The White Savior Film and Reviewers' Reception

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This article documents the collective interpretations of film reviewers, a position typically associated with individual aesthetic judgment rather than socially shared scripts of explanation. Drawing on the reviews of a feature film with implicit racial content, produced in the context of a supposedly "color-blind" era, this article documents how reviewers constitute a racialized interpretive community. Reviewers rely on specific cultural frameworks to both contest and reproduce the notion of a "post-racial" society. These interpretations equate nonwhites with pathological and dysfunctional traits, frame hard work as a white normative characteristic, and construct deterministic views of both Hollywood's ability to represent progressive racial representations and the educational system's potential. This analysis illustrates how film reviews operate as mediating voices between producer and consumer, and in so doing, the interpretations of the film serve as "common-sensed" mappings of the contested terrain of contemporary race relations.
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Freedom Writers (Paramount Pictures, 2007) is based on the "true story" of pedagogical superstar "Erin Gruwell"—a young, white, female high school teacher charged with teaching a majority nonwhite, low-income, "at-risk" classroom. For many, the film represents the latest installation in a spate of Hollywood films known as "white savior films" (WSF). The genre features a group of lower-class, urban, nonwhites (generally black and Latino/a) who struggle through the social order in general, or the educational system specifically. Yet through the sacrifices of a white teacher they are transformed, saved, and redeemed by film's end. Examples include *Conrack* (1974), *Glory* (1989), *Dangerous Minds* (1996), *Sunset Park* (1996), *Amistad* (1997), *Music of the Heart* (1999), *Finding Forrester* (2000), *Hardball* (2001), *Half-Nelson* (2006), and *Gran Torino* (2008). The widespread recognition of the WSF is not solely the product of academics or activists but also the result of laypersons, as several online groups,

discussion forums, and popular magazines have recently addressed the phenomenon. This racialized genus has so saturated the popular imagination that the comedy show *MadTV* recently parodied the genre:

> School Administrator: "Forget it. These are minorities. They can't learn and they can't be educated."

> School Teacher: "With all due respect sir, I'm a white lady. I can do anything."[1]

Given the wide dispersion of media dialogue about the rise of either a "new racism" or a "postracial" society, films of this ilk make for stormy debate. Hence film reviewers and critics, as sources of cultural authority that navigate our racial tempest, are increasingly perceived as valuable voices (Duan, Gu, and Whinston 2008; Holbrook 1999). After all, filmgoing and its subsequent interpretation are quasi-ritualized social activities (Lyden 2003; Stempel 2001). One may rely on the evaluations of film critics so as not to "lose face" (Goffman 1963) or accrue the label of "racist" (Bonilla-Silva 2003) when discussing racialized films in public or sensitive social settings. In this vein, with a film such as *Freedom Writers* placed in the foreground of the contemporary landscape of complex race relations and contradictory racial discourse, it is worth asking: How do professional film reviewers—supposedly acquainted with the nuance of this genre, popular culture, politics, and cinematic aesthetics—make meaning of a film like *Freedom Writers*?

While a wide range of research directly examines the content of WSFs (Bernardi 2007; Chennault 1996; Giroux 1997; Moore and Pierce 2007; Rodríguez 1997; Stoddard and Marcus 2006; Vera and Gordon 2003), there remains a substantial gap in empirical analyses of how active audiences comprehend these films. Such a deficit is an epistemological lacuna that stands in the way of mapping how authoritative meanings about WSFs are produced in the context of our current racial landscape. Moreover, as the world shifts from the "golden age" of capitalism to a "neoliberal" service economy, we find massive growth in the entertainment industries, especially that of film and its distribution across theaters, cable television, DVDs, and an array of avenues for legal and illegal digital downloads. With a burgeoning cinematic marketplace, the role of critics is of great import (Eliashberg and Shugan 1997; Holbrook 1999; West and Broniarczyk 1998). More than one-third of those living in the United States report seeking the advice of film critics, and approximately one-third of filmgoers say they choose films based on favorable reviews (*Wall Street Journal* 2001). In fact, Baumann (2002) finds that the marketing of film relies on incorporating quotes from film critics to such an extent that the omission of reviewers' words may raise suspicions among potential audience members. Accordingly, Basuroy, Chatterjee, and Ravid (2003) find that film reviews are correlated with weekly box office revenue, suggesting that critics play a dual role: reviewers both influence and predict box office revenue.

This article documents the collective interpretations of film reviewers, a position typically associated with individual aesthetic judgment rather than socially shared scripts of explanation. The meanings of a film are enmeshed in a complex process composed by an array of social relations that extend far beyond the realm of individual

"aesthetic" evaluation (Barthes 1985). Interpretation is a social practice in which ideological meanings are unpacked within the context of the recipients. Moreover, these collective judgments and interpretations are political acts in which audiences make meanings via symbolic boundaries of "us and them" (Becker 1982; Denzin 1992). As such, interpretation is a cultural practice embedded in specific *interpretive communities*. Drawing on the reviews of a feature film with implicit racial content, produced in the context of a supposedly "color-blind" era, this article demonstrates how reviewers constitute a racialized interpretive community. Reviewers rely on specific cultural frameworks, most notably that of "color-blind racism" (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 2003) and the "white racial frame" (Feagin 2006, 2009) to both contest and reproduce the notion of a postracial society. These interpretations often equate non-whites with pathological and dysfunctional traits, frame hard work as a white-norma-tive characteristic, and construct deterministic views of both Hollywood's ability to represent progressive racial representations and the educational system's potential. The analysis herein illustrates how film reviews operate as mediating voices between producer and consumer, and in so doing, the interpretations associated with the film serve as supposedly "common-sensed" mappings of today's racial landscape.

FILM REVIEWERS: INFLUENTIAL INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

Film and the Circuit of Meaning

The widespread appeal of film makes audiences a particularly important site for examining the meaning of race in North America (Entman and Rojecki 2001; Fe-agin 2003:vii; Hunt 2005). In the year *Freedom Writers* was released (2007), the U.S. film industry generated over 9.5 billion dollars in domestic box office revenue and saw over 1.4 billion customers in theaters (Motion Picture Association of America 2008). The average U.S. citizen spends about thirteen hours a year at movie theaters, half of all adults watch movies at least once a month, and 60 percent of people ages nine to seventeen watch at least one movie a week (ONDCP 2002). In addition to visiting theaters, more people are watching movies at home. By 2006 81.2 percent of all U.S. households reported owning at least one DVD player, 79.2 percent owned at least one VCR, and 73.4 percent owned at least one computer (Nielsen Media Research 2006). Also, 33 percent of U.S. households have at least one high-definition television (HDTV), which are increasingly marketed for in-home viewing of movies (Nielsen Wire 2009). Movies are also now available online and through the mail via services such as CinemaNow, Movielink, NetFlix, and Starz! Ticket on Real Movies. Internet downloads of film (both legal and illegal) are growing at an exponential rate (Adkinson, Lenard, and Pickford 2004). The popularity of movies as a source of entertainment and cultural expression means that they reach farther than many other discursive forms (Entman and Rojecki 2001).

Perspectives on the intersection of media and audiences have traversed several stages: from deterministic models á la Adorno and Horkheimer (1977), the "Sociol-ogy of Mass Persuasion" (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Merton 1946), and the "Uses

and Gratifications" approach (Blumler, Gurevitch, and Katz 1985; Halloran 1970) to that of the "cultural turn" and the resurgence of "symbolic interaction" (Denzin 2001). A symbolic interactionist approach resists cynical and reductive views that "meaningless" mass-produced and distributed images have wiped out the agency of the subject. Rather, the interactionist paradigm centers on how people make meaning of things (such as film), how meanings are derived from social interaction, and how meanings are modified through a continual process of interpretation (Blumer 1958, 1969; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005).

In terms of the reception of racialized images, Blumer (1958:3–4) wrote over a half century ago that "racial groups form images of themselves and others . . . chiefly through the public media." Such images are not static forms of visual rhetoric but are practices, speech, performances, and actions. Moreover, Denzin (2001:246) writes,

> In any historical moment, racial discourse is embedded in a range of texts, institutional sites, and rituals. This discourse draws on the preexisting racist beliefs and ideologies. This never-ending discourse produces the racial subject, over and over again. A racial subject, or racial group, cannot exist outside of the performative discourses that produce it. Thus race is a process.

In this sense, the symbolic interactionist approach allows us a "middle ground" whereby neither structure nor agency is negated; both the racial representations in the film and the racialized audience receiving them are mutually constitutive. That is, audiences make active meaning of movies while movies are produced to engender what audiences desire and find relevant.

Such a relationship between producer and consumer begs the question: where does one intercede in the circuit of meaning production? For the majority of scholars researching the meaning of WSFs, their point of intervention has been the content of the movie genre itself (Bernardi 2007; Chennault 1996; Giroux 1997; Moore and Pierce 2007; Rodríguez 1997; Stoddard and Marcus 2006; Vera and Gordon 2003). This approach often places WSFs in a historical trajectory whereby the film reflects the paradoxical mix of progress and stasis in Hollywood's representation of racial identities and race relations. On the one hand, some argue that while Hollywood racism is historically entrenched, its force has lessened in recent years (Bogle 2001; Hunt 2005). That is, explicit racism has changed in content, form, and intensity—from the sanitized and assimilated Sidney Poitier films of the 1950s and 1960s, to the "blaxploitation" films of the 1970s, the "Cosby era" of the 1980s, to the "utopian reversal" (Entman and Rojecki 2001) of the 1990s, which brought interracial cooperation and friendship to meet public demands for diversity (Gray 1995). Many now cite the intersection of race and film as more progressive and egalitarian than ever before. On the other hand, while admitting a sea change in racial representations, others point to contemporary Hollywood movies as one of the main instruments for establishing a context in which whiteness—whether victimized or valorized—is framed as ultimately superior and normative. In this vein, racism has shifted from overt expression to subtle and hegemonic qualities (Bernardi 2007; Hughey 2009a). Such a process, according to Vera and Gordon (2003), ultimately produces "sincere

fictions of the white self." That is, while films like *Freedom Writers* seem to tell a "positive" story of nonwhite uplift, they also validate a structurally violent and racist educational and legal system, demonize youth and lower socioeconomic cultural patterns associated with people of color, and ultimately sanctify a sole white teacher as a messianic character of biblical proportions.

While much of the aforementioned work remains astute in evaluating WSF genre-conventions, it does not examine how active audiences—vis-à-vis reviewers— decode these films. That is, while films are "cultural objects" (Griswold 2002) that resonate with the larger society because of their "aura" (Schudson 2002), we often ignore how film reviewers construct and reform that aura. By tackling this side of the equation, we can enter the circuit of meaning production by asking how meaning is re-produced and sustained in and by critical communities. Perhaps the most significant of all film communities today is that of film critics, who serve as highly influential interpretive communities.

Film Reviewers and the Film Industry

Baumann (2002) writes that very little is known about the history of film reviewers, but finds that film advertisements with reviewer blurbs significantly increased over time: from 6.9 percent in 1935 to 46.6 percent in 1980. Baumann argues that this growth resulted from a fundamental shift in moviegoing: film became a legitimate art form, not simply a popular pastime. As an "art world" (Becker 1982) for film developed in the 1960s, U.S. scholastic attention turned to the understanding of critics' roles in markets and the political economy (Cameron 1995). One of the earliest studies on film critics found a significant flow of influence from movie "experts" to their "advisees," in that people sought out opinions from those they felt were well informed about film and popular culture (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Years later Austin (1983) found that critics assist the public in making film choices, understand film content, and perhaps most importantly, communicate thoughts about the film in social settings. Cameron (1995) argues that critics are vital for enjoyable consumption experiences—in that reviews can be fun to read in and of themselves. This effect is far from isolated: more than one-third of those living in the United States report seeking the advice of film critics, and approximately one-third of filmgoers say they choose films based on favorable reviews (*Wall Street Journal* 2001).

Many empirical studies have since examined the relationship between film reviews and box office performance (De Silva 1998; Jedidi, Krider, and Weinberg 1998; Litman and Ahn 1998; Ravid 1999; Sochay 1994). Overall, the results are mixed. For example, Eliashberg and Shugan (1997) found that critics correctly predicted box office performance but did not influence it, while Gemser, Van Oostrum, Leenders, and Mark (2007) found that the number and size of film reviews in newspapers directly influences which films audiences decide to see, how long the movies last in theaters, and how much movies gross. From the large corpus of sundry evidence, two principles emerge: first, as denoted by contradictory findings, a confident conclusion

regarding a causal relationship between reviews and box office sales is untenable. Second, sufficient evidence points to the ability of reviewers to actively mediate the *meanings* of films for audiences (Cloud 1992; Cooper 2000; Holbrook 1999; Prince 1997). Hence Basuroy, Chatterjee, and Ravid (2003:103) report: "The desire for good reviews can go even further, thus prompting studios to engage in deceptive practices, as when Sony Pictures Entertainment invented the critic David Manning to give glowing reviews to several films."

Interpretive Communities and Dominant Ideology

Entman and Rojecki (2001:188) write, "Film reviews may provide an indicator of the play of these market and cultural forces through the racial images of films." Despite their admonition, sparse attention falls on how reviewers frame films that take on the topics of race, education, and identity—issues endemic to the genre of WSFs—and there remains little discussion of how film reviews are representative of larger social forces. As Vannini (2004:48, 49–50) writes:

> interpretation is thus a social practice—a practice that in the late capitalist era works as a form of decoding of the ideological meanings inscribed into the art-turned commodity by its commercial producers. . . . A political aesthetics of interpretation is thus a cultural practice rooted in a specific interpretive community.

Accordingly, we must resist the temptation to view film reviews as if they exist as individual entities within a cultural vacuum. They are both the product and cause of significant social expectations. Hsu and Podolny (2005:191) write:

> Viewed in isolation, a critic's review is simply a judgment about qualities of an individual act or work. However, reviews do not exist in isolation. . . . The slot into which the critic places the work strongly shapes the expectations, perception, and—at a more basic level—the attention of that broader audience. [Some reviews] . . . may have more of the character of a social movement, with different individuals making partial contributions to a broader whole.

Simply put, reviewers play a critical role in the social construction of a film's reality (Entman and Rojecki 2001; Vera and Gordon 2003). The patterns revealed in reviewers' interpretations are indicative of social forces that construct and present a movie star's persona, choose specific targets as "worthwhile" from an increasing plethora of films, select a specific review technique (from content and stylistic parameters), and make value judgments regarding the individuals, interests, and interactions represented.

The Cultural Logic of "Color-Blind Racism" and "White Racial Framing"

As Denzin (2001:244) writes, "The media and the cinematic racial order are basic to the understanding of race relations in any society." Hence reviewers' public and authoritative interpretations of racialized films are practices rooted in the dominant logic of today's racial order, namely, the combination of "color-blind racism" (Bonilla-Silva 2002,

2003) and "white racial framing" (Feagin 2006, 2009). In the former, various "linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies" (Bonilla-Silva 2003:53) provide a means by which people rationalize (in seemingly nonracial terms) practices that reproduce white privilege and casually justify racial inequality. For example, a particularly seductive strategy is the "cultural racism" approach that "relies on culturally-based arguments such as 'Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education' or 'blacks have too many babies' to explain the standing of minorities in society" (Bonilla-Silva 2003:28). In the latter, Feagin (2006:27) contends that since the 1600s, practices of racial domination have been rationalized via the synthesis of "racial stereotypes (the cognitive aspect), metaphors and concepts (the deeper cognitive aspect), images (the visual aspect), emotions (feelings like fear), and inclinations (to take discriminatory action)." To this, we can add narratives (historical myths like "manifest destiny") that construct whites as heroic and virtuous and nonwhites as dysfunctional and dangerous—what Takaki (1979) calls "virtuous republicanism"—concentrated repositories of the Protestant ethic that frames whites as innocent in relation to the supposed impurity of racialized "others."

I argue that in studying film reviews, we may observe how interpretive practices of reviewers make meanings of the cinematic text in ways that layperson audiences can easily understand and believe—a decisively social endeavor embedded in a racialized cultural logic. Because meanings are always sets of practices whereby reality is created, maintained, and transformed, while they are also reified into a force seemingly independent of human action, a symbolic interactionist approach to film reviews is not only useful but imperative.

THE BACKGROUND OF *FREEDOM WRITERS*

In 1994 a young white woman named Erin Gruwell began her student teaching at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. As student teachers typically possess lower status than other teachers, she was assigned to a low-performing classroom. From the onset, Gruwell (1999) described a rough setting: from students threatening each other to students' apparent vendettas to disrupt her lessons. Months later, Gruwell intercepted a note depicting an antiblack racist caricature. Infuriated, she instructed the class that such depictions were once used by the Nazi regime to dehumanize people as a rationale for their extermination. Supposedly, only one of the students knew about the Holocaust, and Gruwell changed the theme of her curriculum to that of "tolerance" (*Instructor* 2004). Gruwell then engaged in various methods to teach the class about oppression, resistance, and racial/ethnic identity, taking the students to see *Schindler's List*, assigning *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and inviting guest speakers to lecture on diversity. The following year, Gruwell returned to Wilson as a full-time teacher and asked her freshman English course to make movies of their lives, to keep journals, and to relate their experiences of "gang warfare" to the family feud in *Romeo and Juliet*. A remarkable "turnaround" occurred in her students, as all 150 of her students—a group she deemed the "Freedom

Writers"—graduated. The 100 hundred percent graduation rate supposedly shocked school administrators who believed that the students were not intelligent enough to read "higher-level" books (Gruwell 1999).[2]

These tales were published in a book titled *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World around Them* (1999). Such actions garnered a great deal of media attention, from *PrimeTime Live* to *Good Morning America*. Since the publication of the book, Gruwell founded the Freedom Writers Foundation, a charitable organization that promotes tolerance and empowers both teachers and underserved students. *The Freedom Writers Diary* became the basis for the film *Freedom Writers*, starring Oscar winner Hilary Swank as Gruwell. The film quotes heavily from the text, including verbatim voice-overs of the students' own recountings of their lives.

DATA AND METHODS

To examine how reviewers make meaning of *Freedom Writers*, I created a collection of film reviews via the "Movie Review Query Engine" (http://www.mrqe.com/). When I accessed the clearinghouse, it held 47, 861 reviews on 69,732 films. The preliminary search for reviews of *Freedom Writers* yielded 131 reviews. After I selected only English-language reviews based in either the United States or Canada, the final number of reviews I analyzed was reduced (*n* = 119). The mean word count per review is 710.24. The reviews included not only the most mainstream and originally print-based sources like the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post* but also the more arcane and solely Web-based like "Reeling Reviews" and "The Flick Filosopher," as well as the more well-known Web-based reviews like "PopMatters" and "The Onion A.V. Room," and race-specific or gender-specific sites like "Black Flix" and "The Movie Chicks" (see Table 1). All of the reviews were published between December 29, 2006, and January 9, 2007, with the majority of reviews (*n* = 91) published on the opening day of the film: January 5, 2007.

There are various kinds of reviews. Prince (1997) distills the cacophony of reviews into two general forms. The first is "mainstream"—the primary goal is to guide the reader's decision on whether to view the film. This type of review generally affords a brief summary of the plot, the cast, and a judgment on its quality. The second type of review is "journal-based criticism"—which is longer, less consumer-oriented, and aimed at a specific audience (by racial, gender, political demographic, etc.), and labors to situate the film in historical, social, and political contexts. Accordingly, I found that roughly one-third (*n* = 42, 35.3%) of the reviews fell into the former mainstream category, while two-thirds (*n* = 77, 64.7%) can be categorized as the latter journal-based criticism. As I detail below, however, I found no substantive differences between these two types of reviews in regard to the presence of racialized themes.

Each review was coded in three stages. First, a single review was the unit of analysis. Reviews were read in their entirety, and notes were taken to obtain an overview

TABLE 1. Frequency of Frame Usage

Master Frame 1	"Dysfunctional Depictions" $n = 112$, 94.1%			
Secondary Frame	Student Pathology $n = 108$, 90.8%	Gruwell Pathology $n = 13$, 10.9%	Student Racism $n = 36$, 30.3%	Administrative Racism $n = 8$, 6.7%
Master Frame 2	"The Color of Meritocracy" $n = 36$, 30.3%			
Secondary Frame	Students $n = 8$, 6.7%	Gruwell $n = 29$, 24.4%		

Master Frame 3	"Race Matters?" $n = 77$, 64.7%				
Secondary Frame	Yet Another White Savior Film $n = 35$, 29.4%			Color-Blind Education $n = 30$, 25.2%	
Tertiary Frame	Overrepetition $n = 23$, 19.3%	No Realism $n = 18$, 15.1%	Explicit Racism $n = 16$, 13.4%	Real Life Story $n = 26$, 21.8%	Movie Produces Conflict $n = 17$, 14.3%	Economics Is Real Problem $n = 16$, 13.5%

of the review's thrust, while I deductively searched for common themes related to WSFs (e.g., race, racism, inequality, power, education, authority, and bureaucracy [cf. Bernardi 2007; Chennault 1996; Giroux 1997; Moore and Pierce 2007; Rodríguez 1997; Stoddard and Marcus 2006; Vera and Gordon 2003]). This preliminary reading served to inductively refine the deductive coding process. Second, I again analyzed the reviews and formally coded them to determine both theme frequency and form. During this stage, I coded judiciously, identifying themes only when it was clear that the review reflected those different codes. As most themes are intimately linked, there are instances in which the reviews referenced more than one theme at a time, thus each was recorded to reflect overlapping categories. Third, drawing from Goffman's "frame analysis," I read the reviews to gauge how various themes cohered into larger ideological "frames." To assess validity and dependability, I used an intercoder reliability measure. An independent research assistant identified a random subset of roughly half the sample ($n = 58$) and coded each review. The assistant had no knowledge of my calculations. Agreement percentages, Scott's Pi, and Krippendorff's Alpha were tabulated. Overall, the findings suggest a strong and robust agreement along primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (see Table 2).

Notwithstanding the periodic symbolic nods to Goffman, frame analysis spans disparate approaches (D'Angelo 2002; Hallahan 1999; Maher 2001). While framing finds applicability in management/organizational and social movement studies, I am concerned with its relation to symbolic interaction. The work of Iyengar (1991), Entman (1993), and Reese (2001) is emblematic of this convention, the latter of whom writes, "Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent

TABLE 2. Inter-coder Reliability Measures

Theme	Agreement Percentage	Scott's Pi	Krippendorff's Alpha
Dysfunctional Depictions	0.828	−0.094	−0.085
The Color of Meritocracy	0.931	−0.036	−0.027
Race Matters?	0.845	−0.084	−0.075
Student Pathology	0.914	−0.045	−0.036
Gruwell Pathology	0.776	−0.126	−0.117
Student Racism	0.914	−0.045	−0.036
Administrative Racism	0.897	−0.055	−0.045
Student Meritocracy	0.845	−0.084	−0.075
Gruwell Meritocracy	0.879	−0.064	−0.055
Yet Another White Savior Film	0.966	−0.018	−0.009
Color-Blind Education	0.862	−0.074	−0.065
Overrepetition	0.810	−0.105	−0.095
Lack of Realism	0.793	−0.115	−0.106
Structurally-Entrenched Racism	0.828	−0.094	−0.085
Real-Life Story	0.897	−0.055	−0.045
Movies Produce Racial	0.845	−0.084	−0.075
Economics Is Real Problem	0.966	−0.018	−0.009

over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (Reese 2001:11). Such a definition avoids rooting frames in a static feature of the "media text" or in the "black box" of the individual mind. Hence I identified what codes cohered and supported larger, prominent, and overarching themes, which the film reviewer may assume readers understand a priori. Specifically, I examined how reviewers framed *Freedom Writers* in terms of (1) problems/solutions, (2) causes/effects, (3) value judgments, and (4) how audiences should respond to the film. These guidelines helped explicate the three most prominent "enduring cultural themes" (Gamson 1988), or what McAdam (1994) calls "masterframes." These masterframes are (1) "Dysfunctional Depictions" (how characters and culture were understood as either normative and practical or strange and dysfunctional, (2) "The Color of Meritocracy" (how the hard work and laziness of characters and culture were explained via implicit racial codes, and (3) "Race Matters?" (how the film's positioning in the WSF genre was navigated). These masterframes, along with secondary and tertiary frames, are accessible in Table 1.

As sociological constructs, the various levels of frames are defined as both competing and cooperative social structures, which organize symbolic material so that certain perspectives are understood as logical, sensible, and normal (Gamson 1992; Kosicki and McLeod 1990). Frame analysis has been useful in examining the methods by which media frames are constructed (Entman and Rojecki 1993; Morreale 1991), how frames are influenced by political advocacy groups (Hertsgaard 1988), and how framing directly affects media consumption (Gamson 1992; Livingstone 1990).

Media researchers commonly employ frame analysis as an extension of the "agenda setting" model. However, I employ framing to venture beyond that approach to examine how frames both re-produce and contest the aforementioned logics of "color-blindness" (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 2003) and the "white racial frame" (Feagin 2006, 2009).

DYSFUNCTIONAL DEPICTIONS: PATHOLOGICAL PEOPLE OF COLOR

Nonwhite formations (especially African American and Latino/a communities) are frequently associated with various forms of cultural deficiencies and self-destructive behaviors. The dominance of this discourse actively serves as a strategy of obscuration—mystifying what structural factors (from joblessness and discrimination to a lack of health care and white violence) make conformity to the cult of whiteness impossible (even if desired). Instead, the invocation of a rhetoric of "bad values" remains a powerful tool for demonizing black and Latino/a racial formations.

As a consequence, the popular imagination has effectively married nonwhiteness to various "pathologies": criminality, hostility, a childlike demeanor, a lack of mental capacity, and a desire to exploit the social system for unearned "handouts." The reviews of *Freedom Writers* indicate that a strong relationship between culture and identity frames racialized depictions. Altogether, pathological descriptions of people of color occurred in 113 of the reviews (94.1%), and 108 of the reviews (90.8%) spoke of the students in the film as "dysfunctional," "criminals," "degenerates," "illiterate," or "racially divided miscreants and roughnecks." In comparison, such depictions of Gruwell and the school administration were used sparingly ($n = 16$, 13.5%). As a reviewer from *Movies 101* wrote: "Life for children like these is like hanging on to a tightrope between death in the gangs and death as a bystander, to say nothing of the slower death that comes from living in a totally dysfunctional family." *DVD Clinic*'s first sentence frames the movie from the start: "Teacher (Swank) hopes to turn a classroom of dysfunctional students into a group that cares about education, life, and themselves."

While the harsh realities of crime, poverty, and the effects of a (mis)educational system cannot be discounted, what is particularly striking is that these reviewers do not point to socioeconomic conditions as causal, but "bad values" as *the* cause. A framework that demonizes people of color is a great deal more convenient, concise, and clear for a film review than spending word space to address the dynamics that re-create those conditions. The review from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* is emblematic of this culture-as-cause approach:

> Frustrated with her [Gruwell] public school's inability to educate her troubled kids, she bucked the system with unconventional teaching methods, broke the students' culture of race-based violence and mistrust, and enabled them to learn.

Framed as proverbial "bad-culture-breaker," Gruwell is not just a teacher but a social engineer, descended from John Dewey and Horatio Alger, who engages the rank and rabble to both educate and liberate.

Such framing of people of color as pathological nihilists and Gruwell as posses-
sive of the right (read: white) type of culture is incommensurate with the observa-
tion that Gruwell's character is plagued by many of the same "dysfunctions" that
reviewers castigate: she comes from a one-parent household, has an unsupportive
father, and seems incredibly self-absorbed, and her marriage results in divorce. Only
thirteen of the reviews (10.9%) cover those aspects of her life, and even when men-
tioned they are stated matter-of-factly in ten reviews (08.4%).

This theme continues when reviewers turn their attention to the subject of racism.
A central premise in the film's own construction, racism is brought to the forefront in
reference to the tripartite relationship of black-Latino/a-Asian racism, collective racism
toward whites, the white school administrators' racism toward nonwhite students, and
the German state-sponsored racism of the Third Reich. Despite the relatively equal
levels of racism distributed throughout the film, reviewers concentrate on the students'
racism. In thirty-six of the reviews (30.3%) the racism/prejudice/racial hatred of the stu-
dents was specifically highlighted. Yet only eight of the reviews (06.7%) mentioned the
racism of the school officials as important to the story. In this regard, *Stylus Magazine*
frames the racism of the school administrators as inauthentic and unrealistic, present-
ing the view that racism would not occur among such education professionals:

> Gruwell's antagonists are an overly pragmatic administrator and an honors teacher
> who attacks Gruwell for attempting to reach her "animalistic" students. Their
> candid racism seems dubious, especially when you consider that divulging such
> appalling viewpoints to a coworker could be detrimental to one's job security.
> The film all but supplies these overplayed and extraneous villains with handlebar
> moustaches to twirl mischievously while cackling about their evil schemes.

Reel.com wrote that such displays of white racism make the characters unbelievable:

> There has to be conflict between Erin and Margaret and Brian, who do not just
> resent her meddling in the Darwinian educational system they serve, they are
> unapologetically racist as well. The two teachers are so poorly written and such
> stereotypes that they are scarcely believable.

When reviewers engage in framing as exemplified above, they effectively resolidify
a white supremacist weltanschauung that equates whiteness with purity and non-
whiteness with cultural and biological contamination.

THE COLOR OF MERITOCRACY

Piggybacking off the last frame, many reviewers concentrated not on the negative
aspects of society like racism or violence but on how characters overcame such ob-
stacles with hard work and concentrated perseverance ($n = 36, 30.3\%$). Such values are
commonly understood as the core of "the American Dream." Accordingly, the United
States is portrayed as a land of nearly limitless opportunity in which social mobility
is ostensibly based on individual merit—generally viewed as a combination of innate
abilities, hard work, the right attitude, and high moral character. Most U.S. citizens
tend to think that is not only how the system *should* work, but most also think this is

how the system *does* work (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Ladd 1994). Reviews commonly display this ideology in framing many of the narratives in *Freedom Writers*.

Moreover, such selections seem guided by racialized distinctions. For example, reviews consistently referenced specific "true story" aspects of the film to present Gruwell as emblematic of a meritocratic and noble teacher. On the one hand, this is not surprising, as the film is constructed around Gruwell as the protagonist. On the other hand, this framing seems bizarre given the absence of attention on the students' efforts to raise their grades and engage in other progressive cocurricular tasks, despite immersion in the harsh conditions on which the reviewers so frequently commented. In twenty-nine of the reviews (24.4%) Gruwell was referenced with words and phrases like "devoted," "committed," "She even takes up two jobs to pay for books the school refuses to provide," and "her achievements at work." In comparison, the students were referenced in regard to meritocratic concepts in only eight of the reviews (6.7%).

The analysis reveals that reviewers rely on a "color-blind" frame that reproduces a view of educational attainment, hard work, and success in terms of white accomplishments. The substantial racial variance in emphasizing meritocratic behavior demonstrates that while many reviews indicate race-conscious ideologies and point out systemic inequality in the schooling system, they are both constrained and enabled by a cultural logic of white racial framing.

RACE MATTERS

As discussed above, numerous Hollywood films have firmly entrenched the WSF motif in popular culture, even if writers and directors attempted to construct color-blind tales of teacher-saves-the-world. Given the collectively shared realization that the WSF is a predominant genre, many reviewers were quick to point out its manifestation in *Freedom Writers*. As one reviewer from "PopMatters" stated, "When I tried to get my roommate to watch *Freedom Writers* she took one look at the cover and said, 'I hate these white savior movies.'" Accordingly, seventy-seven of the reviews (64.7%) clearly identified the WSF trope. However, the frames by which reviewers' understandings were constrained and enabled were of two distinct types: a view of *Freedom Writers* as yet another film in the long tradition of white-teacher-saves-black-students ($n = 35$, 29.4%), and another as a true-to-life story in which reviewers implored readers to read the film as a color-blind story of classroom cooperation ($n = 30$, 25.2%).

Yet Another White Savior Film

I first turn to how reviewers understand the film as indicative of the WSF genre. In this approach, reviewers concentrated on several factors: (1) overrepetition, (2) lack of realism, and (3) structurally entrenched racism. Accordingly, some of the reviews ($n = 23$, 19.3%) explicitly singled out how Hollywood repeatedly draws from the well of the WSF. *EmpireOnline* writes:

> Enthusiastic white teacher takes a job educating disillusioned ethnic-minority
> kids from LA's gang-torn suburbs and turns a bunch of tetchy no-hopers into stu-
> dents who would make America proud. Veteran screenwriter Richard LaGrave-
> nese has hardly picked an original storyline for his first major feature as director,
> and comparisons with the likes of *The Emperor's Club*, *Coach Carter* and, most
> obviously, *Dangerous Minds* are inevitable—and fair.

Many of these reviewers expressed tones of exasperation, frustration, and even dis-
belief in regard to the director's use of this plot structure. Many continually placed
Freedom Writers within a cinematic genealogy of like-minded films, but eventually
derided the film as failing to rise to the level of many of its predecessors. A reviewer
at *Dark Horizons* wrote:

> It's another January, which means another "inspirational" drama about someone
> telling unruly students that getting an education in literature will get them out
> of their miserable lives. It's so well trodden material, whether it be "To Sir with
> Love," "Dead Poets Society," "Dangerous Minds," "Coach Carter," and so on that
> it's the few that actually make their teachers into fallible real people—like last
> year's "Half Nelson" and "The History Boys"—that deserve notice. "Freedom
> Writers" isn't one of those genre breakers however. The MTV drama may take its
> page from real life stories but breaks much of it down into trite formula despite a
> solid cast capable of far better things.

Reviews of this ilk generally challenged the validity of the attempt by *Freedom Writ-
ers* to tell Gruwell's story ($n = 18$, 15.1%). Many of these reviews highlighted the
implausibility of the film's display of pedagogical heroics. Specifically, many seemed
to take umbrage that the film mystified the work of a teacher placed in between re-
sistive students and a doctrinaire administration. As "The Flick Filosopher" wrote:

> The game Swank is Erin Gruwell, a Southern California newbie teacher who
> rocked the limited worlds of her inner-city gangbanger students by introduc-
> ing them to the power of the written word. Word up! Book 'em! Or something.
> Gruwell is a real person and her kids, who'd been abandoned by The System, did ac-
> tually triumph in real life, but movies like this only denigrate their achievement by
> making it look like a snap to overcome the wheels of oppression and ignorance.

Many reviews aimed to correct much of the disinformation about not only the film
but the book on which the film was based. As the *Chicago Tribune* wrote:

> Swank's film feels less like a strange truth than Hollywood fiction. That's not be-
> cause we can't buy a California English teacher broadening her students' world-
> view from gang warfare to a grasp of history and the grace of humanity. It's be-
> cause this film fails to earn what Gruwell earned in real life: credibility.

Enabled by a framework in which *Freedom Writers* was nothing more than frenzied
sentimentalism and "feel good" racial reconciliation, reviewers became amateurish
historiographers with a bone to pick with not only veteran writer/director Richard
LaGravenese but the real-life Erin Gruwell. *Cinema Blend* wrote:

> She doesn't discover a magic formula for getting gangbangers to stop shooting
> each other in the chest, she simply stumbles on a class full of downtrodden, violent
> kids who happen to be ready to listen. As portrayed in the film, the secret to her

> success was simply blind, stupid idealism. I doubt it would work again. The real
> Erin Gruwell quit High School teaching and moved on to a college professorship
> immediately after shepherding this one group of kids through Wilson High, so
> perhaps she'd agree.

This understanding of the film's "hyperfiction," coupled with a view of the real-life Gruwell as fortunate-teacher rather than savior, was often connected to a perception that racial oppression always lurks beneath the bureaucracy of the educational system. Accordingly, "The Flick Filosopher" wrote:

> They sugarcoat the reality that people like Gruwell are merely rearranging deck
> chairs on the *Titanic*—it's wonderful, of course, that she saved a handful of kids,
> but what about the rest of them? The System still sucks, still needs a major over-
> haul or maybe to be trashed entirely and rebuilt from the ground up, but those
> hard realities can't crush the fantasy of this flick.

Such a rendering of "The System," while acknowledging the interconnectivity of subjugation and education (whether through modern techniques of "tracking" or the "hidden curriculum"), leaves little room for a tale of educational redemption or social change. Using this framework, human agency is depicted as flaccid and impotent; ineffective in the face of an amorphous yet Leviathan-like "System." According to some reviews ($n = 16$, 13.4%), it seemed that Gruwell could be effective only if leading a schoolwide revolution or teaching her students from Karl Marx's *Grundrisse* rather than from Anne Frank's *Diary*.

These aforementioned reviews relied heavily on the notion that structural racism is not only deeply entrenched within the educational system in *real* life but on the *reel* life of Hollywood's silver screen. That is, reviewers expressed anguish over the fact that while Hollywood appears to make progressive steps toward on-screen displays of interracial cooperation, it fails to present solutions that do not reproduce the very racism it purports to fight. In this vein, reviews represented *Freedom Writers* as taking one step forward and two steps back.

> [*Austin Chronicle*:] The success story of English teacher Erin Gruwell (Swank)
> and her students in Room 203 of Long Beach High School is true. Yet when
> placed in the hands of writer/director LaGravenese, it becomes indistinguishable
> from what my colorful friend-of-a-friend Bishop calls "them movies where the
> cute little white lady goes in and makes everybody love learnin' just because she
> cares so much." If Erin Gruwell didn't exist, screenwriters would invent her.

> [*efilmcritic*:] Whitey swoops in to save the day again in "Freedom Writers." Writer/
> director Richard LaGravenese does manage to get to the sentimental soft tissue of
> the story, taking the picture in some unexpectedly and emotionally rewarding di-
> rections. Overall though, "Writers" is just as labored as its predecessors, and if you
> already hate the teacher/savior genre, this film will only add to your headache.

These reviews drew from an understanding of racism as an everyday part of reality that has so invaded Hollywood culture that it forestalls any chance of escaping the WSF genre. While such counterhegemony demonstrates that not all reviews replicated the ideal "white racial frame," they demonstrate a regimented and collective pessimism that misses the danger this genre may pose. As Hall (2001:402) writes, "Film

reviewers . . . contribute to audiences' managing of the varied perspectives implied by the images and information embodied in film, they have the potential to contribute to the media's role in maintaining existing belief systems or encouraging social change." That is, reviews frame the WSF trope as more of an unfortunate artistic blunder and annoying plot device than a standard and precarious re-presentation of reality.

Color-Blind Education

While seventy-seven (64.7%) of the reviews admitted (to greater and less degrees) that *Freedom Writers* might resemble the formulaic WSF genre, many reviews departed from this framing. Thirty (25.2%) reviews accentuated that the audience should read the film as a color-blind story, nothing more. Within this type of review, there was a widely shared conception that audiences should direct their attention to the "real life" Gruwell and how the film was simply a story imitating life (*n* = 26, 21.8%). As outlined earlier, beliefs that racism is dead (except among a few individual "bad apples") remain a stubbornly fixed part of normative logic in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Whether intentional or not, color-blind logic facilitates the continuation of racial inequality by criminalizing its victims and then obscuring the fact that inequality exists. Many reviews were informed by this reasoning, exemplified by "PopMatters":

> White savior movies? Although there might be several films with "white savior" potential, rarely are people so vehement in pointing it out. So what's with all the attacks on *Freedom Writers*? Okay, so it's a tad unoriginal. And yes, like the MADtv parody, there is a painful scene of Hilary Swank awkwardly doing the electric slide as she gets down with her minority students, but *Freedom Writers* is more self-aware than people think. It knows it's lacking in originality, it knows its ideas on social matters are broad and naive, but at least it's honest. . . . *Freedom Writers*' simplicity works. It's a sweet little movie, with sweet characters that do touching things. . . . *Freedom Writers* deserves a chance, "white savior movie" or not.

Another reviewer at "The Onion A.V. Room" writes:

> Swank stars as an idealist who takes a job at a tough inner-city school where apathy and cynicism reign, and withering contempt for humanity is a widespread occupational hazard. Swank's Pollyanna pluck initially just earns her insolent glares from burnt-out teachers and students alike, but her persistence eventually wins her the loyalty and affection of shell-shocked pupils unaccustomed to teachers driven by an almost messianic sense of purpose.

Such reviews constructed *Freedom Writers* as little more than a film concerned with tales of educational uplift, social redemption, and overcoming obstacles. Reviews of this sort treat race as the proverbial "elephant in the room," obfuscating the explicit connection to race while implicitly engaging with racialized code-words such as "tough inner-city" and "Pollyanna pluck." As Bonilla-Silva (2002:43) writes:

> Because the dominant racial ideology portends to be color blind, there is little space for socially sanctioned speech about race-related matters. Does this mean that whites do not talk in public about nonwhites? As many researchers have

shown, they do but they do so but in a very careful, indirect, hesitant manner and, occasionally, even through *code language*. (my emphasis)

Other reviews were further enabled by the "color-blind education" frame, castigating the film for paying *too much* attention to race and/or chastising the director and screenwriters for representing interracial conflict under the assumption that it either (1) glorified it or (2) would cause (presumably absent prior to the film) racial conflict in real life (*n* = 17, 14.3%).

> [*Childcare Action Project Reports*:] Though *Freedom Writers* is a dynamic and powerfully moving film, if any movie will embolden youth into aggression by camaraderie, this one is a likely candidate.... the reality of it all is that a noble destination does not excuse an ignoble path. The path through this film, whether accurate to the truth or not, is certainly a bit ignoble.... Certainly things like those portrayed [interracial violence] in *Freedom Writers* happen, but that they happen does not excuse spreading them and perpetuating them by glorifying them.

Ironically, none of the reviews stated that the film's constant evocation and comparison of Nazi imagery and logic was harmful. Rather, reviewers seemed compelled to understand Nazi-sponsored racism as a sanitized historical example, whereas the racism of the school officials or the students was either harmful or over-the-top fiction. In this light, reviews seemed empowered to speak of racism as a "positive" cinematic element when it was in historical and non-U.S. form. Reviews took more color-blind approaches to the film's modern representation of race and racism.

A final method for activating the color-blind frame was accomplished by way of the observation that the film failed to discuss the "real" perpetrator of Wilson High's problems—economics (*n* = 16, 13.5%). *Slant Magazine* writes:

> Despite its compassion for kids born into situations they didn't make and the dog-eat-dog struggles happening on their doorsteps, the movie keeps mum when it comes to the real culprits—the brutal economic outlook for underclass members plus the systematic crippling of public education via underfunding.

The strategy of anointing class-*over*-race within a fixed and nonintersectional hierarchy of social problems effectively reinforces color-blind discourse and stifles an articulation of racism as a still-prevalent social force. Hence only two reviews (1.6%) spoke of race *and* class (gender and sexuality were never mentioned) as issues of possible relevance in the film. By emphasizing a class-*over*-race framework, reviews framed *Freedom Writers* as a racist and fallacious story simply because it mentions race.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I examined 119 film reviews of a controversial film genre—white savior films. Drawing from these reviews, I documented the collective discursive strategies and frames that reviewers employ to make meaning of this particular film. These frameworks equate nonwhites with pathological and dysfunctional traits, dictate that hard work is a white normative characteristic, and construct deterministic views of both Hollywood's ability to represent progressive racial representations and the

educational system's potential. Together, the analysis of reviewers as interpretive communities illustrates not only the strength of these reviews as tools for mobilizing "color-blind" and "white racial frameworks" (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 2003; Feagin 2006, 2009) but gestures toward their function as scripts for navigating the complex terrain of the contemporary racial landscape. Hence this analysis sheds light on how the breadth and reach of reviews reflect the anxieties and conflicts of a society that is at once both color-conscious and color-blind. At issue here is not merely another dimension of how race is understood; rather, this analysis attempts to connect the strains of "common sense" thinking about teaching, conflict, identity, and overcoming racism with political and social discourses that articulate the changing understandings of *whiteness* as an authority of either racist or redeeming character.

While race is not the sole focus of all the reviews, my intention was to accentuate the ritualistic features of reviews, which in turn demonstrate the presence of an interpretive community rather than a disconnected group of critics relying on personal aesthetic judgments. In bringing attention to the interpretive community dynamics of film reviewers, this study follows a developing trend at the intersection of racial and ethnic studies, media studies, cultural sociology, and symbolic interactionism: customary practices of reviewing (racialized) films occur in concert with specific interpretive guidelines and become normalized in social space (Altheide 2000; Denzin 1992, 2001; Vannini 2004). Hence the present article integrates reviews—as meaning-making intermediaries—into the Meadian (1934) "feedback loop" between producer and consumer. Such a move adds nuance by demonstrating how the processes of cinematic interpretation are simultaneously constrained and enabled by the mediating forces between diffuse cultural logics and the cinematic racial order, on the one hand, and active audiences and the interactional racial order, on the other.

While the community of reviewers certainly engages in reproducing static and essentialist versions of racial identities, many of the reviewers actually go to great lengths to identify and condemn the WSF motif. Such reviews are complex and multidimensional; interwoven with the interpellation of the genre is a subtle and covert racism. By hailing the WSF theme as little more than an overdrawn plot device, the WSF is reframed as an aesthetic misstep rather than an ideological device of social import. In so doing, the naming of the WSF genus reassures the audience about the professional and moral authority of critics, who can effectively criticize and confront Hollywood's evils. Readers can then pride themselves with the knowledge that they will not be duped, like others might, by the conventions of a cinematic white messiah. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Hughey 2009b), such "culture war" renderings turn on a dichotomous structure whereby people are labeled "good" and "bad" subjects. Binary frameworks are a cornerstone of our social structures and a roadmap for our navigation of everyday life. Hence film reviews that address the WSF motif, even if superficially, allow readers room to express awareness of racism and to claim the high ground of knowledgeable moviegoing—a position juxtaposed against those ignorant of the genre.

Moreover, I contend that racialized films invite the interpretive community of reviewers to coalesce into a recognizable community of meaning-makers. Unlike film

reviews of explicitly "non-racial" films where broaching the topic of race might be seen as impolite or out of place, the explicit racial content of *Freedom Writers* invites a collective orientation toward portraying whiteness as redeeming and pure while sensitizing such depictions against the obvious and overdrawn Hollywood trope of the "white savior." Hence the film—and the collective process of reviewing the film's text—affords a social space to speak of racial matters in between the rock of "postracialism" (portrayed in some quarters as idyllic naïveté if not color-blind racism) and the hard place of interrogating the hegemonic reach of whiteness (oft-depicted as a form of Orwellian "political correctness" among a public that is weary of discussing "race"). Given this tension, perhaps we should direct more attention toward the micro-interactional level so that the processes of film review production can be illuminated, as well as the ways audiences discuss and interpret these reviews. In either case, future research should examine a wider variety of films and interpretive contexts that will certainly afford us more information about collective meaning-making.

NOTES

1. "Nice White Lady," *MadTV*, February 24, 2007, season 12, episode 15. http://www.tv.com/MADtv/show/725/episode.html?season=All.
2. The name is a play on the famous Freedom Riders, the interracial cadre of civil rights activists who tested the U.S. Supreme Court's ordering of the desegregation of interstate buses in 1961.

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