one's own nature), but to attend effectively to the self, and to exercise and transform oneself" (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure,* 73). It is the practices and technologies that go into transforming oneself that are magnified by and through social media. People visually document their lives and create an image of who they are in relation to society. In other words, self-branding is yet another way people do work on themselves and this work is aimed at crafting oneself into an ethical subject who acts in accordance with a moral code. Banet-Weiser writes that "self-branding is an expression of a moral framework, a means to access 'authenticity,' and crucially important in order to become 'more of who you are' as well as who 'you were meant to be'" (59).

However, when looking at the discourse of white saviorism, I am interested in understanding the shift from self-branding outwardly, toward one's audience as a demonstration of one's values, to instead a self-branding that is transformative in crafting oneself as an ethical subject, in this case a white savior. While humanitarianism has always been somewhat of a project of the self, with the rise of social media, I am claiming that this project is two-fold. People on social media are performing for others the role of humanitarian and simultaneously, it is a process in which one acts, behaves, dresses, and seeks out particular opportunities in order to *understand* oneself in the role of the humanitarian. It is this crafting, this manufacturing that one does to the self that defines the white savior discourse and ultimately alters its ethical substance. For rather than doing this work on the self to be deemed fit to serve and help others, alleviating their suffering and working to improve their current socioeconomic status, the white savior cares for the self also as a way to brand the self. It is this branding, then, that is the ethical substance of today's white savior. The need for social capital and approval drives the discourse.

Self-Branding Through Representations of the Body

From 2014 to the present, the hashtag #HowISeePC creates a public archive of over 84,400 images posted by volunteers serving all across the world in various sectors of education, agriculture, community development, and health. Today, the hashtag is primarily used by individual PCVs as they document their service from first person perspectives on their own, personal Instagram accounts. A recent phenomenon that emerged from microblogging, Michele Zappavigna explains that hashtags are more than just topic markers. Social, or user-generated, tagging is the "practice of adding metadata…to online communication" and a way to increase searchability across content for social media users (1). Even further, Zappavigna claims hashtags have three key functions within online communities and discourse: to enact an experience, negotiate relationships, and/or to organize information. For this chapter, #HowISeePC serves as both an organizational and experiential function because it is a topic marker that classifies the post as "being of a particular experiential kind" (Zappavigna 5). The number of public images using #HowISeePC is rising every day as individuals contribute to the collective archive of self-identified PCVs. These posts share a common appeal, which focus on the volunteer's experience over any work to alleviate suffering or poverty. For example, posts document weight changes, hair growth/loss, injuries, vacation adventures outside of service, acquiring new skills, and outfitting themselves in local clothing styles.[2]

Images catalogued with #HowISeePC are not as consistently vibrant, sleek, and captivating as those found on the @PeaceCorps page, which speaks to the way Peace Corps is branding themselves with only what they consider to be the best photographs of the volunteer

[2] Not to mention the entire Instagram account @BeardsofPeaceCorps that catalogues male PCVs facial hair from around the globe and describes the account as "An appreciation of beards in service, and beards that served!"

experience. Unlike the @PeaceCorps account, which attempts to educate audiences on the work volunteers do and recruit future volunteers, the individual PCV posts with #HowISeePC work to brand the self and the self alone. The photos captured and tagged with #HowISeePC, both through individual accounts and the official Peace Corps account, represent the larger discourse of white saviorism on social media. The scope and variety in these posts show a range of experiences, timelines, reflections, impressions, and understandings of what volunteering and humanitarianism means to each user. And yet, the commonalities and repetition of images demonstrates the pervasiveness of the discourse.

As a framework for my analysis, I focus on how bodies are pictured within each frame and the patterns that emerge across the discourse. In this section, I will discuss three themes that are evident across the images: repetitious poses, documentation of changes, and objectifying the Other. First, I discuss the dominant, redundant poses that occur in the discourse, which include the selfie, dressing like a local, and posing with locals. These poses center the PCV's body as proof of doing work on one's self to fit into the role of the humanitarian and white savior. Next, I explain how PCVs use their Instagram accounts and #HowISeePC to document the ways they have or are transforming physically, mentally, and spiritually. These images point to the neoliberal trends of publicly showing how one is changing and evolving into a better version of the self and evidence that one is caring for the self, be it weight loss, gratitude, or a new self-awareness. In the third and final section, I focus on images that do not include the PCV within the frame but instead center local people. Drawing on postcolonial feminist and visual culture scholars, I claim that this category of images produces a *white savior gaze*, where the Other is captured in a moment that produces an exotic aesthetic primarily for the purpose of continuing to build the PCV's self-brand online.

Body in Pose

The embodied, photographed subject tells a story, frozen in time. For PCVs, this story navigates a conventionalized path of service for others, tourism, and self-transformation. How one performs in front of the camera, or in most cases these days, the smartphone, reflects not just who one is but who one strives to be. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes this feeling, this sensation of being observed by the lens. We transform, in advance, into an image and end up questioning the authenticity of our self. Barthes explains how through posing we momentarily derive our own existence from the photographer, knowing an image will be generated. In the case of #HowISeePC images, photographer and subject are often one and the same. Images are instantly produced, reviewed, and re-taken until this dissonance of the real versus desired version of the self is achieved. Across the discourse, diverse individuals come to reproduce the same images in their depiction of themselves as white saviors through repetitive poses that center the volunteer's positive experience and life-changing journey. These include the selfie, dressing in local clothing, and posing with local people.

The Selfie

The most dominant pose throughout the #HowISeePC images is the selfie, in which volunteers hold the camera or smartphone in one hand and turn the lens directly around onto themselves. The selfie is often criticized as a "look at me," self-centered practice that saturates Millennial social worlds. Most commonly defined as the "representation of the photographer in the image via the face or parts of the body, or through traces of the body such as the shadow or reflection," social theorists continue to debate where to place and how to define the selfie in today's sociopolitical context (Zhao and Zappavigna 1738). Some critics argue the selfie is an iteration of historical self-portraiture while others claim it is more than a genre or form of photography

and believe it is a unique, platform-specific, assemblage of subjectivity (Eagar and Dann; Zhao and Zappavigna). Communication scholars Zhao and Zappavigna describe the selfie as a visual symbol that functions to represent both the self and the relationship between subject and audience. They claim that "what is being negotiated in a selfie is not the relationship between the visually represented self and the viewers (i.e. me vs the other) but the different perspectives or points of view on visually represented phenomena (i.e. my perspective on me vs other's perspective on me)" (Zhao and Zappavigna 1737). So as individuals take and post selfies on social media, they are attempting to control the narrative of their life and develop their personal brand, both for themselves and for their audience (Eagar and Dann).

Of course, not all selfies are the same. Eager and Dann identify seven sub-categories of the selfie that vary in terms of setting, rhetorical function, formal features, and thematic structure. They claim that selfies can be informational and autobiographical, humorous, self-promoting, a representation of one's real-world connections and relationships, a demonstration of self-achievement and mastery, a form of a travel diary, or as an attempt at artistic, aesthetic photography. As part of a bigger trend on social media, the use of the selfie in humanitarian discourse functions in a way that touches on many of these subgenres and, most importantly, highlights the white savior ideology at work. Koffman et al. write that in development work contexts, the selfie "captures the turning of the humanitarian gaze away from the those in need and onto the individual... and it highlights the reframing of 'helping others' in terms of entrepreneurial and narcissistic self-work" (158). In other words, the selfie flips the ethics of humanitarianism upside down and inside out. It does not highlight the selflessness of development work but rather magnifies the image, body, and persona of the individual doing such work. For a volunteer to take and post a selfie acts as a practice for crafting and curating the

self in a way that illustrates to themselves and to their audience that they are living up to the ideals of a humanitarian.

For this section, I examine selfies that involve the volunteer alone and with others, including fellow PCVs, locals, children, and animals. In selfies tagged with #HowISeePC, PCVs give over-the-top, cheesy grins during their swearing-in ceremony (@mattjsosa), place themselves in front of scenic landscapes, captioned with self-reflections or inspirational quotes (@labibisima; @mattmigration; @crreees), cuddle with their cat, dog, chicken, goat, or other local animal or newly adopted pet (@damnitchild; @emilieehrman; @sarahstrut), gather around the table for a meal and drinks with fellow PCVs or locals (@calikrainian; @jeckinguate; @vikki.travels), and surround themselves with local children (@grace.c.j; @marsuzleo; @bethanyannebell). These images all tell a story about a moment in the PCV's journey that center themselves and also contribute to building their personal brand.

Selfies often enact a disciplining effect in which Instagram users, especially women, work to perform and capture their performance according to certain social structures, rules, and expectations (Burns). Volunteers document their ongoing behavior, activities, relationships, and settings to ensure they are participating in the white savior discourse correctly and effectively. As a PCV, the selfie is a technology that governs the self so that the image produced represents the version of humanitarian that is desired. Throughout his work, Foucault discusses various technologies that imply "certain modes of training and modification of individuals" including learning new skills, changing attitudes or perspectives, and forming, managing, or dominating bodies (Foucault, *Technologies of the Self* 225). Foucault situates technologies of the self as forms of "governmentality" and writes that they imply "the relationship of the self to itself, and… [cover] the range of practices that constitute, define, organize and instrumentalize the

strategies which individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" (Foucault and Rabinow xvii). In other words, the things we do to ourselves, for various reasons, reveal the choices we make as humans trying to become ethical subjects. The selfie is a technology that shows our relationship to others, to ourselves, and to the objects, contexts, or places within the frame.

For example, one pattern among #HowISeePC selfies involves a smiling female PCV with an accompanying caption describing themselves as happy, "living their best life," and include the use of emojis such as sunshine, rainbows, and stars (@shaleancollins; @yoquierotrinajoy, "Y'all, I'm Just Really Happy."; @tyleradonohue; @ekalahar; @erintaylor1315; @longlivelei). The captions take on an almost "cutesy" appeal, representing their identities, bodies, and experiences as girly, pure, fun, and innocent. These images portray the day-to-day experience in Peace Corps as natural, positive, and seemingly effortless. The women centered in each photograph appear totally relaxed in their roles as PCVs. Whether their experiences in real life match this depiction is unknown and insignificant. What matters is that the subjects conform to portraying this happy version of their experience as PCVs. They self-monitor and self-regulate how their bodies are positioned, their facial expressions, and the textual description of these moments in a way that contributes to building their brand as a white savior.

Several selfies in #HowISeePC show volunteers in a way that similarly depict happiness but in a less explicit way and one that exudes a tone of nonchalance, as if being a PCV is no big deal and this just another moment to add to their Instagram page. For example, a PCV in Tanzania sits in the doorframe of her house, a brick wall in the background, and natural light casting across her face. She looks straight into the camera with a smile on her face, wearing no

makeup as her blonde hair rests upon her shoulder (Fig. 1). The caption reads “Curly hair, bricks, and comfy track suits. Home. Also, this is me, the person behind the camera and dog ears :). Karibu Tanzania! . . . . #pcv #pcvlife #intentionalliving #pctanzania #howiseepc #wanderer #wanderlust #africanadventure #traveller #peaceofmind #brickhouses #tracksuitlife #thisisme #thisiswhoiam” (@gypsyoflife). Here, the selfie acts to brand the subject as a PCV, a



Figure 1. Screenshot by author of @gypsyoflife’s post.

humanitarian, a white savior in way that looks natural, calm, and peaceful. Even while the role of a PCV is to serve others and be in community with others, the selfie brings the focus back to the individual volunteer and creating a personal narrative. Banet-Weiser writes that “while certainly the Internet affords possibility for collectivities, communities, and networked publics, it also enables and facilitates a focus on the individual; that is, it is no easy move to switch from ‘me’ to ‘us’ in the current moment of self-marketing and self-branding” (88). The selfie, in conjunction with social media and development work, is another version of what Lilie Chouliaraki calls

"egoistic altruism" in mediated humanitarianism, in which it "explicitly situates the pleasures of the self at the heart of moral action" and is:

> a fundamental mutation in the communicative structure of humanitarianism. This is the retreat of the theatrical structure of solidarity, where the encounter between western spectator and vulnerable other takes place as an ethical and political event, in favour of a mirror structure, where this encounter is reduced to an often narcissistic self-reflection that involves people like 'us' (4).

In the Figure 1 example, the selfie influences both how others perceive her and is a technology to control how she sees herself. Her use of #thisisme and #thisiswhoiam are clear demonstrations of the performative aspect of the selfie, indicating directly to her audience that this is how she wants to be seen.

Of course, selfies don't have to only feature the subject's face. One other pattern of selfie I wish to discuss is what I call the "foot pose," where PCVs frame the image by placing their feet as the focal point, either by looking down or by sitting with their legs out in front of them and scenery in the background. Dirt, tan lines, and worn shoes are on display while the spectator notices the setting or activity the PCV is showing us, such as reading, cooking, journaling, or walking through their village. For example, in one foot pose selfie, several PCV feet are seen standing in a circle and wearing similar style sandals embarking a hike to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe (Fig. 2, @giraffeattack14, "5 Hours at Victoria Falls"). Another post displays the white, female legs of a PCV wearing yoga pants, outstretched in front on a red dirt ground and with three additional sets of legs and feet of black children next to her (Fig. 3, @yoquierotrinajoy, "A Few Days Ago"). The caption describes how this PCV does morning stretches and a group of kids started to join her. Other examples show off tan lines, vacation on

the beach, teaching kids to make friendship bracelets, and a first person perspective while using a squat toilet (@ordorachelis; @beardandbackpack, "Not Every Volunteer Wears Chacos"; @entropynivory). These images show us the volunteer's perspective of their body in a particular place and time. Although the framing allows for a first-person perspective where the viewer can imagine it is their own feet they appear to be looking down at, the point is still to curate how the viewer perceives the subject and contribute to the ongoing crafting of the self as a PCV. It is still a selfie, but the foot pose works slightly differently. The image is taken from within the body of the self, rather than a view of the body of the self. This further demonstrates how PCVs are performing the role of humanitarian for themselves as much as they are for the spectator.

Unlike traditional humanitarian messaging and charity campaigns, volunteers taking selfies "are not claiming to 'save the world' with a voluntourism programme…or to provide lifesaving drugs to women and child who need them through a purchase-linked donation of a RED product…to donate a pair of shoes to a shoeless child for each pair they sell you…They are in fact selling only themselves" (Richey 409). When a PCV takes and posts a selfie that shows them in their village, or with a goat, or on the beach, or with a group of local neighbors, the volunteer does so in order that audiences will perceive themselves in that moment, in a particular way: to govern themselves and demonstrate that they performing the role of a humanitarian correctly. Governmentality, when it comes to the self, is the result of employing these different types of practices or technologies. In short, Foucault defines technologies of the self as those "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection,



Figures 2 & 3. Screenshots of @giraffeattack14, "5 Hours at Victoria Falls" and @yoquierotrinajoy, "A Few Days Ago"

or immortality" (Foucault, *Technologies of the Self* 225). The irony is that in working on the self as a humanitarian and demonstrating this work through selfies, the selfie becomes a technology for disciplining oneself into the role of humanitarian. It is self-branding that is continuously performed by volunteers and this performance makes up the ethical substance of today's white savior. These poses get repeated over and over again by PCVs, continuously governing themselves to craft their self-brand and represent the self as the best version of how a PCV

should look. Selfies force volunteers to self-monitor their behavior in a way that disregards the impact of such behavior beyond the narrative that is virtually told and digitally communicated to their Instagram followers.

Dressing like a local

From my own experience as a PCV, I recall preparing for the swearing-in ceremony at the end of our 3-month, in-country training. Because part of the mission in Peace Corps is cultural exchange, it was normal for volunteers to purchase local fabric and have clothing made in traditional, native styles to wear for the ceremony. When looking at photographs now on Instagram of PCVs in native dress, I see that these images add to the broader discourse of white saviorism and self-branding practices. The practice of dressing like the Other curates the brand of the white savior more than simply encountering them or witnessing them. This act says that a white savior goes outside the comforts of home and what is familiar to take on local culture not as a tourist, but as one who can assimilate and become immersed not just as one *with* the Other but *as* the Other. This story being told and displayed by the PCV erases the racial, cultural, political, and societal relations of power and ignores the historical implications of such actions. The privileged, entitled positionality of the volunteer is overlooked because of the compassionate willingness to become *like* the Other, believing equality can be established by such a simple, performative act.

Many of the #HowISeePC images depicting the PCV in local clothing take place at the swearing-in ceremony, much like my own experience, surrounded by fellow volunteers, Peace Corps staff, and host families (@brittanyinbenin; @jconleu; @gregsyerkes; @mattcermak; @wheninbenin). Other photos take place at local festivals and celebrations with the PCV participating in traditional dress (@rachelamerman), or while family members visit from

America (@emily_beth_santor), or simply at one's home to display a recent outfit they had tailored (@mollmatt). Further, striking similarities between corporate fashion branding and self-branding are also seen in these types of posts. In bell hooks' analysis of visual messages in fashion and advertising, she notes how white models posing in Egypt create "imperialist nostalgia at its best -- potent expression of longing for the 'primitive'" and goes on to argue that when white people "desire 'a bit of the Other'" it is to augment the "the blank landscape of whiteness" (29). Likewise, Sara Ahmed writes how "identity is reconstituted in an intimate relationship to 'the strange' and the exotic. The Western consumer is invited to 'go ethnic' through what she or he might eat, drink or wear" (116). While hooks and Ahmed are speaking more to the corporate commodification of ethnic culture, parallels can be drawn between how companies appropriate the Other and how individuals produce similar appeals for the purpose of crafting themselves as an ethical subject.

A PCV in Sierra Leone, for example, poses wearing a matching dress with a local woman from her site. She captions the image in a way that simultaneously speaks to and mocks an existing genre on Instagram of fashion bloggers, celebrities, and influencers who tag where their clothing, jewelry, and other commodities featured in the image come from, writing "Lapa chosen by Jattu. Style chosen by Jattu. Photo pose chosen by Jattu. She knows what's up 👌" (@laurelerobinson).[3] Posting these images on Instagram for a public audience reproduces the narrative that "while one denies accountability and historical connection by way of colonization and imperialism, white bodies visit the primitiveness of anachronistic spaces and are forever changed by this encounter with strangers" (Mason 832). Although the PCV in this example gives

[3] Lapa, or lappa, means brightly colored cloth in Sierra Leone.

credit to her friend Jattu, she does so to show her relation and proximity to Jattu. This produces a version of the PCV that she wants others to see and it works to further build her self-brand as a globally-diverse person.

In another example, a PCV in Panama posted nine photos that she describes with the caption, "Spent an incredible week in the Emberá-Wounaan territory of the Darien Jungle eating wild rabbits, dancing, parading, and playing games. What an unforgettable experience with amazing people. #howiseepc #peacecorpspanama #cuerpodepaz #emberá #wounaan" (@chiriquitalaurita). In one of the images, the volunteer poses with another white, female PCV. They are dressed in a brightly colored, floral print skirts and beaded tops, and wear a beaded collar necklace and earrings (Fig. 4). Their white skin is painted with dark lines and patterns as they smile toward the camera. Another photo shows several PCVs candidly sitting, standing, and squatting in the shade. They each have their skin similarly painted but the men, unlike the women, continue to dress in their American clothing of gym shorts and a t-shirt. The collection of other photos contained in this post include a number of images that seem to represent "native" Panamanians with painted skin, dancing, and participating in various ceremonial activities. This post demonstrates how the PCV can "try-on" the traditions and dress of a different culture to see what it looks like on her. It ignores the privileges that mark her body, allowing her to move into this space freely and use this culture's fashion to curate her self-brand.

The desire to be changed, impacted, and inspired by the Other involves not just interacting with but taking on the material dress and embodiment of them. Ahmed writes that commodity objects, in this case local attire, represent difference and "can allow you to alter the surface of the body" so that this difference of the Other "can become *your difference"* (117, emphasis original). Similarly, Sean Smith writes that "mimicking the lifestyle and/or clothing



Figure 4. Screenshot of @chiriquitalurita

of a local resident often reflects a pursuit of authenticity" but people are appropriating the "identity of those who call the destination home, effectively claiming the destination (temporarily) as their home, too" (183). The PCVs in these images take on difference as a way to brand the self and their journey as authentic, cultured, and global.

Posing with locals

PCVs interacting with local people is a regular occurrence among #HowISeePC images. While there is certainly overlap with the previously discussed poses of selfies and dressing like a local, the additional contexts and framing of photos with locals saturate the discourse. One of the most common images I found were of PCVs holding, surrounded by, or playing/dancing/laughing with local kids.

Many of the images with children are taken from a selfie perspective in which a white, female PCV is swallowed up by the faces of black children (Fig. 5). Yet others show a wider

frame of the PCV interacting with kids. In one post, a female PCV in Zambia wears sunglasses while seated on one side of a seesaw made from two trees (@adamgreenberg). Along the seesaw are six local Zambian children. The kids are looking in multiple directions, some turned facing the PCV, others turn away from the camera, and one child is reaching out their hand to wave directly at the camera. In another image posted by a different PCV in Zambia, two volunteers, both white women, are surrounded by nine Zambian children smiling, giving peace signs, or looking at the volunteers and the caption reads, "With some of my favorite humans I've met here #peacecorpszambia #howiseepc"(@k__del). While these images include people besides the volunteer, the post is still about the volunteer and their experience. The message communicates a positive representation about the life of impoverished youth. Further, the captions and viewer comments continue to center the volunteer's voice, experience, and perspective. Volunteers might identify the child by name or role, such as host family, little brother/sister, and write a quote or story about the person. More often than not, the children go unidentified and are described simply by the emotions felt by the volunteer, including feeling touched, overjoyed, and in love. Still others ignore the children completely in their captions and discuss a current project, progress of service, or other commentary unrelated to the people in the frame.

It is the relationship between light-skinned and dark-skinned bodies that is on display in these images. The innocence and vulnerability of the children becomes a trope for the volunteer to use for their self-branding as a compassionate, maternal or paternal white savior. It is, in fact, a reenactment of poses done by celebrities doing charity work for decades. For example, Raka Shome discusses how the humanitarian actions and behavior of Princess Diana set the stage for the "neoliberal logics of national identity and citizenly belonging" of white femininity. Shome coins the term "global motherhood" to describe the trend of "white Western women saving,

rescuing, or adopting international children through familial frameworks that recenter white Western (and particularly North Atlantic) heterosexual kinship logics" (*Diana* 112). The gendered nature of this behavior is worth noting. Photographs visually capture the actions of Diana and other female celebrities, circulate in the news or social media for audiences around the world to view, and perhaps inspire others to follow in their footsteps. As Shome notes, these moments in which white mothers are holding, comforting, and adopting children from the Global South erase the native mother. This actually reverses the "colonial-colonized relationship," in which the white women are "ironically dependent on the necessary failure of the nonwhite native mother" (*Diana* 133). In the images of PCVs with children, they appear to perform various familial roles. Like Shome's description, some images show the PCV intimately holding a small infant or toddler, much like a parent would. The majority of #HowISeePC images with kids, however, tend to portray the PCV more as the loving, caring older sibling through the playful energy in their poses and the captions describing how they have sincerely taken on the role of brother or sister. Although the frame is full of smiling faces, it is also obviously absent of the real caretakers in these children's lives. Parents and other older family members are not present in most of these images and the PCV uses this moment to brand the self as part of a global family. Inserting themselves into the lives of these children is part of the story to be told on social media, so that friends, family, Instagram followers, and volunteers themselves, can perceive the PCV in this light.

The weaving of femininity, maternity, and coloniality emerges through these very public, performative actions, resulting in the altruistic, female white savior. While PCVs on Instagram do not have celebrity status or a charitable connection, they continue to pose with black and brown children for their own self-serving purposes. Like Shome's analysis, the majority of

images I came across featured young, white women. There are certainly exceptions to this, including men and PCVs of different races. However, it is clear that the face of Peace Corps, or humanitarian and development work in general, is that of young, white women. Koffman et al. describe this trend as the "girl-powering of development [discourse] and humanitarianism," in which corporate and government funded policies and interventions are gendered and marketed by focusing on the simultaneous capacity and vulnerability of girls and women around the world (160). On a globally recognized level, Malala Yousafzai, a victim of patriarchal violence and now an advocate for human rights, is a dynamic example of this dual construction. Campaigns encourage women and girls to participate in a kind of humanitarianism that appeals to global sisterhood in which "the expression of solidarity is predicated on a refashioning of the self through consumption, self-broadcasting, self-branding, self-promotion, and media production" (Koffman et al. 161). For individual PCVs, the images that dominate the #HowISeePC category on Instagram are representative of these larger appeals to girl-power humanitarianism.

However, regardless of their gender, volunteers post images of themselves with locals as a way, to borrow from hooks, to add spice and seasoning to whitestream culture. Lisa Ann Richey looks at similar images posted on the dating app Tinder, writing that humanitarians "use anonymous photographs of people in the Global South to frame themselves as desirable and attractive…They are self-serving instead of selfless; they are displaying their 'exotic' companions instead of helping them; and they are enjoying poverty instead of weeping with its victims" (402). The brand of the white savior emerges as someone who surrounds themselves with the Other, in a positive, social, and adventurous way.



Figure 5. Screenshots from @myrandajames, “The term has ended”; klementine_; @marsuzleo; @grace.c.j

Beyond posing with children, the discourse is full of images that show PCVs in close proximity to other local people. Often these images are posed, with subjects looking right into the camera. For instance, PCVs stand with their host parents or show off a recent dish that they cooked with a local neighbor (@peacecorpseswatini, “Host Family Appreciation”; @peacecorpseswatini, “Peace Corps Eswatinisz on Instagram”; @peacecorpstanzania, “Here We Have”). In other instances, the photograph is captured candidly while the PCV is actively involved with a local villager or group of people, such as having a meeting, leading a training, shopping in a market, farming, or teaching in a classroom (@liannebronzo, “Our Bemba Tutor”; @peacecorpsliberia; @peacecorpstanzania, “The Trainees Have Started”; @emilyinkosova; @peacecorpscameroon; @samoaglow; @rachelemilyansley; @katecalhoun). In one post, a PCV

shares a collection of seven images that show her back to the camera while she stands and participates in a dance with a group of young adults from Malawi. The caption reads:

> I truly believe that until we can see each other as humans, as equals and all differences aside this world will remain the same. I believe that simply based on religion, complexion, geographic location, or family upbringing we are all equals. I believe that sharing laughter and smiles is the easiest way to break down boundaries. So next time the opportunity presents itself, stand next to a stranger, share and smile, and if they dance... dance with them. MW🌩🌍🧍#howiseepc #peacecorpsmalawi @peacecorpsmalawi @peacecorps (@colonative_93).

The two comments on @colonative_93's post say "This is beautiful!!" and "Love the braid!" Again, the central focus is the PCV's role, behavior, body, and position in the frame. Her caption flattens the material, socioeconomic differences that exist between herself and the people she is surrounded by, ignoring the privileges and affordances society gives to some but not to others. The post is a positive sentiment that adds to the ideology behind white savior discourse: that by believing we are equal and through relating to one another with smiles, laughter, and dance, one can change the world. Here we see the PCV as a global sister and best friend to the Other. With an optimistic attitude, the white savior can simply and swiftly brand her own solutions to today's global issues.

Returning to the post by @chiriquitalurita in the previous section, the first image is of the PCV and what is assumed to be a local, native Panamanian man (Fig. 6). The PCV is still dressed in local attire and with painted skin. The man has similarly drawn patterns on his brown skin and adorns himself with a green headband resembling small, circular coins, and a small beaded covering at his waist. The two appear to be standing in a structure made from bamboo

walls and bunches of green bananas can be seen in the background. There is no mention of who this man is in the caption, no name, title, or explanation of the volunteer's relationship to him. We assume he is one of the "amazing people" from the volunteer's caption.



Figure 6. Screenshot of @chiriquitalaurita.

These images, mixed in with young white people, presumably other PCVs, lend authenticity to local practices, but ultimately it is the PCV herself who is showcased. The other bodies in the photos are part of the narrative but are mere objects, used by the PCV to brand herself and requiring the spectator to make several assumptions as to who people are and why she is photographing them. Neither the other PCVs nor the Panamanian people have a voice, but it is the silencing of the native that points not only to hooks' "imperialist nostalgia" at work but also to the shift to positive representations of the Other.

Each of these images depicting the PCV interacting and relating to others is a visual example of what Barbara Heron calls the "paradox of the Other." When it comes to development

workers, Heron writes that "ongoing justifications to ourselves for our presence 'there' are contingent on repeated assertions of racialized difference or Othering that cannot be acknowledged as such in our *rappor à soi* (relation to the self) because we are not supposed to engage in the process of Othering. We want some African people to be subjects with whom we can form equal relations, and yet simultaneously we require Africans [to] take the position of Other" (150). That the PCV is engaging with the local people at all is more important than why, how, or who the other people are. It is the action being captured, proof that this PCV lived, worked, and interacted with local people on a regular basis, that helps build the white savior self-brand.

Documentation of Change

The trend of posting images on social media for self-gaining purposes is by no means limited to those who serve in the Peace Corps, go on mission trips, or participate in voluntourism. Yet, it seems especially heightened in this genre of visual rhetoric. Despite good intentions, Millennials' neoliberal belief in "individual empowerment" and their lack of faith in "governments' capacity to provide social good," leads them to take matters into their own hands, but for self-serving purposes (Gunnarsdottir and Mathers). Whether for future employment goals or marketing one's self to a potential hook-up on dating sites, publicly documenting one's own self-transformation during a service trip abroad is practiced as a form of care for the self. How we know ourselves, however, is not internal but based on the rules and principles that are considered truths in our society. These truths are typically deemed to be ethical and moral. In other words, an "ethical subject is a person who acknowledges socially constructed codes of conduct reinforced by power relations, but knows that she has some flexibility within these codes to conduct herself" (MacKay & Dallaire, 2013, p. 175). We see this play out through volunteers repeating similar

practices on social media that visually track one's self-development through physical and attitudinal changes.

Physical changes

With over 46 million images tagged #Transformation or #TransformationTuesday, a dominant way that people use Instagram is to document changes in or to their body. Images in this category trace weight loss journeys, pregnancies, gender transitions, diets, makeovers, hairstyle changes, and muscle growth. People often frame their post with before and after photos to highlight the contrasts and show how the individual is working on their personal development. Because this genre previously exists on Instagram, many PCVs participate in similar practices throughout their service, which encourages their audiences to read the posts in a similar way.

In #HowISeePC images, volunteers often post before and after images that depict a certain amount of time has passed and can be seen through various physical manifestations. The timeframe between images range from one or two years apart, typically from the beginning or day one of service in the Peace Corps to the present day. These side-by-side comparisons reveal the physical health status of the individual, but also tell a story about what being a humanitarian is about: becoming a better version of oneself. This could mean losing weight, getting in shape, or eating healthy, in other words, living up to Western ideals of male and female physical appearance (@sarahnieburg; @studdyluddy). For example, a PCV in Guinea documented the changes to her body by posting two photos from the same location, one year apart (Fig 7). The images show her in a swimsuit, standing in front of a rocky waterfall with trees and shrubs in the background. Her arms are outstretched and she smiles directly at the camera. In an act of reflection, she writes in the caption:

> One thing I've learned this year: Peace Corps is a place where you start to question everything you've ever known about yourself and your reality. You feel the world you've known come crashing down around you, and all that is left is confusion and chaos. But by the end of the chaos, you start to rebuild, little by little. You become a mentally, physically and emotionally better version of your former self. You become the person you never realized you needed to be. And today, I finally started to see myself in a different light. And I couldn't be happier. Same location, same date, same person- different year, different body, different outlook. #howiseepc #peacecorpsguinea #peacecorps #giveyourselftheworld #beyourownhero (@sarahnieburg).

In this volunteer's reflective post after one year of service, the transformation is about her, her body, and her mental attitude, rather than any transformation in the community she serves. There is no mention of any development work, training or education facilitated, or changes in the local economy or governmental policies. This is not to discredit or shame the transformation she has gone through personally but rather to highlight this connection between image, serving in the Peace Corps, and branding oneself. To be a PCV is to do work on one's self, not on others.

Other images show volunteers embracing their body for how they have gained weight and learning to love who they are not because of how they appear, even while ironically showing us images of their body and soliciting feedback in the form of social capital (@giraffeattack14, "Ya Girl Has Grown"). Beyond weight comparisons, volunteers document other changes or stories about their bodies. Female volunteers shave their heads, male volunteers grow beards, tan lines from sandals become more and more prominent (@beardsofpeacecorps; @bethiemagz; @ordorachelis). Many volunteers, at some point or another, are faced with an injury or illness of some sort and document this experience as well, be it cuts, bruises, insect bites, a cold, stomach

bug, or burns (@caldwelllois; @jennasuen; @sadie.botine). Visually and publicly demonstrating changes in one's body becomes a way for PCVs to care for the self in a way that is familiar. Social media reinforces this behavior through likes, comments, and shares. Overall, #HowISeePC images that document change center the embodied journey of the volunteer, how they are doing work on the self, and then branding that transformation for an audience.



Figure 7. Screenshot of @sarahnieburg "One thing I've learned"

For today's PCV, being an ethical humanitarian is not solely about serving others, helping those in need, or alleviating suffering. It is not even about upholding the principles of peacebuilding, development, and progress. Rather, the work of development and the role of humanitarian is shown on the body. Documenting losing weight or the formation of new tan lines is a way for PCVs to do work on themselves and also serve as evidence of the work they are doing for others. These are performances for spectators as well as practices that influence one's own construction as someone who upholds these principles.

Attitude/worldview changes depicted through tourism

Jokingly described at times as "Posh Corps," many images posted by PCVs look like they belong in a tourist brochure. Certainly volunteers serve in tropical areas in the Global South and along the equator, or in mountainous regions of Asia and Eastern Europe, where travel to tourist destinations is common and accessible to them. It is also not a surprise that PCVs document this stage in their Peace Corps experience, given that Instagram lends itself to and is saturated with travel photography. Almost three-fourths of users ages 18-30 claim to use Instagram during travel and marketers claim that the platform is vital to the dreaming phase of travel planning (Smith).

Photographs show the volunteer splashing under waterfalls, hiking in the jungle or up a snowy mountain, walking or lounging along sandy beaches, swinging or ziplining over a giant valley, posing in front of yachts, going on safari, or snorkeling in the ocean (@myrandajames, "Thrilled Its the Weekend."; @numinousadventures; @fair_estofthemall; @beardandbackpack, "Coming down the Mountain"; @paaaige_g; @postcardsfromkhia; @phoebenishimoto; @live.adventure.liz; @mckenzietheisen; @myrandajames, "Always Travel with Friend"; @peopleofpeacecorps; @rachelleighwalz). What is interesting is that they continue to tag these images as part of the Peace Corps experience. Probably because it is. PCVs get vacation days and are encouraged, at the institutional level, to participate in local tourism activities. Getting to take time off from volunteering to travel and explore is normalized through these images. It highlights the privilege of the volunteer living in their assigned location by how easily they can leave it, an option the PCV is more likely than their local neighbors to have. Further, it magnifies the fact that PCVs are, by definition, only temporary residents in their country and continent of

service. Taking and posting these types of images builds the volunteer's brand not just as a humanitarian, but as a world traveler and global citizen.

A plethora of #HowISeePC images that capture travel and tourism by the volunteer use a combination of back portraits and the trope of the "promontory witness" (Smith). In #HowISeePC images, back portraits center the PCV walking down a dirt path or overlooking a vast, wide-open landscape, such as mountains, a valley, body of water, or a cliff, while vibrant colors of the lush flora surround and enhance the focal point of the image: the volunteer. The person may be standing or sitting, arms on their sides, wrapped around their legs, or outstretched above their head in a "Y" shape. Captions describe the breathtaking beauty of the view, falling in love with one's new "home," and finding peace/joy/stillness and becoming the best version of themselves during Peace Corps service.

While photographers and artists are often trained to approach subjects from the front, others choose a vantage point from behind the subject. Some liken this positioning to voyeurism or timidity but others believe it to be an ethical and compelling way to photograph (Feinstein). Framing images this way "flirts with the power of mystery and provokes questions over an often-neglected feature: the back" (Ming). Hiding a subject's face not only hides their identity but also their emotions, which tell spectators how to view or interpret the image. By capturing a subject from behind, images convey very different meanings and leave viewers asking questions. Photographers describe how back-portraits allow for subjects to become stand-ins for ourselves, create a double gaze in which we are watching someone watch something else, and cause viewers to project their own perceptions, emotions, or memories onto the image (Feinstein). In landscape photography, placing an observer in a back-portrait pose helps to convey emotions of

tranquility, contemplation, or serenity, and adds “layers of contrast, depth, and scale” to the image (Richardson).

For example, in one image, a volunteer in Tanzania sits on a grassy perch, overlooking a valley with mountains in the distance and bright blue sky with puffy white clouds overhead. Her caption is a quote from American singer Jon Bellion’s song, “Stupid Deep” that reads, “what if where I've tried to go was always here, and the path I've tried to cut was always clear” (@giraffeattack14, “What if”). In an almost identical image, a different PCV describes how Mozambique is now home to her (@hannah_9294). Different countries, different volunteers, this image is repeated over and over again in #HowISeePC images as a way to brand themselves as contemplative world-travelers reflecting on their changed outlooks and appreciations for life (Fig. 8). Accompanying the images, many of the captions tend to reference the volunteers’ personal growth and self-improvement. These posts again act to demonstrate, both to themselves and their audience, how the volunteer is caring for the self.

However, it is not just the back-portrait that accomplishes this notion of authenticity. PCVs are also engaging in what Sean Smith calls the “promontory witness” trope, in which the human subject is shown as a “small and indomitable figure standing fearless against the epic scale of nature” (180). The spectacle of the landscape connects back to colonial paintings and photographs, surveying foreign land to be dominated and acquired. Drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell, Smith writes that landscapes are “akin to the ‘dreamwork’ of imperialism, where narratives of power and expansion are extolled through both metaphor and realist portrayals of conquered territory” (180). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, visual depictions that show the exotic, Eden-like locations of the Global South were noted for the “prevailing *vacancy* of the landscape” which lacked local inhabitants as a “method by which Europeans imaginatively

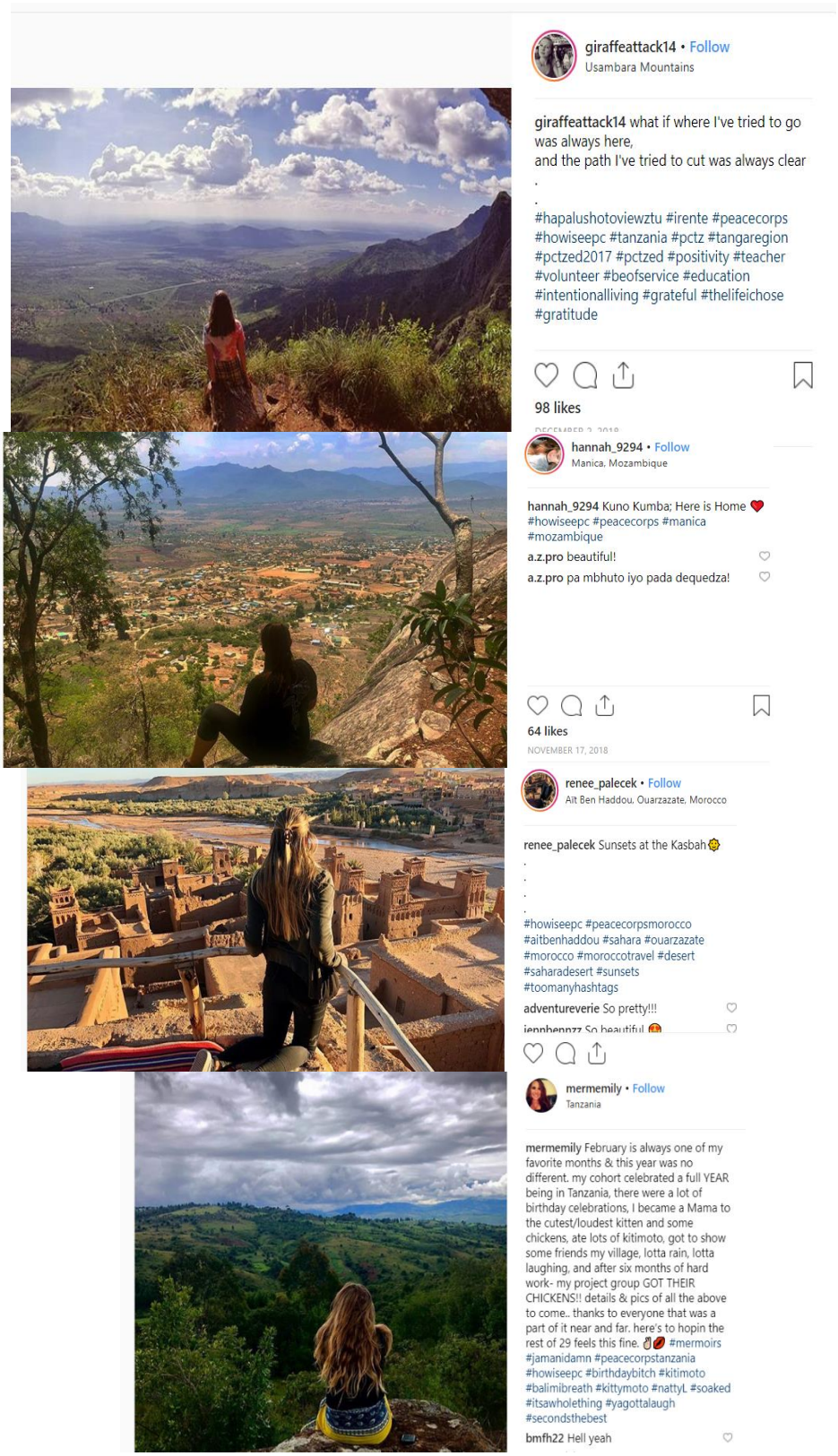


Fig. 8 Screenshots of @giraffeattack14, “What if”; @hannah_9294; @renee_palecek; @mermemily

established their presence" (Smith 177). This indicated to observers that the land appeared to be for the taking. Inserting a human subject into the center of the frame as a witness who is looking over the landscape produces not just a colonial gaze but "is indicative, at once, of the metaphysical solace delivered by the view as well as alluding to mastery of the scene beheld" (Smith 180).

The volunteers in these #HowISeePC images reproduce the promontory witness as a neocolonial white savior. This shifts the purpose of the image away from a tone that conveys "this is mine, a place for my future empire" to "look at me, in this exotic place." The image brands the volunteer as a world traveler, "whose unexamined privilege guarantees their visa and right to occupy that infrastructure even as the infrastructure displaces local residents" (Smith 180). It is the combination of land and the volunteer looking out over it that brands the white savior as simultaneously not from this place yet entitled to be there. Instagram is the perfect stage for PCVs to brand themselves as citizens of the world, capturing the ways they transform and are transformed by the landscapes in front of them in yet another act of caring for the self.

Objectifying the Other's Body

In the previous two sections, I focused on how the PCV centers their own body in an act of self-branding ethical subjects. In this final section, I turn toward images posted in #HowISeePC that feature the body of the Other, without the volunteer pictured inside the frame. Drawing from visual culture, postcolonial theory, and critical whiteness studies, I claim there is a distinct *white savior gaze* that looks at the Other in a way that is distinct from previous theorizations, including the male gaze, the colonial gaze, and the white gaze. While Mulvey's notion of the male gaze focuses primarily on gender, in which women are looked at as the passive, sexual objects of male

desire, I am interested in ways we can expand studying the gaze to include the racial and neocolonial power dynamics of observing, watching, and looking.

In hooks' work on spectatorship in the media, she writes simply yet profoundly, "There is power in looking" (115). She points out the paradoxical beliefs and behavior of most white people when it comes to race and the act of looking in a way that directly connects to current practices on social media in white savior discourse. For instance, when white people learn that they are being observed by black people with a "critical 'ethnographic' gaze," it disrupts the white, liberal belief in the "myth of sameness" that says "we are all just people" and therefore ways of looking that focus on differences are offensive (167). At the same time, white supremacist society has controlled the black gaze for centuries, punishing black people for looking and denying them subjectivity while believing "there is no representation of whiteness in the black imagination" (168-169). White bodies can move through the world in a way that is safe and protected, without giving thought to if differently raced bodies are watching. The visibility of black bodies, however, is controlled by white society. On one hand, they can be rendered invisible to white society but on the other hand, are subjected to abuse, appropriation, and surveillance. Similarly, George Yancy refers to the *white gaze* for how white people "'see' the Black body through the medium of historically structured forms of 'knowledge' that regard it as an object of suspicion" (3). While I don't intend to set up a simple binary of white and black bodies, I open this section with hooks' and Yancy's work to connect the ways that bodies are treated in our own society and how that gets translated by the PCV upon entering their country of service.

PCVs are raised in the social context like that described by hooks and Yancy, but in order to perform the role of humanitarian must learn to look with a white savior gaze. Unlike Yancy's

white gaze, which fears the racialized Other, or the colonial gaze, which acts to conquer or exoticize the Other, the white savior gaze perpetuates a naïve innocence and belief in one's good intentions to justify the practice of photographing the Other and doing so for one's own self-branding purposes. The white savior gaze manifests from Mariana Ortega's notion of white feminism's "loving, knowing ignorance." Ortega argues that "we may find the [white] feminist who wants to perceive lovingly, who wants to see women of color in their own terms, does not want to homogenize them, does not want to be coercive with them, does not want to use them but who, despite her well intentions, turns women of color into something that can be used to further her own desire" (Ortega 61).

Among the #HowISeePC posts that center the Other, visuals and captions often focus on the labor and emotions of the subject. Interpreted or translated by the PCV, the local or native subjects are often portrayed in simplified, sometimes patronizing ways. For example, in a post by a volunteer serving in Zambia, we see an older Zambian couple standing outside in front of lush green trees and a bright, blue sky (Fig 9). The man, on the right, wears a plaid button-down shirt and the woman is donning a head wrap and dress in traditional African fabric. Both are reaching out to one another from the side with big smiles. As the man looks up, the woman is looking directly at the camera, missing several of her bottom teeth. In the caption, the PCV writes:

> We spend every Tuesday morning with them. This was a beautiful moment, but I can't say she's always this happy. She usually tells long stories involving death and pain - she's lived a tough life. We've tried asking questions so she could recall some happier moments, which helps temporarily. The only time I've seen her this happy was when she began singing "I Want to Hold your Hand". We'll show up next Tuesday with an arsenal

> of music. Truly, they are two people I'll never forget. (@liannebronzo, “We spend every Tuesday”)

This example shows how the PCV is portraying the Other lovingly but ignorantly. She describes the uniqueness of this joyful moment by vaguely referring to the subject’s pain and then quickly discussing her own tactics for helping to solve the woman’s emotional problems. Nowhere do we learn the names of these two people. They are not given a voice or the agency to tell their own story and solve their own problems but are spoken for by the PCV who actively and simplistically comes to the rescue. The white savior gaze believes in seeing the best in Others while remaining blissfully ignorant of the racist and colonial implications within their post. The photograph of this couple, and the caption accompanying it, are not trying to raise funds for a charity or tell this couple’s story to a news agency. Posts such as this are yet another act in crafting one’s brand. The volunteer communicates her version of the relationship as a way to influence how she sees herself and to perform as the ethical white savior for her followers.



Figure 9. Screenshot of @liannebronzo “We spend every Tuesday”

Like the selfie, one of the most common subjects to photograph is again the child. In a stark contrast to Kevin Carter’s *Vulture Watching Starving Child*, these images show individual children and groups of children in positive, joyful moments, often smiling directly into the

camera and posing. For example, in one post, a PCV in Swaziland photographed a 4-year old black toddler squatting down in front of a wall with an ombre gradation from the reddish-brown dirt to the speckled tan plaster (Fig. 10). His arms are wrapped behind his knees as he smiles a wide, toothy grin at the camera. He wears sandals, blue jeans, a white tank top, and a black baseball hat that sits sideways on his head. The style of the boy's clothing is not unlike what we see in the U.S. or other societies in the Global North among urban, hip-hop, and black culture. The stark, crisp whiteness of his shirt contrasts with the dusty ground he squats on. His smile, apparently in mid-laugh, reveals his perfectly straight, white teeth as his eyes crinkle with delight. He appears happy and joyful in being photographed. The caption reads:

> Everyone meet bhuti wami (my brother) Melo. I come home from classes every day to a flying hug, and him yelling AUNTIE at the top of his lungs. He's been my buddy since the beginning, and as my SiSwati improves, I'm finally starting to understand him when he talks. He's just as smart, sweet, and sassy as any 4 year old I've ever known. I'll miss him a ton when I finish training and move to my permanent site. #peacecorpseswatini #howiseepc #g16simunye (@_mandasursely)

Other Instagram users commented on the post, writing "I just cried wow," "I NEED TO SQUEEZE HIS FACE HES SO CUTE," and "oooohh i love this sisi😈" (@_mandasursely). The volunteer's description centers her side of the relationship with the child and what she gets out of it. The comments reinforce her actions of posting the image, gushing over the cuteness of the child like they might with a friend's newborn baby. But this is not a newborn baby of a friend. Here, a mostly anonymous child is presented by the PCV to be consumed by a white, American audience in an act to produce a particular version of the self. Familiarity with his clothing makes him relatable to American aesthetics of blackness. Yet, his African-ness

exoticizes him in a way that is unproblematized among the discourse. The boy becomes visible in this frame, on this platform, connected to this user's account, frozen in time and space. It was the choice of this PCV to post the image of his body and face publicly. But beyond the brief caption, we don't know anything else about the child. Is it our right to know? Do we even want to know? In the end, what matters is that the PCV is able to use the body and image of the Other to craft her self-brand as an ethical humanitarian.



Figure 10. Screenshot of @_mandasurely

In looking at not just interactions with the Other, but specifically photographing the Other, it is no wonder that the phrase "take a photo" exists. We are *taking* something from someone or some place when we photograph them. Sontag draws comparisons between photography and war, writing that "Shooting a subject and shooting a human being" exist on the same continuum (66). Based on #HowISeePC images, and the hashtag itself, PCVs are entitled to *capture* photographs, and therefore capture the bodies within them, because of their privileged race and positionality. Of course, it is not just the production and circulation of these images that

is problematic. The white savior gaze relies on audiences to consume the discourse just as much as they work to produce it. Ariella Azoulay argues that there is an "ethics of the spectator" to acknowledge who is recognized as a citizen and who is silenced (130). Put simply, we can begin with asking who is made visible and who is made invisible in white savior discourse. Throughout the #HowISeePC images, we learn a lot about the experiences and perspectives of the volunteers but not much else. The practice of the PCV being able, entitled even, to take photographs of Others and use them for the purpose of building their brand online says just as much about us as spectators, willing to consume and accept the behavior as normal, as it does about the volunteer.

The New Ethical Substance of Today's White Savior

Taking the collection of #HowISeePC Instagram posts analyzed here as a whole, I understand these images to mean more than just a form of documenting one's experience in the Peace Corps. Further, they function differently than previous forms of humanitarian discourse by serving as a way not to represent one's morals but rather as the ethical substance in and of itself. Foucault defines ethical substance as how one determines which part of one's self is subject to morality and judgment. Ethics ask, "Which is the aspect or the part of myself or my behavior which is concerned with moral conduct?" (Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics" 263). For the white savior, the answer to this question is not that self-branding as a humanitarian is an expression or representation of one's morals but rather that the image and brand *is* the framework, the ethical substance of the white savior. Service for others is the story we tell ourselves, to craft ourselves. But it is this crafting, the production of our image and brand, that makes up the ethics of today's humanitarian. In other words, it is just not the act of building a school but posting about that act on social media which concerns today's white savior.

Self-branding as an ethical substance is a new iteration of the various historical strands of visual discourse in colonialism. Previously, humanitarians and missionaries had spiritual or religious aspirations that drove them to believe white saviorism was moral and ethical. Colonizers were often driven by economic desires and exploration fantasies. Foucault perceives actions as moral not simply because they are following a rule or law, but because they involve a relationship with the self. This relationship, he argues, is:

> Not simply 'self-awareness' but self-formation as an 'ethical subject,' a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* 28).

Rather than land acquisition, domination over others, or relieving suffering, today's white savior is aimed at creating their best image and brand.

In this chapter I traced the shifts in traditional humanitarian communication from negative appeals and the discourse of suffering to positive appeals, borrowing on others' suffering to brand the self as an ethical subject. Posting about one's experience as a PCV requires self-regulation and practicing certain behaviors that correctly perform the values and morals of what it means to be and look like a humanitarian. The body of the volunteer is vital to this aspect of branding, reproducing conventionalized poses, tropes, frames, and perspectives that are communicated as authentic. Further, objectifying Others' bodies through the white savior gaze is performed as an innocent act by someone who means well but is often ignorant of or unconcerned by the neocolonial, neoliberal complications that their actions bring.

Overall, the images and posts categorized by #HowISeePC are representative of the larger white savior discourse on social media. Outside of Peace Corps, many other humanitarians, missionaries, voluntourists, and development workers similarly use Instagram and personal photography to curate their self-brand. Choosing to visually brand themselves within the discourse is not to say that these individuals are intentionally participating in white saviorism or claiming an identity as a white savior. Rather, they are repeatedly documenting their experiences in a public, performative act to influence how others see them and how they see themselves: as ethical subjects. In the next chapter, I look at the implications of Instagram users who consciously and intentionally take up white savior discourse and use the white savior gaze in an ironic, satirical form to call out the complex and problematic consequences within these practices.

Chapter 2: I'm a Barbie Girl, In a Savior World

> *Dear child,*
>
> *You inspire me. You inspire me to be the best person to myself and I guess everyone around me, even my frenemies. But mostly myself… I am sorry to tell you that there is a very small chance we are ever going to meet again. I have a lot of other children to take selfies with... I could keep on talking, but I want you to know there is hope. It's me. But I have to catch a bus..... #dearwhitesavior #kenyanot*
>
> \- @BarbieSavior, 22 March 2018

Life in plastic, it's fantastic. Especially when you are saving the world one orphan at a time, according to Instagram's Barbie Savior. A cultural icon for decades, Barbie is the girl who can do anything she sets her mind to. Developed in 1959 by Ruth Handler, co-founder of Mattel Corporation, in 1959, the blonde, plastic doll has had an almost infinite array of outfits, careers, and adventures (*The History of Barbie*). So, if Barbie can be an astronaut, a soccer player, a veterinarian, or a police officer, would it be far-fetched for Mattel to create a Peace Corps Barbie or Christian missionary Barbie?

Barbie is one of the most internationally recognized toys, marketed in over 150 countries and "placed head to toe, Barbie dolls and family members sold since 1959 would circle the earth more than seven times" (Engin 22). She embodies the unrealistic, ideal standards of beauty and femininity in American society and is often criticized for her lack of diversity. Even while she travels the globe, celebrates international holidays, and has multi-ethnic friends, the message is clear: "Barbie always remains faithful to those who buy into the prevailing idea that the best thing to be is white, skinny, blonde, glamorous, rich, mainly apolitical and heterosexual" (Engin 25). When Mattel Corporation launched Barbie in India, rather than producing an Indian or South Asian Barbie, they simply dressed up the Euro-American doll in a sari and sent her

traveling through, making herself at home across “exotic borders” (Grewal 81). This romanticizing and commodifying of culture through travel and tourism is rooted in colonialism and simply manifested through transnational economies today (Grewal). And yet, Barbie as a brand still represents empowerment and independence for each child who picks her up to play, creating an imaginary world where anything is possible.

While there may not be an *actual* line of white savior Barbies coming out anytime soon, the Instagram account called Barbie Savior offers a playful critique on today’s humanitarian practices through the use of this fictional icon. Emily Worrall co-created the Barbie Savior Instagram account as a parody to the ongoing trend of white saviorism found on social media. Carefully constructed images show the white, femininely dressed doll holding hands with black Barbie children in front of a backdrop of red dirt roads, grass huts, and squat toilets. Worrall writes original captions with the images that satirically describe Barbie Savior’s sacrifices, such as giving up Pumpkin Spice Lattes and Ugg Boots, to do the hard work of a Christian missionary in Africa. Worrall’s inspiration to create Barbie Savior came from her own experiences living in Uganda and realizing that “the last thing Africa needed was another American-led NGO” (“Hosts”). The account now has over 166,000 followers and has been featured on various media outlets, including BBC, NPR, and Huffington Post highlighting both positive reactions and criticisms from the public.

As a platform for self-branding, Instagram provides filtering tools for users to alter the color, brightness, sharpness, and shading of their photographs. So, what happens when the discourse of white saviorism is altered not only through a visual filter but an ideological one? Worrall capitalizes on the fact that the ethical substance of today’s white savior is posting about

the self on social media. She uses the exact same frames, tropes, and practices but with an ironic filter.

The internet is rich with comics, humorists, and trolls producing content simply to provoke others and get a reaction. Although trolling can have political significance, what Worrall is doing acts differently than the trickster notions so often found in online trolls (Phillips). She looks toward creating societal changes rather than simply antagonizing online communities. Worrall takes advantage of both the corporate brand of Barbie, where audiences are able to instantly identify who Barbie Savior is, and the self-branding aspirations of Instagram users. The difference is how Barbie Savior's performance not only mimics but critiques these practices.

In studying white saviorism and self-branding on social media, I am interested in how the use of irony and satire impacts the discourse. To frame my research, I draw on Kenneth Burke's notion of "perspective by incongruity" as the basis for both how and why Barbie Savior communicates her message. Burke describes his idea as the comic corrective, effective when connecting previously unassociated or unlinked words, similar to a comedic pun. In the case of Barbie Savior, the spectator is familiar with the types of images being produced, but there is something off, something incongruent with having a doll as the focal point and main subject. Worrall uses Burke's comic corrective in hopes of enabling "people *to be observers of themselves, while acting.* Its ultimate [purpose] would not be passiveness, but *maximum consciousness*" (171 emphasis original). In other words, Worrall aims to spark conversation about the problems surrounding white saviorism by reflecting a comical version of the carefully curated self-branded humanitarian back onto the audience who creates these images in earnest.

Seeing Barbie Savior at the center of the frame confronts our expectations of what an ethical humanitarian subject on Instagram looks like, shifting from authenticity to plasticity,

from a sense of self-branding to corporate branding, and from familiar Instagram filtering to an ironic tone. Barbie Savior increasingly blurs the ironic with the real in a way that is familiar to a postmodern audience. Anyone who has watched The Daily Show or Colbert Report has a good sense of what this looks like in a performative context, where the ironic and serious are virtually indistinguishable. The relationship between Worrall as creator and Barbie Savior as subject of the account is important to distinguish here. Worrall intentionally parodies white saviorism in order to critique it while Barbie Savior is more ambivalent by how she simultaneously participates in and is understood through the very discourse Worrall aims to disrupt. Throughout this chapter I look at how this relationship functions in both intended and unintended ways.

In this chapter, I analyze Barbie Savior's various posts, including the images, captions, hashtags, and viewer comments, to understand Worrall's use of three rhetorical strategies that lead her to a perspective by incongruity: mimicry, satirical composition, and hyperbolic representation. By employing these strategies, Barbie Savior mocks, critiques, participates in, and perpetuates the discourse. While some groups use perspective by incongruity as an approach to fight for social justice or create political change, Worrall uses it in an over-the-top, ridiculous manner that reveals the flaws and problems within humanitarian discourse. My point in this chapter is not that Worrall stops the discourse or creates lasting social change but rather that she draws on the same exact self-branding tactics in this particular context. In fact, this ironic self-brand is already built into today's young adult way of understanding the self.

In what follows, I discuss the overarching concept of irony as it relates to branding, perspective by incongruity, and social change. I then contextualize Barbie Savior in relation to other humorous content online and demonstrate how she strategically uses mimicry, satirical composition, and hyperbolic representation. I conclude that despite Worrall's intended criticism,

the use of Barbie Savior's ironic branding and comic framing relies on the very discourse she aims to disrupt, creates ambiguity, and proliferates the images and discourse of white saviorism.

Ironic Self-Branding

If we understand from chapter one that self-branding is the careful curation and construction of how one represents themselves online, what happens when we add irony to these acts and practices? In this section, I dig deeper into how irony functions for dual purposes, in creating communities, and with an element of self-reflexivity. I further discuss how the incongruity that emerges out of irony is used intentionally by social activists.

Irony is often used to get a laugh and to change people's thinking. Amber Day writes how "one of the consistent hallmarks of the newer forms of irony, parody, and satire...is their striking seriousness of purpose, where irony is put to use in the service of real political aims, pointing to flaws in the existing political discussion and gesturing toward possible solutions" (4–5). Day studies the works of Stephen Colbert, John Stewart, and Michael Moore to demonstrate the intricate, complex ways that politics and comedy merge in today's digital, mediated society. Incorporating real issues, people, and events into the comedic act gives power to the humor itself, according to Day. Her work focuses on performative examples from TV and film, but also points out how advances in digital technologies makes ironic critique easy. In our daily lives, we often see ironic images and messages as we scroll through Facebook, Instagram, email, YouTube, or Reddit. Access to this content is hardly a barrier and Day argues that "the manufactured quality of public life has made expressions of serious earnestness somewhat suspect. One could argue that new technologies have been central to provoking this situation by helping to turn public life into highly managed spectacle; however, these technologies are equally being mobilized as means of critiquing and deconstructing that spectacle" (24). Barbie

Savior is engaging with irony to simultaneously make fun of and point out the problems with self-branding as the ethical substance, and spectacle, of white saviorism. To do this effectively requires the audience to have a sense of familiarity with the discourse and how irony works.

Irony is successful when the creator and receiver "share particular assumptions and cultural cues" (Day 40). Without this common knowledge, the joke may be lost or misinterpreted by audiences. This interestingly creates an "insider" group for those who understand and appreciate the irony and an "outsider" group that is left confused, ambivalent, or offended. As Claire Colebrook writes, irony "relies on assumed norms and values" for the audience to understand and recognize that what is said is not what is meant (16). Further, Day points out, groups who make meaning through irony can only do so in existing discursive communities with shared cultural, political, and social intentions and understandings. Social media sites like Instagram and YouTube create such communities when people can discover, follow, and share material that is funny to them but may not be to others outside of a certain context or identity group.

One way to ensure irony is successful is when the audience can personally relate to the opposing tensions being expressed. Burke claims that "True irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside of him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him" (Burke and Gusfield 257–58, emphasis original). This makes sense given both my own experience blogging about the development field, now wanting to interrogate the current behaviors of social media users, as well as Barbie Savior's creator Emily Worrall's career working in various NGOs in Uganda also wanting to engage with critiquing online white savior discourse. We analyze and critique, each in our own way, because we are not just making fun of *them*, those who actively

do the earnest posting of selfies, but because *we are them as well*. Being self-reflexive of past behaviors does not change the effects of having previously participated in contributing to the discourse of white saviorism. It is ironic and perhaps even hypocritical to acknowledge the faults in others' behavior, and yet, reflexivity, be it through rhetorical analysis or social critique, is part of what makes irony function. Spectators scrolling through Barbie Savior's images understand the joke because they know the person in the frame whom Barbie represents: them. Worrall could not make the joke without the earnest posts on Instagram already in existence, simultaneously relying on her audience to connect the two but also wanting to challenge or stop the persistence of the discourse. In short, Worrall depends upon the very discourse she wants to critique.

Irony is a rhetorical tool to help achieve Burke's perspective by incongruity. Expressing one thing but meaning another is the most basic form of irony and also represents an incongruous relationship. This happens, Burke describes, in an act of "verbal 'atom-cracking,'" where a "word belongs by custom to a certain category -- and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category" (Burke 308). He gives us a visual example, imagining the moral or aesthetically congruent relationship between a table and a chair. To create an incongruous relationship, one would need to think outside the box in a way that shifts our views or understanding. For example, one could turn the chair upside down or an image might show a man sitting at the table with a mannequin instead of another human. The result, Burke explains, is a "perspective with interpretive ingredients" (311). Although grounded in literary traditions, several scholars have applied this concept to visual, embodied, and other rhetorical acts.

Some social activist groups have found ways to utilize perspective by incongruity as a strategy for protest and social change by using irony and humor together. Known by Burke as the comic frame, this form of perspective by incongruity was used by ACT UP activists to create an alternative to situations typically calling for a tragic frame, such as the AIDS epidemic (Christiansen and Hanson). Rather than depicting people living with AIDS as victims, which is what most people would expect for such a serious situation, ACT UP activists dressed up as religious clergy and clowns, made posters and signs with ironic, obscene images or phrases, and created a protest atmosphere that was carnivalesque. Christiansen and Hanson write that this strategy allowed for protestors to "debunk the tragic frame" and instead use a comic frame to focus on the "capacity for laughter" and change the viewpoint of "gays as scapegoats" (158). Further, they claim that this was effective in changing people's perspectives, finding common values, and reclaiming agency within groups suffering from oppression.

Similarly, Anne Demo describes how the comic frame that comes out of perspective by incongruity "offers a corrective to the inequities of the present system while working within the existing social structure" (245). For example, in her study on the feminist art activist group the Guerrilla Girls, Demo explains how they use strategies of incongruity to reposition patriarchal norms through exaggerations of femininity, centering the logic of women as objects in art, and "subverting traditional definitions of the artist" (245). By playing into the stereotypes that surround women in the art world and exposing the contradictions that exist, Demo finds that the Guerrilla Girls re-brand and redefine feminism at the intersection of irony and comedy.

ACT UP and the Guerrilla Girls created not only a spectacle through incongruous elements that confronted audiences' expectations but also used humor to redefine the narrative that was being told about them and reclaim agency within oppressed groups. Both groups relied

on embodied, live performative acts but how do these tactics translate to digital forms of activism and social criticism online? It is important to note that because of the nature of the internet, messages meant for a particular community often get circulated outside of and beyond that originally intended audience. As Phillips and Milner write, humor on the internet is ambivalent, not in the sense of indifference but rather in this "simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed" kind of way (10). Expression online can be interpreted in multiple ways and therefore is difficult to pin down one singular purpose or intention. The internet itself is a place for weird content, "silliness, satire, and mischief" but each of these things are relative, meaning that they might be described as weird by one person and normal by another (Phillips and Milner 9). The internet encourages this type of divergent interpretation due to the layers of individual, collective, and wide-scale interactions, motivations, and affordances. These factors, when using irony, influence how the people interpret and understand the message.

In what he calls "the irreverent internet," Tim Highfield describes how online culture encourages adaptation and mixing or re-mixing media texts, such as memes, "spoof trailers, mash-ups, literal lyric videos and other irreverent participatory practices" which are successful when they combine "different, dissimilar texts and contexts to create new content or commentary" (2030). For example, Twitter accounts that parody real people, such as Queen Elizabeth II, or fictional characters, such as Lord Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* series, and actively engage in or comment on actual current crises, politics, and social issues, may be viewed by other social media users as comedic, offensive, just for fun, a critique of sorts, or some combination thereof (Highfield). Parody social media accounts assume the perspective and voice of the person or organization they are poking fun at in order to emphasize satirical commentary

and discredit the real person or actual organization (Wan et al.). Social media invites a form of participation that welcomes creativity, playfulness, and irreverence.

So, how and why do parody accounts emerge? Wan et al. claim that they are created (a) in response to an "event that causes public ridicule" (b) "when smoldering issues are mishandled," or (c) "when there is an information vacuum" (383). With Barbie Savior, Worrall is responding to the humanitarian discourse that remains in a vacuum and gets perpetuated without being challenged or questioned. Worrall parodies the numerous humanitarians, missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, and voluntourists who naïvely contribute to ongoing discourse of white saviorism. While there is still a notion of performance, much like ACT UP and the Guerrilla Girls, this shift to a digital platform makes the message more ambivalent than an embodied act. To understand how Barbie Savior intentionally and irreverently parodies the white savior discourse, I now turn to the rhetorical strategies used by Worrall in creating her ironic, self-branded white savior.

Mimicry, Satirical Composition, And Hyperbolic Representation

The Barbie Savior Instagram account chronicles Barbie's journey as a Christian missionary from 2016 onward. Three years into her trip, Barbie Savior has overcome obstacles including battling malaria, managing her long-distance relationship with Ken, not being able to love as many orphans as she'd like, and not having enough bandwidth to download Beyoncé's "Lemonade" video. Her service projects have been quite successful and generous, providing high heels to those in need, exposing orphans to Peeps candy at Easter, collecting donations of white people's tears to combat the need for clean water, teaching English without any formal training or qualifications, introducing the "modern medicine" of essential oils to locals, painting villagers'

homes in more calming, Earth-tone colors, and having a dumpster-size container of snow delivered at Christmas.

In this section, I focus on three rhetorical strategies Worrall uses to create perspective by incongruity through Barbie Savior: first, I trace how Barbie Savior imitates white savior discourse by parodying tropes, poses, and posts by real people; next, I explain the way she composes each image with a satirical, kitschy aesthetic and strategic juxtapositioning; and third, I look at the use of hyperbole to portray self-branding and white saviorism as absurd, rather than heroic. Through this analysis, I reveal how Barbie Savior is simultaneously making fun of and critiquing the discourse of white saviorism and self-branding as an ethical substance. In short, I claim that Barbie Savior demonstrates the way white savior discourse continues to be conventionalized and reproduced as a way to brand the self, even while being critiqued, ridiculed, and mocked.

Mimicry

In the most basic way, Barbie Savior strategically mimics the discourse of white saviorism on Instagram. She poses the same way, snapping selfies and wearing native clothing. She frames herself with others in the same way. She utilizes the same tropes of children, self-transformation, and travel. As a rhetorical exercise, imitation has been around as long as Cicero and Aristotle (Clark). Of course, its value and function go beyond simply learning how to do something or craft oneself in a way inspired by others. Mimicry also has the potential to subvert that which one is imitating. To do so, Homi Bhabha writes, "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence;* in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (126). So, mimicry goes a step further than just imitation. By adding an element of difference, mimicry produces a rhetorical effect that shifts people's perspectives.

From a feminist standpoint, Demo draws on Luce Irigaray to write how mimicry can expose the incongruities within society while not being confined or reduced to its norms. Barbie Savior does just that. By mimicking missionaries, voluntourists, humanitarians, PCVs, and development workers on Instagram, she reveals the conflicting ideologies and behaviors at work both on and offline.

Barbie Savior's mimicry involves a parodic adaptation to the original forms of white saviorism I discussed in the previous chapter. Drawing on scholars Linda Hutcheon, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Deb Margolin, Lindsay Gratch defines parody as "the creative adaptation of a text that has explicitly changed the form and/or content of the source text, and in doing so acknowledges the complex set of forces at work in the adaptation. By adapting a text to celebrate and/or critique it, a parody asserts its producers position in relation to said text" (9). Initially, the public speculated on who was behind the account as Barbie Savior's creators originally remained anonymous. Worrall has since come out publicly as one of the co-creators, writing on the Barbie Savior website that the idea for the account came about "by two friends who were simply tired of the acclaim of the White Savior on social media. It began as a joke - a place for us to express our frustrations. Our little Instagram account, however, caused quite the stir. It was clear we struck a nerve on the age old topic of the White Savior Complex" ("About"). Through their parodic versions of the images on Instagram, Worrall positions herself as a critic of the practice of self-branded white saviorism while simultaneously mimicking it. In what follows, I use the frames, poses, and tropes from Chapter 1 to guide my analysis of Barbie Savior's posts. Like the real human subjects in Peace Corps, Barbie Savior poses with locals, especially children, takes selfies, and documents her self-transformation. Additionally, Barbie Savior directly targets individuals and groups who gain notoriety for their racist, neocolonial actions on social media.

However, the parodic tone evoked through her mimicry in each post creates an ironic self-brand of white saviorism.

Pictures with children dominate the discourse, as I previously analyzed. As of April 2019, Barbie Savior utilizes the trope of the child in 24 of 116 total images. Barbie Savior carries children on her back, shares a Coke with them, visits them in hospital beds, gives them candy, and loves to hug them. She often writes about how cute the orphans are, how they take the best photos, how they follow her around, and how her heart breaks for them. In one of her first posts after "landing" in Africa, Barbie Savior takes a photo of her hand next to the hand of a black orphaned Barbie (Fig. 11). In the caption, she describes how jetlag has left her feeling "less than beautiful" but once she made it to the orphanage, she knew God had called her to this place for a reason. She goes on to describe how this "sweet spirit" ran up to her when she arrived and stayed by her side all day, writing:

> As she laid in my lap, her brown hand intertwined with mine, I knew this is exactly where God wanted me. To love the least…the orphaned. I am here to love on all these little ones who have no one that loves them. All they have is me… #loveothers #loveonorphans #called #change #soul #africa #Whitesavior #hero #reddirt #orphans #blessed #tenderheart #povertyporn #oneheart #greatWhitehope #disciplethestreets #likes #forlikes #followme #mission #hereiamlord #blessed #purpose #thirdworld #stayprayedup #orphans #orphanage #orphancare #God #barbiesavior (Barbie Savior, "All of this travel").

In putting the image with this written caption, Barbie Savior mimics how volunteers and missionaries frame their experiences of being in the right place, where they are "supposed to be."

This post parodies the self-serving notion of white saviorism; she ignores the experience and perspective of the child she photographs in order for this image to represent Barbie Savior's own struggles of long flights and discipleship. Just like in the #HowISeePC images, Barbie Savior is focused on curating her self-brand over alleviating any actual development issues, such as those connected with orphanages. With a quick search on Instagram, I barely started scrolling through publicly posted images tagged with #missionstrip before finding an almost-identical image to Barbie Savior's parody image (Fig 12). Comparing these images shows how Barbie Savior uses mimicry to poke fun at the self-branding substance of the discourse. While thousands of Instagram users continue to participate in the practices of white saviorism by posting selfies with kids, Barbie Savior attempts to call out the conventional form, the inauthentic brand, that everyone is producing. Centering Barbie Savior's own experience and relationship with the child is completely accurate with what actual volunteers, missionaries, and humanitarians are doing. The fact that Barbie Savior's posts get a laugh indicates that her parody and imitation subvert the real discourse while simultaneously participating in it.

To understand how Barbie Savior's post works differently, I explore the comments submitted on each image. The image posted by user @itsbenji_ has comments with sad face and prayer emojis, empathizing with wanting to return to where this image was taken during a mission trip. Contrastingly, comments on Barbie Savior's post include tagging other users to call attention to the account, laughing emojis, and phrases like "this cracks me up," "omg," "so uncomfortably hilarious," and "this is too real. I'm dyingggg." Users commenting on Barbie Savior's image are responding not to the overt image and caption like those in the @itsbenji_ post but rather to the implied parodic message; they understand the joke and get the irony behind it. The mimicry and parody of Barbie Savior requires spectators to have previously viewed

images of white saviorism on social media. This allows for a recognition and familiarity with the discourse. When confronted with a parodic doll version, viewers initially find themselves laughing. Connections are made in the viewer's mind between similar images of real-life volunteers they may have seen previously (or produced themselves) and this parody. The tone of their reactions acknowledges both their amusement and, for some, the uneasiness they feel about laughing. Perhaps this is the first-time people are confronted with the incongruous relationship between acts of humanitarianism and acts of self-branding. Maybe it is even the realization that taking and sharing images like this is not only a trend, but a trend that perpetuates stereotypes of black bodies, children, and poverty. It is this contradiction of emotions, this tension of real discourse and comedic parody, that makes Barbie Savior's utilization of mimicry effective in producing a perspective by incongruity.



Figure 11. Screenshot of Barbie Savior "All of this travel"



Figure 12. Screenshot of @itsbenji_, "Missing Africa"

Beyond the trope of the child, Barbie Savior often mimics the selfie pose, even creating a subgenre she calls the "slumfie," which entails taking a selfie in front of a backdrop of poverty, the ghetto, or the slums (Barbie Savior, "Just Taking a #slumfie"). Further, she continuously parodies the notion of self-transformation that is so central to the brand of white saviorism. In one post, an image shows her running through an alley with garbage on the ground, sporting a hot pink tank top and sneakers, with three dark-skinned Barbie arms reaching up from the left corner of the image. The caption reads:

> Outside of my virtuous new years resolution to love on millions of orphans, I have been working hard to lose the extra pounds I have gained since being here in Africa. It seems so wrong, coming to Africa and gaining weight. #mustbeallthegluten #makeAfricaglutenfreeby2020 #waitisriceandbeansglutenfree? #glutenfreecurespoverty #andeverythingelse #reddirtisthenewsuperfood #justdoit #nah #justsaveit #slumrunner

> #ifyouwanttogoquicklygoalone #orhavesomeonechasingyou #forwhentheychasemeiaminspiringthemtoruntoo #newyearnewslumfies #ohgodthemudonmynewshoes #myslumshoegamethough (Barbie Savior, "Outside of My Virtuous").

Barbie Savior's caption and hashtags parody the common narrative found in white savior discourse about losing weight and becoming a better version of the self physically. It is the hashtags specifically that draw out Worrall's critical message, supplementing the caption in a way that uses satire to directly critique the discourse. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Zappavigna identifies the main functions of hashtags and #HowISeePC worked to both organize images as well as to enact the Peace Corps experience. With Barbie Savior, however, Worrall's use of hashtags is quite different. Worrall creates them in order to negotiate relationships and is a demonstration of what Zappavigna calls the interpersonal function. Here, the hashtags work "by facilitating evaluative metacomment that resonates across an entire post to construe an evaluative stance" (Zappavigna 6). In this sense, hashtags are used to express questions, emotions, judgements, appreciation, or commands. Even further, Worrall is employing what Zappavigna describes as a subset of metacomment hashtags which "appear to subvert the overall collectivizing function of hashtags. The tags in this subset are usually evaluative and are often involved in humour and other forms of linguistic play. Many of these tags are so long or so specific that they are extremely unlikely to be replicated by other microbloggers" (8). Worrall creates her own metacomment hashtags as a way to signal the audience she is satirically, even sarcastically, engaging in the discourse of white saviorism. She focuses on the stereotypes of diet fads, Nike slogans, and material possessions to guide her play-on-words hashtag creations and criticism of the self-transformation and self-branding acts of humanitarians on Instagram.

In other posts that parody self-transformation by the white savior, Barbie Savior shows herself fetching water with a large jerrycan and writes about her realization of the things she used to take for granted in America. After breaking a heel and meeting the "poor Africans" that broke her heart, Barbie Savior explains that "Now I think I understand what it means to be broken in order to be made whole. I'm not going to lie, I was frustrated. But I got a tan and did even more soul searching. There is ALWAYS a silver lining!! And always an adventure" (Barbie Savior, "We Take so Much for Granted"). In a different image, Barbie Savior excitedly shares how she reached 100 followers, claiming "It just goes to show that through Christ and shamelessly promoting yourself, ALL things are possible!" (Barbie Savior, "Today I woke up). Clearly, Barbie Savior is on the road to sainthood.

These posts each mimic the ways self-transformation is centered in white savior discourse but Barbie Savior does so mockingly, through a comic frame. Barbie Savior's inner realizations, optimism for her own future, gratitude for capturing authentic moments of herself, and losing weight strategically point out the problems with the discourse. The spectator recognizes Barbie Savior's self-centeredness as a joke through the intertextuality of image, caption, and satirical hashtags. The joke, however, mimics real portrayals of self-transformation on Instagram. When actual volunteers post in ways that focus on their "authenticity" and how much of an impact the "villagers" have had on them, spectators often comment with congratulations, pride, and gratitude toward the subject for sharing this personal experience with friends and family back home. Through perpetuating the neocolonial fantasy that "others" need saving, but in reality documenting one's own transformation, Barbie Savior magnifies the contradicting motivations and ethical substance behind white saviorism.

Additionally, Barbie Savior doesn't just mimic broad tropes and poses but directly parodies specific posts and people. A user by the name of Jossa Johansson posted an image of herself hugging a young, Black, Kenyan girl in front of a bus in Nairobi (Fig. 13).[4] Accompanying the image, Johansson wrote a caption in the form of a letter to the child. Of course, it is clear the text was never meant for the child to see and Johansson's intended audience was her followers on Instagram. The letter describes how inspired Johansson felt after meeting the child, how she will likely never see the girl again, and writes a disturbing prediction of the outcome of this child's future, drenched with pity and stereotypes of arranged marriages, hypersexualized Black men, and prostitution. Johansson's post to brand herself as the compassionate white savior was so explicitly racist and patronizing that Barbie Savior made only a few small edits to the captioning on her own parodic image holding a child in front of a bus (Fig. 14).

The real image by Johansson shows how the "fantasy of white saviorism depends on racial privilege" (Hanchey, "All of Us Phantasmic Saviors" 4). Sharing not only the photo of an experience of white saviorism but framing that experience in a patronizing message that conjures neocolonial and neoliberal ideology, Johansson's post represents an attempt to brand the self through evoking emotional responses of pity toward the girl and praise toward herself from her audience. Brown writes about how the relationship between the spectator and visual rhetoric that objectifies suffering children "carefully situates the postcolonial/postimperial entity as curiously lacking civilization's most salient feature: the ability to self-govern and self-sustain" (Brown 187). Johansson's caption clearly indicates she has little hope for the child's future and believes

[4] The original post caused so much criticism and outrage that Johansson took it down and made her Instagram account private. Screenshots of the original post were published in Gharib, "Woman's Instagram Post About Kenyan Child Ignites Fury."

her interaction with the child will be the highlight of this girl's life. When the fantasy of white saviorism is so strong, Hanchey argues that many American volunteers ironically recognize the fantasy, but "not as one's own" ("All of Us Phantasmic Saviors" 5). Rather, they project it onto their "beneficiaries." In other words, people like Johansson often lack reflexivity in their actions not because she denies the existence of racial power structures but because sees herself as outside of these structures. Worrall's mimicry of Johansson is an attempt to reveal the contradictory notions of white savior discourse.

When Barbie Savior mimics the post, Worrall's goal is to call out the absurdity of how branding the self as an ethical white savior is racist, essentialist, and rooted in colonial ideologies. Using the "sentimental-oriented discourse of suffering" found in so many versions of humanitarian discourse like Johansson, Barbie Savior mimics this pervasive neocolonial gaze from real life in her own posts (Zembylas 507). Drawing on the cultural norms of privileged, white, European and American audiences, having an emotional reaction toward an image of a suffering child helps alleviate the guilt and pain of the viewer (Zembylas). Using mimicry, Barbie Savior puts spectators in a position of incongruity. While the initial reaction is to laugh at the parody, Barbie Savior urges spectators to question why they may not find the real images of white saviorism to be just as absurd.

By imitating the current images within the discourse and adding a parodic tone, Barbie Savior recreates and re-presents white saviorism for online audiences to interpret with a different perspective. Gratch writes that in performance adaptations, such as YouTube videos, creators are "simultaneously making fun of and *having fun*" exploring stereotypes (31). This suggests that Worrall may take pleasure in participating in white savior discourse, albeit ironically. She taps



Figure 13. Screenshot of Jossa Johansson



Figure 14. Screenshot of Barbie Savior “Dear child”

into a brand of individual identity that aspires to be authentic but ironically is so easily, commonly reproduced that it becomes a joke. Her use of mimicry highlights how readily accessible these poses, tropes, and frames are in the discourse. As a parody account to the other Instagram-using humanitarians, Barbie Savior playfully crafts her brand of white saviorism to critique the normalization of the discourse. Next, I look at how the images of Barbie Savior are composed and assembled using kitsch and satire.

Satirical Composition

Most people over the age of ten don't take Barbie too seriously. Barbie is seen as frivolous, silly, and apolitical. Her fictionalized persona, hypersexualized femininity, and the fact that she is simply a toy for child's play, all stack up against her in the realm of a politically challenging society. And yet, it is the use of Barbie specifically that makes Worrall's creation work simultaneously as a joke and a critique. To do this, Worrall creates a satirical frame that utilizes a kitschy kind of "visual" atom-cracking, as opposed to Burke's verbal version, within the composition of each image. The manner in which the photographs are assembled highlights the ethics of white savior self-branding through satire. I argue that Worrall constructs each post with a sense of intentional bad taste that sparks both laughter and a groan of self-actualization in the audience. In short, Worrall juxtaposes the real with the fake as her core strategy. This moves the viewer's perception from laughing at the fake Barbie Savior account to feeling unsettled by the real implications of the discourse.

While parody directly mocks the discourse, satire is the layer of criticism that blankets the image. Barbie Savior uses satire by incorporating the sincere Instagram posts with the joke.

Like irony, Burke wrote that the "the satirist attacks *in others* the weaknesses and temptations that are really *within himself*" (Burke 49, emphasis original). Worrall does this with Barbie Savior not only because of her own experience within the development field but to draw out this self-awareness from viewers on Instagram. Simply put, the satire behind Barbie Savior can be both therapeutic for the creator and thought-provoking for the audience. A step further than parody, the composition of the image doesn't just make fun of the discourse but critiques it. Day writes how "this ability to manipulate the real gives the satire a great deal of power" (8). Through intertextuality, Barbie Savior uses the relationship between her image, caption, and hashtag to curate a satirical version of white savior discourse on Instagram. For Barbie Savior, framing with satire involves creating a self-aware kitsch aesthetic to her image.

Kitsch is often associated with cheap, low-brow art and overall bad taste. Philip Crick describes the relationship between art and kitsch as "interinvolved" but "in an irreversible mode" where art can survive without kitsch but not the other way around (48). Sometimes defined as tacky, trashy, or cheesy, kitsch feeds off existing art forms and reproduces them in a deliberate knock-off way. Chuck Kleinhans argues that kitsch can be subjective and classist when it comes to how one defines good or bad taste. Instead, Kleinhans suggests a notion of "self-aware kitsch" in which the creators and objects are "often highly self-conscious of their own de-based status" (183). The wide array of photography appearing on Instagram certainly blurs the line of what is considered art in a digital medium. Anyone from professionally trained photographers and graphic designers to tweens with an iPhone is able to construct and post their images in a way that looks aesthetically pleasing to other Instagram users. Having already determined that there is a well-established genre of white savior discourse on Instagram, I consider images like those discussed in Chapter 1 to be the art form that Barbie Savior's creator is drawing from. Worrall is

well-aware of the bad taste she is creating and does so intentionally to make a point: that there is a problem with these images, with or without Barbie being the subject. For instance, in an image depicting Barbie Savior loving on orphans, she ends her heartfelt, over-the-top caption with politically-charged hashtags, including #stoporphantrips, #attachmentproblemsarentcute, and #notazoo (Barbie Savior, "When I First Walked Through"). We again see Worrall inserting metacommentary in her post through hashtags that indicate an evaluative stance to the viewer. The dissonance between the cheesy image of Barbie with orphans and the pointed hashtags that convey negative judgement demonstrates Worrall's strategy to use self-aware kitsch as a rhetorical move. While the image and caption can be read ambiguously, the hashtags are key for indicating to viewers how to read the rest of the post as both parody and critique.

Other images appear to some viewers as just truly in bad taste, such as when Barbie Savior appears sitting on the ground facing the camera, her arms outstretched as if wrapped around the backs of others but nobody else is there (Fig. 15). In the background is a large tree and several round, grass-roofed houses. The caption reads, "I found the famed invisible children of Africa! I couldn't see them, but their spirit was palpable" (Barbie Savior, "I Found the Famed Invisible Children"). Here, Barbie Savior takes a jab at the Invisible Children campaign, founded in 2004 in the U.S. to stop the Ugandan rebel group Lord's Resistance Army, and their leader Joseph Kony, from taking children against their will to be soldiers and sex slaves. The campaign produced several online videos that went viral in 2012, which Jenna Hanchey argues perpetuated neocolonial logics, racist binaries, and the appropriation of the Black Power movement by young, white, American men. For a few viewers, this Barbie Savior post crossed the line, commenting with "like it was kinda funny until this post," "oh this is too much," and "this kind of irritates me." For these viewers, Barbie Savior touched a nerve and their comments indicate

she should not make fun of a tragic circumstance involving child soldiers. But through Worrall's metacommentary in, again, the hashtags, we can see her point is directed at the creators of the Invisible Children campaign, not the children themselves. The hashtags include #iscommonsenseinvisibletoo, #invisibletearsarethehardesttowipeaway, #invisiblechildrenarereal, and #savetheinvisiblewhitepeople. Although some spectators misinterpreted the critique, most Instagram users commented with laughter emojis, tagged friends to follow, and describe the hilarity and accuracy of the post as a critique on white saviorism.

Barbie Savior's use of kitsch evokes this kind of groan from viewers, in which they appreciate the irony but also understand the truth behind the tacky exterior. Barbie Savior re-presents white savior discourse with self-aware kitsch. Worrall does this in a way that not only indicates she is aware of the tackiness of her images but also as a persuasive strategy. She draws in spectators for the cheesy, humorous image and then rhetorically slaps them across the face as they then also become aware of the problem within it and, further, their own role in perhaps participating in or producing similar posts.



Figure 15. Screenshot of Barbie Savior "I Found the Famed Invisible Children"

Her self-aware kitsch aesthetics are also about how she brings together previously disconnected elements. We can understand this through Burke's atom-cracking analogy, which describes the "highly charged nature of the symbolic alchemy produced when differing rhetorical/ideological orientations mix" and that it is this "fracturing process engendered by planned incongruity" that leads to social change (Demo 139). Worrall strategically juxtaposes a visual, yet fake, icon as the photograph's subject within a real scenic backdrop. Cara Finnegan writes that the early emergence of photography was understood as superior to other visual art forms because it was believed to represent nature completely realistically, as close to human vision as possible. Drawing on Don Slater, Finnegan explains that photography promotes realism in ways that make viewers believe "what appears in the photograph must have existed in order to have it captured by the camera" (142). She goes on to explain how even as society and technology have become more "visually sophisticated," we continue to link photography to what is deemed real or natural. Although we are well aware that photographs today can be heavily doctored or altered through programs like Photoshop or simply by adding a filter on Instagram, we still treat photographs as if they are displaying some form of truth and reality. As just one example, portraits of celebrities are altered on the cover of magazines and yet continue to influence society's notion of what an ideal body is or should be. I claim that Worrall relies on this assumption of photographs showing us what is "real" to play with the audience's perspective. She does this in two ways, first by using a fake subject and a real background, and second by creating an entirely fake image opposed to the real discourse.

We recognize Barbie as a toy that children, most commonly girls, play with using their imaginations to act out pretend scenes of daily life and relationships. We are familiar with this image through advertisements, commercials, and perhaps personal experience. Worrall takes this

understanding of Barbie and places her within a frame containing politics of global poverty, humanitarian aid, and neocolonialism. This creates a perspective by incongruity because of the discordant nature of pairing an innocent, playful toy with the complexities of international development. Worrall's decision to use Barbie as the subject, rather than a different toy like Tickle-Me-Elmo or Transformers, is strategic. Barbie Savior is close enough to the face of real white saviorism (young, white, straight, cis-female, American), yet slightly off from being the real thing so that the atom-cracking works. Viewers immediately recognize the discourse and are struck by the incongruities within the frame.

For example, in one image we see Barbie Savior reaching down, arms outstretched toward a little girl Barbie doll with black hair (Fig. 16). Barbie Savior is wearing a bright pink dress and tan ankle boots. They are standing in front of a real building with a half brick wall and pillars, a piece of wood leaning up on the wall while the sun casts shadows down on the subjects. In her caption, Barbie Savior describes entering the orphanage and being flooded with hugs, kisses, and laughter from the children. She connects this moment to serving God, being inspired, and having never felt "more loved or needed as I did in that moment" (Barbie Savior, "When I First Walked Through"). The spectator knows that the dolls in the forefront of the image are fake and their relationship to the real building behind them is incongruous. Barbie Savior is clean, shiny, pink, and pristine. The child Barbie doll in the image is also dressed like a typical doll, with plastic, hot-pink sneakers and a pink floral dress. The perfection of the dolls contrasts with the dusty, cracked reality of the real building behind them. Like all of her images, Worrall alters the photograph so that Barbie Savior appears proportionally accurate to the real background and other objects within the frame. Placing a fake subject in front of, or in the context of, a real place creates an incongruent relationship that is recognized by the audience. Further, this image of

Barbie Savior at an orphanage is entirely fake yet strikes a chord with viewers who are familiar with real images identical to Barbie Savior's satirical version. The spectator can easily imagine a real human subject in the place of Barbie Savior and her orphan friend. This makes the image familiar and yet jarring, shifting from congruent to incongruent relationships inside a frame.

Over and over again, in almost every photograph on the Barbie Savior account, we see this juxtapositioning. Whether she is walking along a red dirt road, riding in her pink Jeep across the African prairie, standing outside village houses, or riding a hippopotamus, toy Barbie is personified as an almost-real white savior. The composition of the photograph is intentionally bad, which serves to both fit into the discourse but also be discordant with it. By crafting an



Figure 16. Screenshot of Barbie Savior "When I first walked through"

image that magnifies the bad taste, Worrall is able to offer criticism on the broader issue of this discourse. Viewers will move from identifying the discourse initially, to appreciating the humor,

and finally, to realizing the performative critique that is occurring. Her use of self-aware kitsch allows her to put Barbie Savior in virtually any situation she can imagine. Barbie Savior has an atom-cracking effect by confronting the spectator's expectations of what they believe to be aesthetically pleasing and appropriate for the discourse. Joining together the fake, plasticity of Barbie with the real background of slums and poverty, Worrall is able to simultaneously make fun of, participate in, and criticize the discourse of white saviorism.

Hyperbolic Representation

Finally, the last part of my analysis looks at the ways in which Worrall exaggerates the supposed virtues of humanitarianism to expose how absurd they can be. The humor within each post is a key part to Barbie Savior's popularity on Instagram. Of course, there are multiple ways to make a joke, so what is it about Barbie Savior that is so captivating? Often, comedians turn pain and tragedy into something that can be laughed at. Christie Davies draws on Brottman to claim that, "Most jokes are about the undesirable, for people joke not about good things or virtuous people but about failure and wickedness and about matters that they might well find disturbing outside the context of the joke" (Davies 6). This approach to humor is familiar to most, such as stand-up comics regularly delivering racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic jokes. Burke similarly creates a division between what is humorous and what is virtuous. He writes:

> Humor is the opposite of the heroic. The heroic promotes acceptance by *magnification*, making the hero's character as great as the situation he confronts, and fortifying the non-heroic individual vicariously, by identification with the hero; but humor reverses the process: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by

> *dwarfing the situation*. It converts downwards, as the heroic converts upwards (43, emphasis original).

Yet, I argue that the humorous and virtuous are not mutually exclusive. Rather, when one magnifies the heroic to the point of absurdity, there is humor in that magnification, or over-magnification perhaps. To exaggerate the heroic is to take it to an extreme level that depicts the behavior as absurd due to its excessiveness. In short, I disagree with Burke's binary of humor and the heroic; Davies provides some hesitant support for this critique:

> It is difficult to envisage jokes that depict particular groups as the sane, the clean, the generous, the sober, the moral, the peaceable, the practical, the honest, the reliable, the equitable, the efficient, and the modest. In order to do so, it would be necessary to manipulate the situation in the joke in such a way that these qualities became a problem. It is difficult to make a joke out of a virtue except when it is cultivated to an absurd and inappropriate extent, by which time most observers will have ceased to regard it as a virtue (6-7).

Barbie Savior is certainly doing what Davies describes, turning virtue into a joke. Whether or not the consumers of the images have stopped regarding humanitarianism, missionary work, and development aid as no longer virtuous, I cannot say without a deep, qualitative analysis. However, the performance of Barbie Savior and the saturation of the discourse on social media suggests this is not the case. As demonstrated in chapter one, white saviorism continues to be a dominant discourse that is unchallenged, regarded as ethical, and operates invisibly. To turn the heroic into a joke, Barbie Savior exaggerates the self-branding of white saviorism to a ridiculous degree. In the captions accompanying each post, Barbie Savior uses hyperbole as a rhetorical

strategy to represent the discourse of white saviorism on social media as comical. In portraying the behavior of humanitarians, missionaries, and development workers as absurd, it becomes absurd to the viewer.

Like real human subjects participating in the discourse, Barbie Savior centers herself in each post to further curate her brand. Throughout her captions, she writes about her projects, reflections, and self-transformation. However, she takes each of these to a level of absurdity that is close enough to a real caption but with enough hyperbole to become humorous. For example, in one image we see Barbie Savior wearing a white doctor's coat, holding a pink stethoscope in one hand and a child in the other (Fig. 17). She is standing in front of a mint-green building with a street sign that says "Hospital" in the lower right hand corner. In the caption, Barbie Savior writes about how after being hospitalized herself just recently due to malaria, she is now using her "vast amount of knowledge gained during those few days" to treat, heal, and cure locals because apparently there are "no trained medical professionals or hospitals in Africa" (Barbie Savior, "As Many of You Know"). In another post, Barbie Savior stands in front of a chalkboard and the caption reads:

> Who needs a formal education to teach in Africa? Not me! All I need is some chalk and a dose of optimism. It's so sad that they don't have enough trained teachers here. I'm not trained either, but I'm from the West, so it all works out. Good morning, class!! #barbiesaviortheeducator #wildwildwest #theyteachmemorethaniteachthem #whichmakessensecuzicantteach #PhDindelusionalthoughtprocesses #degreesplease #qualifiedisnotafeeling #godstillQUALIFIESthecalled #gettingschooledandoverruled (Barbie Savior, "Who Needs a Formal Education").

These two examples demonstrate how hyperbolic representation of virtuous acts common within the field of development, such as teaching or healthcare, is taken to an absurd degree. The captions are hyperbolic and through her judgements and metacommentary in the hashtags, the exaggerated tone comes through even clearer. The descriptions from Barbie Savior are ridiculous and yet, not far off from the real discourse. Worrall is attempting to turn virtue into a joke, magnifying the hero to a point beyond belief. This balance between real and hyperbole is a fine line that Barbie Savior plays with to persuade her audience that the real humanitarians serving abroad without qualifications should be viewed as equally absurd and shocking as the exaggerated form.



Figure 17. Screenshot of Barbie Savior “As many of you know”

In addition to the work or projects being done, Worrall magnifies the ignorance and naïveté of development workers and volunteers, such as believing Africa is a county, not a

continent. In one post, Barbie Savior is holding a strand of beads, her other hand running through her hair, and the caption reads, “Africa is like no country I've been to. I discovered it has these strange and beautiful objects called ‘beads.’ I feel like they could be a part of solving the devastation and economic crisis here. I just have to figure out how...wait! I got it. This is a perfect GoFundMe #abeadingheartisableedingheart #povertybeads #stopthebeadmadness #passion #called #pleasefollowme #forhim #love #mycall #mycalling #blessed #whitesavior #whitesaviorchic #myafrica #change #panacea #greatwhitehope” (Barbie Savior, “Africa Is like No Country”). A day later, Barbie Savior posts a photograph of herself holding a cutout of the shape of Africa and writes, “I have noticed people informing me that Africa is a continent and not a country. I hope you can forgive my mistake. I have so much to learn-but I do know one thing for certain- and that is that my love for this place is bigger than ANY country! Even bigger than the country of Africa! #thecountryofafrica #loveformiles #rusticdoor #missingthepoint #aminotthepoint? #whitesaviorchic #youllalwaysbeacountrytome #myafrica #snarkysavior” (Barbie Savior, “I Have Noticed People”). Each of these posts depicts Barbie Savior as uninformed and insensitive to the culture and place she lives and serves. Worrall hyperbolically points to the way people in the Global North travel to places they have no knowledge of yet believe they are entitled and called to do so. The narrative of the development worker, missionary, or humanitarian frames the “spaces of development as ‘exotic’ places inhabited by people who are ‘different’ (from us) in peculiar, even fantastical, ways -- places which ‘we’ from this part of the world are free to access and alter” (Heron 7). Worrall’s captions highlight the neoliberal belief many volunteers have that they individually can solve poverty and alleviate an entire country’s problems without the language, skills, or knowledge to do so. The use of hyperbole allows Barbie Savior to turn the heroic, brave, selfless white saviors into something to

be laughed at rather than held up in high regard. Through humor, Worrall's message tries to show how the virtue of "doing good" can actually be problematic when taking into consideration the global context of these behaviors.

The third way Barbie Savior hyperbolically represents white savior discourse is through her integration of pop culture and stereotypes. As is common on Instagram, referencing celebrities, song lyrics, or movies, using slang or altering phrases to fit one's needs, and quoting famous texts, authors, or spiritual leaders is all part of the self-branding process. Worrall uses these same practices in a way that embellishes or distorts their meaning. For example, Barbie Savior posted a picture of herself pressed up against a wall, her hand tracing the outline of a map of Africa (Fig. 18). The caption reads, "I love your curves and all your edges....all your perfect imperfections…" quoting the lyrics to John Legend's 2013 romantic song, "All of Me" (Barbie Savior, "I Love Your Curves"). Here, she personifies her love for Africa through an American pop song about Legend's love for his wife, Chrissy Teigen. It is comedic, absurd, and also completely on point with how so many white saviors describe their love of Africa. In a different post, Barbie Savior brags about how she has perfected the "art" of taking selfies, especially at the local hospital with those "less fortunate" (Barbie Savior, "Today I Sacrificed"). Her hashtags #icanbeyoursaviorbaby #icanselfieawaythepain reference singer Enrique Iglesias' 2001 song "Hero" with the original lyrics being "I can be your hero baby, I can kiss away the pain." Barbie Savior distorts the meaning of Iglesias' words to connect with the audience in a way they recognize and laugh along with.



Figure 18. Screenshot of Barbie Savior "I love your curves"

Barbie Savior understands the power of a good, inspirational quote to grab audiences' attention. Worrall recognizes the self-centeredness behind these acts and creates a post to facetiously point it out. In the image, Barbie Savior is standing in front of an African prairie, looking through binoculars and dressed in a khaki jumpsuit with leopard print collar. Her caption reads:

> "If you put an inspirational quote under your selfie, no one can see your narcissism." - Gandhi. No truer words to live by. Thanks for the inspiration @unspirational ♡ #bethenarcassistyouwantoseeintheworld #memyselfieandi #selfiesforchange #narcicisticallynonchalant #aintnobodyghandinotice #Ughandibekiddingme #imsopretty #ohsopretty #imsoprettyandwittyandWHITE #selfsacrificingselfie #itsgunnabeme (Barbie Savior, "If You Put an Inspirational").

References to Gandhi, the musical West Side Story, and pop band *NSYNC's song "It's Gonna Be Me" all merge to make fun of and magnify the egotistical nature of the discourse. Watering down the ideology of Gandhi and completely misquoting him, juxtaposed with American pop culture, is the hyperbolic form of people trying to create social change solely through posting on social media. Barbie Savior often draws from clichés in American culture, such as spiritual activist, author, and now 2020 presidential candidate Marianne Williamson's quote, "Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our greatest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure," to brag about surviving without power (Barbie Savior, "Our Greatest Fear"). Another image shows Barbie Savior surrounded by children and the caption references the sonnet mounted on the Statue of Liberty written by Emma Lazarus, altering the last line so it reads, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the fly covered African child, to me: I lift my face to the sky to usher them home into my arms" (Barbie Savior, "Give Me Your Tired"). Each of these posts reference popular phrases and people in an over-the-top way. Altering the words or applying the quote to something miniscule in scale compared to the original context exaggerates the performative nature of posting on social media. By emphasizing the narcissism of self-branding on Instagram in a comedic way, Worrall indirectly calls out today's problematic ethical substance of white saviorism.

Through hyperbolically representing the actions, personality traits, and pettiness of real posts on Instagram, Worrall is able to take the virtuous, "doing good" aspects of humanitarianism and make them absurd. She exaggerates the execution of development projects, ignorance of the subjects, and shallowness of the discourse as a performative mode of criticism. Worrall's strategy shows how magnifying the heroic to the point of absurdity can be both

humorous and a form of critique. She is not simply making fun of humanitarians but rather the discourse itself, targeted toward both producers and consumers. Scrolling through one's Instagram feed and coming across a Barbie Savior image creates an incongruity, cueing the viewer to something different at work in Barbie Savior's post. Through the intertextuality of image, caption, and metacommentary hashtags, Worrall is able to make the virtuous hero seem like a joke.

Conclusion

Worrall uses the strategies of mimicry, satirical composition, and hyperbolic representations to brand Barbie Savior ironically as a white savior. Because self-branding is the ethical substance of today's white saviorism, Worrall's comical creation makes a serious point: that people can juxtapose fiction with reality to curate the illusion of being the perfect humanitarian, missionary, or development volunteer. While I appreciate the critique of white saviorism that Worrall is offering through Barbie Savior, there are unintended effects that emerge from these efforts. First, Barbie Savior can't fully carry out Worrall's critique of the discourse. Rather, she depends on the existence and perpetuation of the discourse in order for viewers to know how to read the image. She participates in the exact thing she criticizes, expanding the discourse of white saviorism rather than troubling it. Second, the use of irony can create ambiguity in responses, in which some people understand the joke, others are offended, and some miss the critique entirely. Worrall's critical intentions get clouded by the humor of Barbie Savior.

Third, from a visual culture perspective, Brown claims that when the audience is what drives an image of suffering to be captured in the first place, emotional reaction is the goal, "allowing the viewer into the frame for the purposes of human connection, when in actuality it is human removal that is taking place on a visual and visceral level" (Brown 193–94). In other

words, responding emotionally to an image substitutes for any social or political response or further intervention. Traditional humanitarian discourse intentionally appealed to the spectators' emotions of pity, sympathy, and guilt, making them feel absolved of the issue by focusing on themselves and forgetting the actual lives and realities facing the subjects within the frame. In the discourse of white saviorism, the emotional response shifted to acquiring social capital responses from the audience through likes or comments. Similarly, Worrall intentionally parodies the discourse to get a laugh or a groan from spectators, but it stops there. Actions to alleviate suffering, prevent further neocolonial projects, or altogether disrupt future white savior discourse online fail to emerge from Barbie Savior's efforts. The trend of white saviorism has yet to slow down.

Finally, Worrall uses Barbie Savior to hold this tension between real and ironic forms of white saviorism to evoke a perspective by incongruity. The drive to brand oneself as a global citizen and humanitarian condones white saviorism for the sake of neoliberal, neocolonial needs and efforts. But when juxtaposed with the notion of ridiculousness evoked through Barbie Savior's comedic frame, spectators are left with a sense of irony that makes both messages simultaneously acceptable yet stops short of fully challenging and displacing the actual performances of white saviorism. These various intended and unintended effects represent the larger issues of white savior discourse. Although the opportunity for critique is there, Worrall's creation of Barbie Savior falls into the same self-branding cycle of real Instagram users and humanitarians alike. More can be done, and is being done, to complicate the discourse of white saviorism. In the next chapter, I highlight a few groups who are explicitly fighting against the discourse and conclude with a brief discussion on how we, as scholars and social media users alike, can work toward decolonizing white saviorism on social media.

Conclusion: White Savior in Recovery

> *We must remember – just as no one *thinks* that they are racist, no one identifies as a white savior. When you exist believing the world and everything in it is yours, you can convince yourself that exploiting poor people is "good work."*
>
> - @nowhitesaviors, "People are mad"

The problem of white saviorism is bigger than posts and pictures on social media. And yet, as one of the technologies that help perpetuate the myth, ideology, and actions of white saviorism, social media may be the right place to begin addressing the problem and to work toward creating alternatives. For social workers Alaso Olivia Patience and Kelsey Nielsen, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are perfect outlets to reach a wide audience and educate people about the issues of white saviorism. Patience, who is Ugandan, and Nielsen, who is American, are part of a group of activists, advocates, and development workers from Kenya, Uganda, and America who decided it was time for a more direct approach to calling out racist white savior behavior. They started the NoWhiteSaviors (NWS) social media campaign in 2018 after working together for several years in the development field. In the nine months since it began, the NWS Instagram account has reached 117,000 followers, purposefully aiming to make viewers uncomfortable in order to change their beliefs and understanding when it comes to humanitarianism, charity, and the discourse of white saviorism on social media.

One the biggest goals of NoWhiteSaviors is to get people in the Global North to understand that white saviorism appropriates the Other and is racist, despite good intentions or innocence in "not knowing any better." Posts by NWS expose how white saviorism perpetuates colonial ideology and strips agency and voice away from people in the Global South who do not have the opportunity to tell their own story. Unlike the #HowISeePC and Barbie Savior images, NWS posts are text-centric, controversial, and educational. They do not center the white savior,

themselves, or the people they are supposedly helping. Rather, they focus on the issues surrounding white saviorism and work to create a conversation around those issues.

For example, bright, colorful patterns frame a quote, phrase, or comment that highlight distinct problems with white saviorism (Fig. 19). The post actually points out what is wrong with the "poor but happy" idea instead of just making fun of it through a funny photo or sarcastic hashtags. From transnational adoption and mission trips to unqualified doctors and Peace Corps volunteers, NWS does not shy away from directing their criticism at certain groups, practices, or individuals. In a series of posts they call "Peace Corps Exposed," former PCVs narrate their experiences with white saviorism and invite followers respond by "identify[ing] areas you still need to grow in & how the work being done needs to be improved…instead of trying to tell us how you or your chapter of the peace corps avoids this" (@nowhitesaviors, "We Just Posted What We Feel"; @nowhitesaviors, "A Former PCV Tells It like It Is"). Other posts teach followers about cultural appropriation and ethical social media practices, asking people to think before posting and ask themselves if the image challenges or confirms harmful stereotypes (@nowhitesaviors, "Responsible and Respectful Engagement"). They use the captions to detail specific issues, explain the #NoWhiteSavior purpose and approach, respond in-depth to hate messages, and engage directly with other Instagram users all about the white savior complex, neocolonialism, and colorblind ideology.

One of NWS's tactics is to directly call out people who post racist images perpetuating the discourse of white saviorism, whether they are celebrities, comedians, or everyday people on social media. Further, they aim to hold organizations accountable that enable white saviorism by exposing their lack of qualified staff, misuse of funds, cultural appropriation rhetoric, and unsustainable practices. They acknowledge how upsetting this tactic can be and are firm in their

beliefs that this is the best way toward actively debunking the myths, actions, and ideology of white saviorism. Patience claims that NWS is not saying Ugandans and Africans "don't want white people [to come here]. But we want to be the heroes of our stories" ("Meet the Women behind #nowhitesaviors"). NWS aims to confront people about their own biases or conflicting behaviors when it comes to humanitarianism.



Figure 19. @nowhitesaviors, "They are so happy with so little"

To educate others, NWS encourages its followers to comment on posts, engage in conversation about these topics, work through personal reflection, and challenge one another to do better when it comes to holding each other accountable for racist content on social media. For example, in one post, NWS targets white people by writing "Taking ownership of the way you have contributed to the savior complex is essential in moving forward. If you cannot accept the fact that you have work to do in challenging the savior complex in yourself, this is not the space for you" (@nowhitesaviors, "Before we move forward"). Elsewhere, NWS co-creator Nielsen openly describes her own participation in white saviorism, just a few short years ago actively posting images like the ones she now critiques. She calls herself a "white savior in recovery" and

challenges those wanting to engage in development work or humanitarianism to question their motives, stating “If your [hope] is really to do good for the people you want to do good for, you don’t need to put it on social media” (“Meet the Women behind #nowhitesaviors”).



Figure 20. @nowhitesaviors, “We will, without a doubt”

In other posts, NWS uses humor, memes, and pop culture references but unlike Barbie Savior, writes lengthy captions that connects the jokes to real issues, current events, or common practices within white savior discourse. For example, one post displays a meme of Steve Carell in his famous role of Michael Scott in the TV show *The Office* (Fig 20). He appears to be shouting and upset. The words above and below the image read, “How wyt people respond to the slightest mention of white supremacy: ‘Not all wyt people!,’ ‘Some of us are here to learn!,’ ‘You could try being less aggressive!’” (@nowhitesaviors, “We will, without a doubt”). The caption discusses how NWS hears these phrases regularly in response to their Instagram posts but explains why addressing issues of racism and white saviorism should not be handled lightly or delicately to preserve the comfort level of white people. They often expose notions of white

fragility, innocence, or silence that has contributed to the perpetuation of white saviorism. Their direct, candid content is intentional and NWS challenges those following to personally share in the comments how they are changing, progressing, or reflecting on these issues.

I open this final chapter with a detailed description of NWS to show how some groups recognize the issues I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, and are explicitly pointing out the racist implications of white saviorism. NWS is an example of one approach to decolonizing social media, development work, and white saviorism, but they are not alone. Other groups and campaigns, such as the ChildSafe Movement, also use online platforms to specifically target people who choose to actively participate in humanitarian practices. Their messaging attempts to educate people on how their donations, travels, and volunteer efforts can actually be exploitative, damaging, and unsafe, especially for youth around the world ("ChildSafe - About Us"). Their campaign, "Children Are Not Tourist Attractions," works to unveil the harm caused by orphanage tourism, despite best intentions by visitors, and to teach people about children's rights to privacy and protection under international law. Similarly, in 2017 the NGO Save the Children released a study called "The People in the Pictures: Vital perspectives on Save the Children's image making." This report looked at how to restore dignity in the voices and images of their aid campaigns through qualitative interviews, surveys, and focus groups in four countries: Jordan, Bangladesh, Niger, and the UK (Warrington and Crombie). The authors write that the goal of conducting such research was to "give voice to and understand contributors' (and members of their communities') experiences and perceptions of the image-making process and the resulting Save the Children communications" (x). Through a collaborative effort between staff and local communities, the report found that contributor-led narratives, informed consent, and ensuring

transparency and dignity throughout the image gathering process were key to dismantling stereotypes and the exploitation of subjects in future mediated campaigns.

It is not just non-profits or groups doing this work. Individuals are taking it upon themselves to create podcasts, online workshops, and downloadable books like “Me and My White Supremacy” by Laya F. Saad, or “Dear White Women” by Rachel Cargle, using social media and online communities to educate, inform, and challenge the narrative of white saviorism. Both women of color, Saad and Cargle engage with online audiences that build community for people, especially white people, wanting to learn how to do better when it comes to anti-racist work (Figures 21 & 22). In exchange for the mostly free materials, videos, and conversations, Saad and Cargle ask for contributions via online donations or monthly subscriptions, acknowledging the labor, time, and energy they put into helping people become more informed.



Figure 21. @rachel.cargle “The start”



Figure 22. @laylafsaad “#learnwithlayla”

These brief examples demonstrate the various efforts of groups and individuals who are actively challenging the trends in humanitarian messaging, but it is an uphill battle. Given the saturation of the discourse of white saviorism and its ongoing trends previously analyzed, is it even possible to decolonize social media and online self-branding practices? My research for this thesis leads me to suggest that the discourse of white saviorism is on its way to making yet another shift. We have, for the most part, moved beyond the discourse of suffering and humanitarian discourse of charity appeals and iconic photography of the 1980s that depict war and famine. With social media we can see the changes in framing, subjects turning the camera on themselves, and the depiction of poverty as hopeful and even positive. While the discourse of white saviorism is alive and well, as illustrated in this study, I am beginning to see attempts at disrupting what has become accepted and normalized. This shift can be seen in posts like those of NWS, fervently addressing issues in real time. And just like the practices that build up the self into a branded humanitarian, dismantling and demystifying white savior discourse starts with the self. Groups like NWS understand how they must craft their messages in order to rupture people's personal beliefs and views of themselves. It involves tactfully engaging with local communities and strategically targeting audiences that are willing to notice, understand, and inform others about the issue.

Decolonization and communication can come together through both academic research and social media practices to name white saviorism for what it is, debunk the humanitarian myths that perpetuate the white savior fantasy, and decenter American and European logics within the discourse. In her canonical essay, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," Lila Abu-Lughod asks how we as scholars can call out the selective ways in which people in the Global North choose for

whom they can feel sorry in relation to whom they can feel smugly superior. Like we see in the discourse of white saviorism, the narrative that tells people in the Global North that they can and should "save" others, especially women and children, relies on and perpetuates a "form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged" (789). Discourse that continues to center the humanitarian erases geopolitical concerns and flattens diversity. Abu-Lughod argues that it is impossible to critique a population based on one positionality and that incorporating multiple stories works to clarify one's own position, be it on a personal, political, societal, or organizational level.

While Abu-Lughod targets academics and scholarship, her words resonate in a way that also applies to media and discourse. Julie Reid points explicitly to how mythologies uphold colonization and dominant power relations and writes that, "[t]ransformation toward a decolonized world demands a far-reaching exercise of countermythologization to foster a broad consciousness that admits the fallacies in the myths we live by" (135). She emphasizes how mass media need to stop privileging one voice over others. This favored perspective is often the journalist, government representative, or some other "official" body of authority. Doing this erases the voices of marginalized groups and constructs them as objects without agency in a Western narrative. To speak for others privileges the perspective and positionality of those who are speaking and to speak about others naïvely constructs the representation of subjects for them (Alcoff). Applying this to social media, we must stop centering the body and voice of the white savior. It is time for people in the Global North to step back and start listening. Further, we must understand and respect the fact that people in the Global South may not want to tell their stories and are under no obligation to do so in the first place.

In another push to decolonize media, Mirzoeff and Halberstam put forth similar calls to action by scholars, practitioners, and activists alike. They describe several points that challenge our notions of knowledge production, including creating open-source publications, listening to marginalized/colonized/underrepresented groups, learning non-colonial languages, creating scholarship that goes beyond just text, and encourages interdisciplinary collaborations. Mirzoeff and Halberstam write, "Media is such a dominant, powerful, and daunting set of representational apparatuses that we cannot simply overturn them all. So we must hijack the spaces they colonize and decolonize the sites that they have infiltrated. Decolonizing is not a metaphor" (121). Here, I find the work of revealing the myths behind the humanitarian narrative is essential to decolonizing the discourse of white saviorism and the social media practices that perpetuate it.

One final component of how decolonization and communication merge to call out and disrupt the discourse of white saviorism is through decentering American and European logics. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism,* Shohat and Stam focus on popular culture and media to critique the ways Eurocentrism is seen as natural, right, and common throughout culture and society. It is through American and European centered logic that the West and non-West binary developed, linear time became understood as common sense, cultural appropriation was made acceptable, and nobody batted an eye at minimizing the destructive history of imperial nations. In relation to how narratives are constructed, through film, mass media, or documentary, Shohat and Stam write, "By focusing on the moral dilemmas of the dominant group rather than on structures of oppression, liberal discourse also devalorizes the lives of the people of color" (24). The perspective of white savior discourse often centers the emotions and ethical tragedies facing the audience viewing or receiving the message, rather than the subjects such a campaign supposedly is helping. To disrupt this, scholars like Raka Shome are pushing to change the narrative and

practices at the intersection of postcolonial studies and media studies. She views the articulation of these two fields as mutually beneficial, in which "postcolonial frameworks unsettle dominant (and unmarked) West-centric logics that inform the received history of media as well as the functioning of media…[and] how a focus on media opens up the field of postcolonial studies to conundrums and challenges" ("When Postcolonial" 246). Like Abu-Lughod, and Shohat and Stam, Shome argues that the American and European centered logic in media needs to be challenged. Messages will continue to perpetuate the white savior myth to the Global North and the victimization myth to the Global South without the incorporation of postcolonial critiques and decolonial activism like those illustrated in the opening of this chapter. Shome claims that decolonizing media frameworks must be the goal for communication scholars and postcolonial studies alike. Even further, as NWS demonstrated earlier, this work can be done by activists, social media users, and current humanitarians.

Serving in Peace Corps revealed the problematic white savior tendencies in my own beliefs and actions. The photographs I captured during that time are parallel in many ways to the images I analyzed in this study: selfies with my host sisters, dressing in traditional Rwandan attire for a local wedding, traveling to nearby Lake Kivu for a vacation with fellow PCVs, and wide angle snapshots of the "land of a thousand hills." My personal photographic archive reflects the myth, ideology, and behavior of white saviorism. Even more explicitly, the title of my blog "AfricanWannabe" demonstrates the unintentional cultural appropriation, the desire for the Other, and neocolonial self-branding practices I engaged in at the time. As a scholar, social media user, and recovering white savior, I see the current shift in the discourse that merges decolonization strategies with communication as hopeful and inspiring. Peace Corps is part of my personal narrative but how I share those experiences is essential to the decolonization

process. I no longer have images of myself during that time posted on social media because I recognize the issues not only with the photographs themselves, but with the act of publicly sharing them for my own self-branding purposes. To this day, when I disclose my service in Peace Corps to others their response is in the form of accolades. Part of the act of decolonizing white saviorism is in how I reply to their praise, not by deflection or humility, but through admitting the problematic implications of such work and by poking holes in their own white savior fantasies or beliefs. The way I see it, as a white person, it is my responsibility to hold other white people accountable for the perpetuation of the discourse of white saviorism and point toward informative, educational, even provocative resources that work to disrupt this ongoing trend.

While society has certainly taken steps away from the 1980s images depicting suffering, starving children, much work is left to be done to not only decolonize this discourse but the behaviors and logics of humanitarianism itself. I have attempted to map out the various shifts and evolutions in the discourse of white saviorism as a way to demonstrate how social media can be used to both perpetuate and disrupt its myths, ideologies, and behaviors. In Chapter 1, I explored how self-branding is the ethical substance of today's white saviors. By looking at posts by current Peace Corps Volunteers on Instagram, I explained how reproducing and normalizing behaviors that are harmful and offensive to people in the Global South are performed for self-serving reasons. In Chapter 2, I pointed out how irony and comic framing of the discourse by Barbie Savior is entertaining but simply highlights the ease with which one can replicate white saviorism. Finally, the brief discussion in this chapter focuses on how scholars and social media users can draw on postcolonial theory to strategize effective decolonizing activism online. Chouliaraki writes that people must balance a "delicate act between being good to others whilst

being skeptical about any justification for such goodness that transcends ourselves" (205). With social media and scholarship alike, I argue that we can choose to participate in the mythological narrative that white savior discourse sells us or we can use these outlets as platforms for calling out the problems with white saviorism and continue to engage in critical, anti-racist, decolonial ways.

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