



# *Qualitative Sociology Review*

Volume III, Issue 2 – August 2007

---

Wendy Leo Moore

Texas A&M University, USA

Jennifer Pierce

University of Minnesota, USA

## Still Killing Mockingbirds: Narratives of Race and Innocence in Hollywood's Depiction of the White Messiah Lawyer

### **Abstract**

Through a narrative analysis of movies confronting issues of race and racism in the post-civil rights era, we suggest that the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird* ushered in a new genre for movies about race which presented an image of a white male hero, or perhaps savior, for the black community. We suggest that this genre outlasted the era of the Civil Rights Movement and continues to impact popular cultural discourses about race in post-civil rights America. Post-civil rights films share the central elements of the anti-racist white male hero genre, but they also provide a plot twist that simultaneously highlights the racial innocence of the central characters and reinforces the ideology of liberal individualism. Reading these films within their broader historical context, we show how the innocence of these characters reflects not only the recent neo-conservative emphasis on “color blindness,” but presents a cinematic analogue to the anti-affirmative action narrative of the innocent white victim.

### **Keywords**

Race; Racism; Film; Popular culture; Whiteness

The film, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, based on Harper Lee's eponymous book, was produced in the early 1960s, in the midst of the civil rights movement. Its narrative focuses on the valiant efforts of a small town lawyer, Atticus Finch, who defends Tom Robinson, a black man wrongfully accused of rape, against the racism of the Jim Crow South. In doing so, it creates a representation of an honorable, upper-middle class, white man who becomes a hero to the black community. The movie industry paid great tribute to this white male hero. Gregory Peck, who played the role of Atticus Finch, won an Academy Award, a New York Film Critics Circle Award, and a Golden Globe for Best Actor for his portrayal of the white lawyer/hero and Mary Badham who played Scout was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. The film's immense success – it won even more acclaim and awards than the Pulitzer prize-winning book – suggests that its portrayal of the white hero who fights against racial injustice was an appealing and popular one to many white Americans at this historical moment.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the film's appeal has stood

the test of time as the American Film Institute featured it one of the top 25 films of all time in 2007. What is the appeal of such a story?

In her analysis of Hollywood films in the 1980s and 1990s, media scholar Kelly Madison (1999) argues that the Civil Rights Movement created a crisis of identity for whites in the United States in that it largely redefined the image of the black self for white America. Blacks asserted themselves as a positive and powerful force against externally imposed oppression and publicly voiced the fact that that oppression was rooted in white supremacy. This, Madison suggests, led to a need among white Americans to redefine themselves in order to maintain the notion of whiteness as good, civilized, and just. In her view, the emergence of “anti-racist, white hero films” in the late 1980s and 1990s reaffirmed the fiction of a good white self by creating a new collective memory in which whites become the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement, the leaders in the historic fight for racial justice.

We concur with Madison’s argument about the “legitimation crisis” the Civil Rights Movement posed for white America; however, we challenge her assertion that the anti-racist, white hero film genre emerged in the post-civil rights era. As the plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird* suggests, this project began at least as early as the 1960s. Further, as other scholars have pointed out, Hollywood has long produced the fiction of the white savior as the noble and kind, beneficent, all powerful, and usually male. For example, Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon argue that even early movies like *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), though steeped in “nostalgia for the antebellum South,” present images of the courageous, just and kind white self –a white self that at once recognized and participated in structures of racial hierarchy (Vera and Gordon 2003: 23).

Consequently, we argue that *To Kill A Mockingbird* not only offered a racially divided nation a representation of anti-racist white male heroism, but it also set up a new genre, one that outlasted the Civil Rights Movement and continues to emerge in popular films in post-civil rights America. As our analysis will demonstrate, these post-civil rights films share the central elements of the anti-racist white male hero genre, but they also provide a plot twist that simultaneously highlights the racial innocence of the central characters and reinforces the ideology of liberal individualism.<sup>ii</sup> Reading these films within their broader historical context, we show how this genre is complicated over time by shifts in underlying discourses about racial inequality in the United States between 1950 and 2000. As we will argue, the innocence of these characters reflects not only the recent neo-conservative emphasis on “color blindness,” but presents a cinematic analogue to the anti-affirmative action narrative of the innocent white victim.

## **Narratives, Sources and Method**

Susan Chase (1995) notes that individuals draw on “cultural resources,” as they construct their own narratives and that, “[c]ontrary to common sense, which assumes that our lives determine our stories, narrative scholars argue that our stories shape our lives and that narration makes self understanding possible” (Chase *ibidem*: 7). Serving as a powerful cultural resource, popular films offer a particular type of narration to a mass audience. As such movies serve as a powerful “mode of discourse” that at once tell us about our lives and those of others, but also shape the stories we might tell (Manley 1994: 134). In this way, films present us with stories about who we are, provide information about what important social issues and historical events might be, and help us make sense of the world that we live in.

Furthermore, because of the popularity of movies as a source of entertainment and cultural expression, the reach of this discourse goes further than many other discursive forms (Feagin 2003; Entman and Rojecki 2001; Hooks; Wilson and Gutierrez 1985). As Joe Feagin (2003: vii) observes, "For the majority of Americans, Hollywood's movies are a constant source of images, ideas, and 'data' about the social world. Indeed, the average citizen spends about 13 hours a year at movie theaters, and half of all adults go to the movies at least once a month.... Almost all U.S. families now have a VCR, and watching movies is the top leisure-time activity."

The expansive reach of the narrative frames in movies make them a particularly important site for examining popular culture constructions of social issues such as race relations in American society. Because the United States is a racially segregated nation, most Americans live in neighborhoods that are racially isolated (Massey and Denton 1993). The result of this spatial segregation is that most people spend the majority of their time socially interacting with people of their own race and little time with others of different racial or ethnic groups. This is particularly true for white Americans who, as a result of white flight and wealth accumulation, live and socialize within neighborhoods that are predominantly white (Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1997). As a result, popular films about race and racism offer many white Americans narratives for experiences they may not have had. In fact, as some scholars have noted, in the absence of lived experience, films may seem more "authentic" and "true." Historian George Lipsitz, for example, notes *Mississippi Burning* and other such films "probably frame memory [of the 1960s] for the greatest number of people" (1998: 219).

Given the power of popular films to construct such "authentic" narratives, we asked what movies produced in the post-Civil Rights era could tell us about race and racism, during an historical time period that many sociologists described as one in which racial prejudice has declined (See, for example, Bobo, Kluegel and Smith 1997; and Schuman, et. al. 1997). As part of a larger research project, we searched all movies made between 1980 and 2000 that explored issues of race and racism. Specifically, we searched and analyzed plot summaries of movies and selected those movies in which a main aspect of the plot engaged issues of race, racism or racial reconciliation. Plot summaries were obtained from Internet Movie Database, ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)). Through this search, we located 174 movies. Next we examined the earnings of these movies, and kept only those movies that made at least 3 million dollars. Our rationale here was to include a wide range of films including those that were top grossing (\$25 million) as well as those that had a substantial viewing audience, but were not block buster hits. This left us with 64 movies in our sample (see Appendix A for an excerpt of this list).

We watched the movies in our sample and conducted a narrative and frame analysis of each movie. The coding categories we employed in our discourse analyses derived from our theoretical questions about popular movie constructions of white male protagonists and innocence (Johnston 2002). In the end we produced an analysis of each movie which included a detailed plot summary (including relevant quotations from the movie's dialogue) and an analysis of analytical categories including: constructions of innocence and appeals to innocence in the movie; constructions of race and character development along lines of race; transformation or conversion narratives by characters in the movie; constructions of whiteness; and the convergence between constructions of race, class and gender.

Of those 64 films, approximately twenty-five percent focused on a white male hero battling racial injustice. This particular genre contains three main elements. First, as the central character in these films, the white savior's viewpoint becomes the

narrative focus, while the perspectives of African American characters and their broader community are peripheral at best, if not entirely absent. Second, the white hero sacrifices a great deal at the hands of white racists to further the cause of African Americans and suffers terribly. Third, the white hero also appears in professionally prestigious and influential positions such as lawyer, law enforcement official or educator. The resulting “white Messiahs,” as Vera and Gordon (2003) call them, appear to communities of color with a structural power that the community itself does not possess.

### **The Innocent White Messiah Lawyer**

For the sake of brevity in this paper we focus on our analyses of three post-civil rights film presentations of the white Messiah lawyer to illustrate our broader findings. The films *Amistad*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, and *A Time to Kill*, represent direct narrative parallels to the Civil Rights era film *To Kill a Mockingbird*, making a comparative analysis feasible. Yet in our broader analysis of post-civil rights films about race, we note that the figure of the white savior extends to roles beyond legal advocates. These heroic characters come in the form of law enforcement officials such as police officers or FBI officials (cf., *Mississippi Burning*). Or they appear as educators – teachers or high school principals (cf., *Dangerous Minds*).<sup>iii</sup> What these films all share with the film depiction of the white messiah lawyer is a narrative focus on a white hero who appears in a role with relative structural power vis-à-vis African Americans. Their authoritative positioning not only reifies white hegemonic power structures, but also silently suggests their entitlement to the story’s central focus. One who possesses structural power and uses it with painful consequences to themselves and their loved ones in a battle against injustice is obviously deserving of focused and nuanced attention. In Madison’s (1999) reading, these anti-racist white heroes become a trope, representing the goodness and valor of whiteness. At the same time, people of color are not represented in positions of authority, thus signaling them as powerless, passive or ineffectual.

While the portrayal of white involvement in struggles for racial justice is arguably progressive, the fact that this particular story becomes a dominant genre to the exclusion of those focusing centrally on people of color as agents of social change is problematic. The white experience and interpretation of racial struggles is repeated time and again in the movies of the post-civil rights era while films with people of color as central heroic characters are quite rare (cf., *Stand and Deliver*). Moreover, the post-Civil Rights era films create and sustain a new ideology based upon the notion of white innocence. As our analysis reveals, the white lawyer messiah in each of the three post-Civil Rights films we discuss below is initially represented as *innocent* of racism. In their innocence, these characters appear initially completely unaware of racial prejudice or hatred in society, and they rely upon narratives that minimize the relevance of racism by asserting that race does not matter because we live in a color-blind society.

### **White Innocence in Social Context**

Within the broader context of post-Civil Rights United States society, the notion of white innocence has served as the basis for halting progressive reforms of the Civil Rights Movement. For example, affirmative action programs have been severely restricted based upon the notion that the state must protect “innocent white victims”

(Ross 1990). For legal scholars, this framework derives from the 1978 U.S. Supreme Court *Bakke* decision wherein the Court ruled that the University of California, Davis had violated the equal protection clause of the Constitution by denying access to whites, or more specifically to Allan Bakke, “solely because of their race” (*Bakke v. Regents of the University of California* 1978; Schwartz 1988; Ball 2000. Bakke claimed that he had been discriminated against in medical school admissions because he was white. As historian Mathew Frye Jacobson (2006: 100) points out, the Court’s ruling “created a new class of victims” – the innocent white male.

Legal scholar Thomas Ross has suggested the notion of innocence is not only an element of legal rhetoric, but a powerful ideological image in American culture. He (Ross 1990) states:

the argument for white innocence in matters of race connects with the cultural ideas of innocence and defilement. The very contrast between the colors, white and black, is often a symbol for the contrast between innocence and defilement. Thus, the theme of white innocence in the legal rhetoric of race draws its power from more than the obvious advantage of pushing away responsibility... White and black often symbolize some form of good and bad. (p. 34)

Stories of innocence have long been part of the mythology about America’s history and heritage. In American Studies, the theme of “innocence” is central in the early historiography of America as an exceptional nation, a nation uncorrupted by the forces of feudalism and aristocratic excess, as “innocent” and unmarked by history, and as “innocent” of imperialism and fascism (Marx 1964; Perry 1960; Smith 1950). And stories about racism and genocide are profoundly shocking, as Coco Fusco (1995) reminds us, because they deeply upset white Americans’ notion of self as good and tolerant people. As a result, as Kelly Madison (1999) suggests, the Civil Rights Movement presented a stark challenge to the historical rhetoric of American innocence by making visible the violent story of white racism.

Trina Grillo and Stephanie Wildman (1991: 400) note that, “when people who are not regarded as entitled to the center move into it, however briefly, they are viewed as usurpers.” The Civil Rights Movement functioned to center the experiences of African Americans, and in doing so, blatantly challenged notions of the innocent and beneficent white community. As a result, the cinematic emergence of an empathic white civil rights hero during this era corresponds to the process of re-establishing a dominant narrative that registered with traditional cultural conceptions of goodness and innocence, while simultaneously de-centering, once again, the histories and experiences of African Americans (Delgado 1996). But, more important for our analysis, in the post-civil rights era white Americans acted to retrench white power through the halting of racially progressive reforms, and in doing so constructed an even more virulent narrative of white innocence (Crenshaw 1988). The development of the *innocent* white male hero in post-civil rights era Hollywood films, along with their emphasis upon heroic individual solutions not only registers with dominant cultural conceptions of innocence, it also functions to distinguish these films from their earlier anti-racist white hero cinema counter-parts like Atticus Finch in *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

## The White Messiah Lawyer of the Civil Rights Era

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* Atticus Finch (as portrayed by Gregory Peck) is a noble and selfless lawyer who justly takes on the case of a black man wrongly accused of raping a white woman despite the fact that representing this man is a clear violation of racial norms in the Jim Crow South.<sup>iv</sup> When Finch takes the case of Tom Robinson, he fully understands that he and his family will be the target of racial hatred in the small, Depression era, Southern town of Maycomb, Georgia. Because he understands the racial dynamics of his community, he not only anticipates potential harassment, but responds to these incidents with dignity. Part of what makes his character heroic is that despite his awareness of the consequences of taking the case, he does it because it he considers it his moral obligation. As a consequence, he endures insults and threats from neighbors and a violent attempt on his children's lives at the hands of the father of the woman who accused Robinson of raping her.

Throughout the movie, Finch never questions his decision to represent Robinson. Nor does he complain about the negative consequences he suffers as a result of his decision. Finch maintains his belief that justice will prevail through his commitment to the legal process, the hegemonic white legal power structure of the Jim Crow South, and remains optimistic about the possibility of legal justice with a higher court even after the Maycomb jury convicts Robinson of the rape he did not commit. As such, Atticus Finch personifies a Messiah role. A major element of this role is his expectation of suffering and the fact that he does not falter in his commitment throughout the film. Moreover, his character is portrayed not as innocent of power, but rather as knowledgeable about racism, courageous, and selfless. Innocence in this film is instead represented by his young daughter, Scout, who does not understand the racial dynamics of her girlhood town, and continually violates racial norms without being aware that she has done so. Scout's youth makes her a perfect innocent, because as a child she is not yet expected to understand the racial taboos of her social world. Thus the film pushes against these taboos, directly, with Finch publicly rejecting them by taking the case, and more subtly, with young Scout who violates racial norms because they do not make sense to her.

Scout's innocence, however, is betrayed by the conclusion of the trial. Finch cannot save Robinson from conviction by the racist, all white jury. And, when Robinson attempts to escape from jail and is shot by the guards, the possibility of appealing to a higher court is lost, and white racism prevails. The death of Robinson captures the film's central metaphor. Mockingbirds represent, as Finch tells Scout early in the film, goodness (read innocence), and killing them constitutes a cruel and senseless act. In this light, killing mockingbirds becomes a metaphor for the violent consequences of racism.

Like the post-civil rights films we analyze below, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is told from the perspective of the white male hero. We never learn what Tom Robinson is thinking. In fact, we rarely see him for much of the film. As for the larger Black community, all we are shown is their gratitude for Atticus. His perspective thus becomes normative. His perspective, however, is not uncritical and presumably appeals to a white audience's sense of fair play. The film highlights injustice – in personal terms with respect to Atticus and his family and, more generally, with respect to white racism in his community. Further, and in a significant twist that differentiates this film from later ones, Atticus is never innocent of racism or its consequences, and though he is valorized as the beneficent white hero, he cannot prevail against its intractability. His failure suggests that despite his goodness, his

hard work, and his commitment to justice through the legal system, one individual can not solve this larger social problem.

The genre of the male white hero saving African Americans through the legal system reappears in post-Civil Rights films; however, there are a number of subtle, but important differences in these more recent depictions. In the post-civil rights era, the white savior is initially represented as innocent of racism. Interestingly, their innocence of racism at once mirrors the viewpoint of the young ingénue Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but their actual role as adult lawyer saviors reproduces Finch's commitment to the legal system in obtaining justice. Further, their savior role is enhanced by the fact that unlike Atticus Finch, they actually win their cases in court. As a result, they are vindicated as morally righteous when the juries or judges rule in their favor. The storyline then becomes a conversion narrative in which these lawyers were once blind to racism, but over time become advocates for racial justice through the legal system, a system that now gets portrayed as fundamentally fair.<sup>v</sup>

### **The Cinematic Narrative of White Innocence**

In our first film, *Amistad*, a Steven Spielberg film released in 1997, the audience is transported to the early 1800s to witness the legal battle that surrounded the infamous ship *Amistad*. The film is loosely based upon the actual case of the *Amistad* ship, in which a revolt occurred upon a Spanish ship, illegally engaged in the transportation of Africans into slavery from the British protectorate Sierra Leone. The movie opens with melancholy music as we see Cinque (portrayed by Djimon Hounsou), an African man shackled aboard the ship break free from his bonds and revolt against the white crew of the ship. The scene of the revolt is dark and ends with a close-up shot of Cinque brutally stabbing a white crewman, stepping on his neck to pull out the knife, and then stabbing him again and again while shrieking. The camera pans back to the name on the front of the boat: *Amistad*. Following this dramatic opening, the *Amistad* floats into American waters and the Africans who revolted against their captors are taken into custody to be prosecuted for murder. After setting us up with this image of a black man that expressly illustrates defilement, the ensuing legal drama unfolds.

Although the movie *Amistad* has more than one lawyer, the white lawyer who becomes the savior in the legal battle is Mr. Baldwin (played by Mathew McConaughey). Baldwin is an eager real estate attorney who approaches two abolitionists, Mr. Tappan, a white man (portrayed by Stellan Skarsgard) and Mr. Johnson, a black man (played by Morgan Freeman) who are working together to find legal representation for the African men and women who were aboard the *Amistad*. On their first meeting Baldwin tells the two men that he is perfect for the case because "all of the claims [in the case] speak to the issue of property and ownership," and in a later meeting he says that it is really a simple case, "It's like anything, land, livestock, [etc.]..." After he makes this point, the camera dwells on the shocked face of the white abolitionist. Baldwin goes on to make his legal argument: If the men and women from the *Amistad* are slaves, then they must be viewed as possessions, and therefore, may not be tried for murder; but if they are not slaves, then they were illegally obtained and were justifiably defending themselves. The white abolitionist responds with outrage, "This fight must be waged on the battlefield of righteousness... these are people... not livestock." He adds that his cause is in the name of Christ himself, and Baldwin responds, "But Christ lost."

Here, Baldwin presents us a discursive framework based upon legal formality, one without emotion or moral judgment that the white abolitionist finds dehumanizing

and offensive. In addition to emphasizing the differences between a dispassionate legal rationality and a Christian moral righteousness, this scene also provides a subtle but important message about race relations and the law. Matters of race and racial justice are to be sorted out by white men and the perspective of white men in regard to these issues is of the utmost importance (Morgan Freeman's character is silent throughout this exchange). As the movie progresses however, Baldwin becomes less reliant on cold legal logic and more emotionally invested in the lives of the people he represents suggesting that the arguments he began with are indeed offensive and dehumanizing. Baldwin's conversion from racial innocence to recognition of the humanity of the black people whom he represents becomes the film's central focus.

Baldwin's loss of innocence and growing awareness of racism is revealed in multiple scenes. For example, after successfully arguing his case to the district court where he proves that the ship *Amistad* came from Sierra Leone, a protectorate of Great Britain where slavery is outlawed, he leaves the courtroom and a white man comes up behind him and hits him over the head. Baldwin falls to the floor and when he gets up he asks in deep confusion, "What did I do to deserve this?" Mr. Johnson, the black abolitionist involved in the case responds, "You took the case sir, you took the case." Here, Baldwin's portrayal is one of a white man who is naïve about the racial norms of the time who become the unwitting victim of discrimination and harassment.

As Baldwin's case progresses he meets with lawyer, Congressman, and former President, John Quincy Adams (portrayed by Anthony Hopkins), who convinces Baldwin that he must get to know the African men and woman better in order to tell their story in higher court. After finding a Mende translator, Baldwin talks through this interpreter with Cinque about his capture and the abuses of his journey. Throughout this process, Baldwin becomes more personally invested in the human issues of the case. Yet, after winning his case at the court of appeals, Baldwin learns that it will be appealed to the United States Supreme Court. Here again, he appears completely taken aback that this would happen – despite the fact that from the perspective of an advocate in our legal system who understands the appeal process this should have been fully anticipated. When he reports this news to Cinque in his jail cell, Cinque expresses disgust by the outcome and refuses to talk further with Baldwin. To this Baldwin responds with anger, "Has it occurred to you that I'm all you've got? Because as it happens, since my practice has deteriorated, you're all I've got." Then he shows Cinque the death threats he has received since he took the case and tells him that one benefit to having no business is that, "I am now free to sit here as long as it takes for you to talk to me." In this moment, Baldwin becomes the Messiah, one who has forsaken his own livelihood in order to save the men and women of the *Amistad*. In this scene and throughout the film, Baldwin's suffering becomes the central frame of the story despite what we learn about the abuses Cinque and other Africans suffered on the *Amistad*.

In sum, Baldwin becomes a Messiah, through his conversion from a rationalistic lawyer, naïve about racial politics, to an advocate for racial justice. Given that Baldwin is ultimately successful in his endeavor, the film also suggests that the white legal structure is the appropriate route to racial justice, a paradoxical fact given that at this historical moment the United States legal system was an expressly white racist system in which the institution of slavery was its defining characteristic. In this way, *Amistad* echoes *To Kill a Mockingbird's* emphasis on the legal system as a route to social justice, but unlike Finch Baldwin actually prevails.



In our second film, director Rob Reiner's *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), we are faced with a brutal crime against a black civil rights advocate at the hands of white men. The movie opens with scenes of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s set to protest music of the era. Documentary footage from the era shows black protestors being beaten by white police, black soldiers fighting in Viet Nam, black athletes winning major competitions, Martin Luther King Jr. giving a speech, black women picking cotton, and then ominously, crosses burning in the yards of people's home. In a caption, the screen notes "Mississippi Delta in 1963," followed by the line, "This story is true." In the next scene, a white man murders black civil rights worker Medgar Evers in front of his home and as the murder unfolds, we hear John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights speech in the background. Then, we see the white man who shot Evers, Byron De La Beckwith (portrayed by James Woods), in the courtroom. White law officials shake his hand and are friendly toward him as he enters the court for his hearing, and as Myrlie Evers (portrayed by Whoopi Goldberg) testifies on the witness stand, the former governor of Mississippi walks up to Beckwith in front of the court, and jury. After two hung juries, Beckwith is released, and we see him being greeted by a street full of white people, celebrating his acquittal. Juxtaposed against this celebration, Myrlie Evers is shown trying to scrub the blood off of the car port cement outside her home where her husband was shot.

These snapshots of the 1960s murder of Medgar Evers set up the historical background for *Ghosts of Mississippi*. The film jumps forward in time with the screen signaling a different date: 1989. Here we meet Bobby De Laughter (portrayed by Alec Baldwin), a prosecutor for the district attorney's office. Bobby's boss asks him to check on the files of the Medgar Evers case. Initially, he resists, explaining that the murder case is over 25 years old, but his boss responds, "Sure it is, but if we try to bury this, Myrlie Evers is gonna have every black politician in Jackson climbing all over me." Thus, the audience is set up to watch our Messiah transform into a reasonable attorney who will eventually do good in the world. By contrast, Myrlie Evers's character is thrust into the background as a nagging voice unreasonably focused on the racism of the past who will manipulate politicians to achieve her own ends.

Although De Laughter initially looks into the Evers' murder case file to appease Evers, as time goes on he discovers evidence of corruption in the first trial. His expression of disgust with the case's blatant racism and corruption mark a shift in his viewpoint from his original blindness to racism (read innocence) to his ultimate conversion as an advocate for racial justice when decides to re-open the case and re-prosecute Beckwith for the murder of Medgar Evers. Like Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Baldwin in *Amistad*, De Laughter experiences injury at the hands of other whites as a result of his decision. His wife leaves him in disgust, his family tells him they are embarrassed by his actions, and he becomes the target of hate crimes: His van is vandalized, he receives threatening phone calls, and his son gets in a fight with a boy who calls De Laughter a "nigger lover." Yet, like Baldwin and unlike Atticus Finch, De Laughter expresses surprise and confusion about these events, he is completely bewildered that such things would happen to him when he is simply trying to be a good advocate.

Near the conclusion of the film, the press learns through their investigation that De Laughter has found the original murder weapon. When they publish this information, Myrlie Evers is furious with De Laughter because he had not told her. In a scene of a press conference with two black men standing at a podium, one of the men says, "...as far as I'm concerned they're [referring to Bobby De Laughter and his boss] nothin' but a pair of lying racists who never, I repeat never, had any intention of

prosecuting the case.” The next day, De Laughter’s boss tells him that he is taking him off the case and he is to be replaced by a black prosecutor. Like earlier attributions to Myrlie Evers as a manipulator, here the black community leaders are represented as irrational and quick to wage claims about racism. Because De Laughter’s story is central to the film, and he has been represented thus far as the all-sacrificing hero, the threat to dismiss him appears incredibly unjust. He is innocent of accusations of racism and is represented as being unfairly replaced by a black attorney, a portrayal which silently echoes broader narratives of the innocent white victim unfairly harmed by affirmative action.

The night after his boss takes him off the case, De Laughter calls Myrlie Evers from a pay phone at a movie theater. He tells Evers that he is committed to the case, and he wants her to make a commitment to him by telling his boss to leave him on the case. The next day at De Laughter’s office, Myrlie Evers shows up and gives him the transcript to the original trial—noting that she has kept it for many years, and tells him he will not find any more opposition to his handling the case. After this final exchange, De Laughter goes forward to win the case with the full trust and support of Myrlie Evers thus solidifying his role as the white Mesisah lawyer. Here again, as in *Amistad*, through a conversion narrative from innocence to advocate for racial justice, De Laughter prevails as an heroic individual.

The third and final movie we discuss, *A Time to Kill* (1996) directed by Joel Schumacher, opens with the same dramatic set-up for the legal challenge the white Messiah lawyer will face. Foreboding music plays as we see a group of white men in a pick-up truck with a confederate flag on it riding around talking and laughing loudly, while making dirt fly off the road with their truck. This is juxtaposed with a scene of a young black girl, ten year old Tonya, buying groceries at a small groceries store. After Tonya leaves the store, we see one of the white men throw a can of beer at her head and hit her as she walks down the road. Then we hear her screaming and see the face of one of the white men, and then blood on Tonya’s feet. Tonya has been raped by these white men, and when her father, Carl Lee Haley (played by Samuel L. Jackson), comes home from work, and sits beside his daughter on the couch. Her face is badly swollen and bloody. In a scene invoking deep emotion, Tonya says to her father, “Daddy, I’m sorry I dropped the groceries.”

The white men who raped Tonya are soon arrested and in the next scene Carl Lee Haley, a janitor, talks to Jake Brigance (portrayed by Mathew McConaughey), a white lawyer. He asks Brigance what sentence the young men who raped his daughter are likely to receive. Brigance responds with uncertainty, but acknowledges that in a nearby town a white man who raped a black girl got off. Haley then says to Brigance, “If I was in a jam, you’d help me?” Brigance says that he would. On the following day of the arraignment of the white men, Haley shoots and kills them. He is arrested and charged with the murder, and then, requests that Brigance represent him.

Here again, the central focus of the story is on the personal growth of Brigance from racial innocent into anti-racist white hero. We learn very little about Haley or his perspective. And, we learn almost nothing of the 10 year old Tonya, who is objectified as the victim of a horrible violence in a scene at the beginning of the movie. Jake’s innocence of racism is established early in the film when the press asks him whether Haley can get a fair trial in Mississippi. Brigance replies, “Some folks believe Black folks can’t get a fair trial, but in the New South justice will be color blind.” And, like the other films discussed, because Brigance agrees to take the case, he is punished for doing so. The Ku Klux Klan begins a spree of hate crimes against his home, his family, and his colleagues. The Klan burns a cross in front of his home

and his daughter comes home crying every day from school because she gets taunted as a “nigger lover.” Throughout *Brigance* appears confused and stunned that such things could happen. When his secretary tells him that she has been getting death threats on the phone, he responds with concern and confusion, “I’m sorry. Why didn’t you tell me?” She responds indignantly, “Why? Would you have dropped the case?”

As the film progresses, the violence against Brigance and his friends escalates. First, the Klan attacks and beats his secretary’s husband, while they hold her down forcing her to watch. Her husband later dies as a result of the attack. Finally, toward the end of the film, the Klan burns Brigance’s home to the ground. His friend (an alcoholic divorce attorney) tells him, “Your marriage is on the rocks... Your career is ruined if you’re lucky. And, if you’re not, you’re dead. Do everyone a favor and quit the case.” He ignores the advice and sits forlornly in the smoldering rubble of his house, calling for his dog.

Despite his enormous suffering, Brigance as the white Meissah lawyer moves forward just as the central characters do the other post-civil rights films do and ultimately wins his case in the end. However, over the course of the trial, it begins to look increasingly difficult to secure an acquittal. The night before the last day of trial, Brigance goes to the jail to see Haley and suggests that he try to negotiate a plea bargain. Haley refuses to let Brigance give up and explains that he picked Brigance, a white lawyer, because he, Brigance, is “one of them.” Brigance protest that this is not true, suggesting that he and Haley are friends. Haley challenges Brigance’s professed color-blindness saying,

We ain’t no friends... America is a war, and you on the other side. How a black man ever gonna get a fair trial? You, you one of the bad guys. You see me as different. You see me as that jury sees me. If you was on that jury, what would it take to convince you to set me free?”

Brigance leaves looking stunned – his innocence about color-blindness shattered.

The next day, in Brigance’s dramatic final summation to the jury he tells them that “the eyes of the law are human eyes” and that the racial differences we see mean that Blacks often cannot get a fair trial. He urges them to seek the truth with their hearts. Asking the jury to close their eyes, he slowly and dramatically retells the story of the beating and rape of the little girl that shattered “everything innocent and pure...” Finally he says, “I want you to picture that little girl... Now, [I want you to] imagine that she’s white.” Brigance is nearly crying as he speaks, and the faces of the jurors are lined with tears. In the next scene, the doors of the courthouse open, and a young black boy yells “Innocent. He’s innocent.”

Like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the central narrative focus in *A Time to Kill* is on a white lawyer who fights for racial justice on the behalf of an African American man. African American perspectives are marginalized in the film, and the abuses suffered by African Americans in the story serve merely to set the stage for a story about the white male hero. Here too, the exceptional heroism of the white hero and their encounters with white racism on the behalf of African Americans suggests that whites also suffer and perhaps have done more than their fair share to aid Blacks. And finally, power is rightfully executed in the hands of a white man suggesting at once his beneficence and paternalism toward the African American community.

Despite these similarities, *A Time to Kill* differs in significant ways. Unlike Atticus Finch, Jake Brigance is initially presented as an innocent who is unaware of racism who becomes transformed during the process of defending Carl Lee Haley.

While Finch fully anticipates the negative consequences of his decision to take the case for Tom Robinson, Brigrance is surprised and confused when he finds himself the target of hate crimes. Like the roles of Baldwin and De Laughter, his role presents the cinematic analogue of Bakke as the innocent white victim. His transformation from color-blindness to an anti-racist consciousness becomes the central focus of the film. Furthermore, while Finch may be portrayed as a hero to the Black community, he is not a savior – he cannot rescue Tom Robinson from prison or prevent his death. By contrast, the more recent anti-racist heroes we discussed, like Brigrance, do prevail – often against tremendous odds – and win their legal cases. How do we account for these differences? To answer this question, we suggest that these films must be read within the historical context of their production.

### **Racial Narratives and White Messiahs**

In 1962, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, dominant narratives about racial inequality were shifting and changing. As Richard Pride (2002) argues in the *Politics of Racial Narratives*, notions of Black biological inferiority were being supplanted by narratives that highlighted the historical and contemporary effects of white discrimination against African Americans. While such narratives arose in the civil rights movement, he suggests that white liberals also espoused such stories to explain racial inequality. In this light, Finch's initial understanding of racism reflects this broader historical narrative. He begins with an awareness of the consequences of white discrimination. Further, his failure to save Tom Robinson confirms this larger narrative. Despite his goodness, his hard work, and his commitment to justice through the legal system, the film suggests that individual solutions will not solve this larger social problem. Remedies for the historical burdens of discrimination will not come about through individual effort, but entail instead government policies and programs that will ultimately restructure political power.

As historian Angela Dillard argues, in the 1980s neo-conservatives began to reject what they saw as the excessive egalitarianism of American culture and stood in staunch opposition to programs such as affirmative action and many of the Great Society program's federal initiatives which, in their view, constituted government interventions in the "free market" and undermined the importance of individual achievement, responsibility, and hard work. Similarly, Pride argues that in the 1980s and 1990s, another narrative emphasizing individualism and the lack of the Black work ethic to explain racial inequality becomes dominant. During this time period, remedial programs and policies such as affirmative action designed to ameliorate Black disadvantage come under attack by conservatives and, as other sociologists have noted, the ideology of color blindness begins to emerge (Flagg 1993; Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003). Within this framework, race no longer matters and discrimination is a relic of the past. African Americans are to be judged according to their hard work, individual effort, and merits. If they don't succeed, it's because they haven't worked hard enough, taken initiative, and so forth. The racial innocence of the heroes in the films of the 1990s captures these themes. They do not expect to find discrimination, and when they do, they are completely surprised.

As we have shown, the focus of the narrative then becomes the protagonist's transformation from innocence to anti-racist white hero who battles against the odds and ultimately triumphs in the courtroom. Whereas Atticus Finch's efforts may be regarded as heroic, these newer anti-racist heroes are saviors. As the ideology of liberal individualism would predict, their hard work and suffering are rewarded in the end with success.

## Conclusion

Portraying white men in these post-civil rights films – *Amistad*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, and *A Time to Kill* – as saviors rather than oppressors of other races serves to assuage white guilt by reassuring white viewers that white people are not bad, they simply may not know about racism. These white male saviors are also differentiated from “bad” white people as the narrative of racism is framed as explicit racial violence. They are innocents, color-blind. And, when they lose their innocence, they become heroic figures who fight against injustice. Here, we see a theme common to many Hollywood movies, collective endeavors, such as the Civil Rights Movement, are transformed into the battle of a lone individual who triumphs against evil, in this case, racism (cf., Vera and Gordon 2003). Further, while this narrative purports to be anti-racist, it also serves to reinforce white paternalism. Whites are presented in these films as saviors rather than oppressors of other races and people of color are passive or ineffectual victims who cannot save themselves. In comparing these more recent films with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we are not suggesting that the former is a radical film and the others are not. As we have argued, all these films all share problematic elements – particularly their narrative focus on the white male hero which serves to create the fiction that whites, rather than people of color, are heroes in historic struggles against racial injustice. Rather, our point is that the ideology of innocence and liberal individualism has become a dominant motif in these more recent films.

This subtle shift in the anti-racist hero genre has several effects. First, the focus on the main character’s transformation from innocence to consciousness about racism suggests the possibility of such a transformation for white America. By contrast, both survey data and qualitative research demonstrate the majority of white Americans believe that African Americans no longer experience discrimination (Schuman et al.1997). In fact, as Jennifer Pierce (2003) finds in her research with highly educated white professionals, these white men are often “racing for innocence,” that is, they disavow discrimination and exclusion at the same time that they practice it. In this way, the films provide a convenient fiction which serves to gloss over the actual beliefs of most white Americans.

Second, by emphasizing the victimhood of white men, these films also play into and reinscribe the broader narrative of the innocent white male from contemporary debates about affirmative action. While anti-affirmative action rhetoric paints white men as unfairly victimized by such policies, the films portray the central characters as victims in their relentless pursuit of racial justice. While the source of their injury differs in each case, what is central to both is a narrative focus on the benevolent white male who is innocent of racism (at least initially in the films), and has been treated unfairly. By making white male victimhood the central focus, the films obscure the long history of discrimination and violence directed against communities of color in the United States. Indeed, if these films had focused instead on the suffering of Cinque in *Amistad*, or Medgar Evers (or Merlie Evers) in *Ghosts of Mississippi*, or Tonya in *A Time to Kill* within a larger genre of films of the same type, they would not only tell a story that is more true to the experiences of people of color historically and contemporarily in the United States, but they would also decenter the innocent white male victim of contemporary public rhetoric.

Finally, by focusing on the white savior’s heroic and individual efforts to combat racism, these films also celebrate and reinforce the ideology of liberal individualism. The triumph of the individual not only masks and obscures the collective exercise of

power that relentlessly channels rewards, resources, and opportunities to white Americans, but silently suggests that government programs and policies such as affirmative action are unnecessary. As Bonilla-Silva (2003) points out, this new individualistic, color-blind perspective, which fails to account for racialized practices and structural racism, results in consequences strikingly similar to earlier periods in which black biological inferiority was professed. If killing mockingbirds serves as a metaphor for the violent consequences of racism in the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we suggest that popular movies in the post-civil rights era are, perhaps metaphorically, still killing mockingbirds.

## Appendix A: Films Included in the Study

The full list of 64 movies included in our sample include: *American History X*, *American Me*, *Amistad*, *Amos and Andrew*, *BAPS*, *Black and White*, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, *Bullworth*, *City Hall*, *The Color Purple*, *Cop and a 1/2*, *Cry Freedom*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Deep Cover*, *Dead Presidents*, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Dry White Season*, *A Family Thing*, *The Five Heartbeats*, *Gattaca*, *Get on the Bus*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, *The Glass Shield*, *Glory*, *Heart Condition*, *Higher Learning*, *Hoodlum*, *The Hurricane*, *Joy Luck Club*, *Jungle Fever*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Liberty Heights*, *Long Walk Home*, *Losing Isaiah*, *Malcolm X*, *Men of Honor*, *Mi Vida Loca*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Mississippi Massala*, *Panther*, *Posse*, *Remember the Titans*, *Rising Sun*, *Romeo Must Die*, *Rosewood*, *Round Midnight*, *Set it Off*, *She's Gotta Have It*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Surf Ninjas*, *Surviving the Game*, *Tales for the Hood*, *Thunderheart*, *A Time to Kill*, *True Identity*, *Two Family House*, *A Walk in the Clouds*, *White Man's Burden*, *White Nights*, *The Wood*.

Films identified in the anti-racist white hero genre include: *Amistad*, *Bullworth*, *Cry Freedom*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Dry White Season*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, *Long Walk Home*, *Losing Isaiah*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Thunderheart*, and *A Time to Kill*.

---

## Endnotes

- i The movie received rave reviews, as well as winning substantial movie industry nominations and awards including: Best Actor (win) - Gregory Peck - 1962 Academy, Best Adapted Screenplay (win) - Horton Foote - 1962 Academy, Best Art Direction (win) - Oliver Emert - 1962 Academy, Best Art Direction (win) - Henry Bumstead - 1962 Academy, Best Art Direction (win) - Alexander Golitzen - 1962 Academy, Best Cinematography (nom) - Russell Harlan - 1962 Academy, Best Director (nom) - Robert Mulligan - 1962 Academy, Best Picture (nom) 1962 Academy, Best Score (nom) - Elmer Bernstein - 1962 Academy, Best Supporting Actress (nom) - Mary Badham - 1962 Academy, Competing Film (win) - Robert Mulligan - 1963 Cannes Film Festival, Gary Cooper Award for Human Values (win) - Robert Mulligan - 1963 Cannes Film Festival, Best Actor (win) - Gregory Peck - 1963 New York Film Critics Circle, Best Film (win) - Robert Mulligan - 1963 New York Film Critics Circle, Best Screenwriting (win) -

Horton Foote - 1963 New York Film Critics Circle, U.S. National Film Registry (win) 1995 Library of Congress, 100 Greatest American Movies (win) 1998 American Film Institute, Best Director (nom) - Robert Mulligan - 1962 Directors Guild of America, Best Picture - Drama B (nom) 1962 Golden Globe, Best Actor - Drama (win) - Gregory Peck - 1962 Golden Globe, Best Director (nom) - Robert Mulligan - 1962 Golden Globe, Best Original Score (win) - Elmer Bernstein - 1962 Golden Globe, Motion Picture Promoting International Understanding (win) 1962 Golden Globe.

- ii As George Lipsitz reminds us, the language of liberal individualism serves to recast long standing, systematic racist practices such as discrimination against African Americans and other people of color in employment and housing into seemingly individual, isolated incidents of personal prejudice. “Collective exercise of power that relentlessly channels rewards, resources, and opportunities from one group to another will not appear ‘racist’ from this perspective because they rarely announce their intention to discriminate against others” (Lipsitz 1998: 20-21).
- iii We also note that while our period of examination ended in 2000, the recent (2006) film *Freedom Writers*, which parallels the plot line of *Dangerous Minds*, suggests that the white Messiah image in post-civil rights film continues to proliferate.
- iv As in many screenplays, the plot for the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* deviated from the book’s original storyline. Harper Lee’s (1960) book takes the perspective of Scout, the young girl, while the film centrally on her father Atticus Finch. For an interesting discussion of how and why this change was made, see Shields 2006.
- v As literary scholar Ann DuCille argues, “The I was blind, but now I see” script among white feminists who claimed to be anti-racist serves to mask responsibility for racist practices.

## References

- Ball, Howard (2000) *The Bakke Case: Race, Education and Affirmative Action*. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press.
- Bakke vs. The Regents of the University of California* (1978) Supreme Court of the United States decision 438 U.S. 265, June 28
- Bobo, Lawrence, James R. Kluegel and Ryan Smith (1997) “Laissez-Faire Racism: The Crystallization of a Kinder, Gentler Antiblack Ideology.” Pp. 15- 44 in *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s, Continuity and Change*, edited by Steven A. Tuch and Jack K. Martin. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo (2001) *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- (2003) *Racism Without Racists, Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chase, Susan (1995) *Ambiguous Empowerment: The Work Narratives of Women School Superintendents*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

- Crenshaw, Kimberle Williams (1988) "Race, Reform, And Retrenchment: Transformation And Legitimation In Antidiscrimination Law." *Harvard Law Review* 101: 1331.
- Delgado, Richard (1996) "Rodrigo's Eleventh Chronicle: Empathy and False Empathy." *California Law Review* 84: 61-99.
- Dillard, Angela (2001) *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Now? Multicultural Conservatism in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- DuCille, Anne (1994) "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies." *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19(3): 591- 629.
- Entman, Robert and Andrew Rojecki (2001) *Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
- Feagin, Joe (2003) "Foreword." Pp. vii – xi in *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*, edited by Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon. Boston: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Flagg, Barbara J. (1993) "'Was Blind But Now I See': White Race consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent." *Michigan Law Review* 91: 953.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford (1995) "Beyond White and Other: Relationality and Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse." *Signs* 21(1): 1-49.
- Fusco, Coco (1995) *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*. New York: New Press.
- Grillo, Trina and Stephanie Wildman (1991) "Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implication of Making Comparisons Between Racism and Sexism (or Other – isms)." *Duke Law Journal* 41: 397.
- Jacobson, Mathew Frye (2006) *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Johnston, Hank (2002) "Verification and Proof in Frame and Discourse Analysis." Pp. 62-91 in *Methods of Social Movement Research*, edited by Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenborg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hooks, Bell (1992) *Black Looks, Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press.
- Lee, Harper (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: J. B. Lippincott.
- Lipsitz, George (1998) *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Madison, Kelly (1999) "Legitimation Crisis and Containment: The 'Anti-Racist-White-Hero.'" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 16(4): 399-416.
- Manley, Theodoric (1994) "Teaching Race and Ethnic Relations: Do The Right Thing." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17(1): 134-163.
- Marx, Leo (1964) *The Machine in the Garden*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Massey, Douglas and Nancy A. Denton (1993) *American Apartheid; Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press .
- Miller, Perry (1961) *The New England Mind*. Boston: Beacon Press.



- Pierce, Jennifer (2003) "Racing for Innocence, Whiteness, Corporate Culture, and the Backlash Against Affirmative Action." *Qualitative Sociology* 26(1): 53-70.
- Oliver, Melvin L. and Thomas M. Shapiro (1997) *Black Wealth/White Wealth, A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. New York: Routledge.
- Pride, Richard (2002) *The Political Use of Racial Narratives*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Ross, Thomas (1990) "The Rhetorical Tapestry of Race: White Innocence and Black Abstraction." *William & Mary Law Review* 32(1): 1-40.
- Schuman, Howard, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo and Maria Krysan (1997) *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations. Revised edition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schwartz, Bernard (1988) *Behind Bakke: Affirmative Action and the Supreme Court*. New York: New York University Press.
- Shields, Charles (2006) *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Smith, Henry Nash (1950) *Virgin land: The American West as symbol and myth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Vera, Hernán and Andrew Gordon (2003) *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*. Boston: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Wilson, Clint C. and Felix Gutierrez (1985) *Minorities and Media: Diversity and the End of Mass Communication*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

## Citation

- Moore, Wendy Leo and Jennifer Pierce (2007) "Still Killing Mockingbirds: Narratives of Race and Innocence in Hollywood's Depiction of the White Messiah Lawyer." *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. III Issue 2. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php))