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WHITE SAVIOR NARRATIVE VS. EMERGING IDENTITY IN AMERICAN SPORTS FILMS

Introduction

In May 2020 the United States and the world have yet again faced a dark face of the unsettled problem of systemic racism. The Black Lives Matter movement intensified its actions following the arrest and killing of Afro-American George Floyd by a white police officer. Monuments to racism and colonialism have been brought down throughout the country, violent protests and riots have flooded American streets and the debate whether people of color receive proper appreciation and respect has been sparked off. That, in turn, led to a thorough revision of films, novels and other cultural artefacts in order to establish their relevance in today's world and check if they are not racially biased.[1] The deliberations over Hollywood's contribution to the false and harmful depiction of the minorities' experience returns double-barreled. In this article I strive to contribute to the discussion on sports white savior narratives and the portrayal of emerging cultural identity as shown in sports dramas. By examining selected movies, I argue that sports dramas extensively use the tropes of white savior narratives and, thus, offer biased understanding of the ethnical minorities' experience and their identity formation process in the United States. An extensive body of literature exists to serve as a theoretical basis of the project. I will draw from the theoretical findings on cultural identity by Stuart Hall, Grant Jarvie's seeking identification and recognition through sport, and Matthew Hughey's writings on the white savior trope, among others. The corpus of material selected for analysis consists of three mainstream Hollywood productions of the last decade based on true events: Steven Hopkins's *Race* (2016), Niki Caro's *McFarland, USA* (2015), and John Lee Hancock's *The Blind Side* (2009).

On identity and sport

There has been numerous studies to investigate the concept of identity and its relation to sport. Stuart Hall argues that identity constantly operates "under erasure, in

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1   E.g. HBO has recently decided to temporarily withdraw *Gone with the Wind* (1939) from one of its platforms, as it glorifies slavery.

the interval between reversal and emergence" (2). It is, hence, a task never accomplished, an ongoing process interwoven with a concept of identification, which Hall defines as a construct "on the back of recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation" (2). Sigmund Freud understands it as an expression of an emotional connection with another human (73). There is no totality and completion of that expression, though. Homi K. Bhabha goes a step further in examining social forms that emerge from the process of multicultural and post-colonial integration, such as hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry, the latter being the urge to imitate the dominant culture as emanation of "the colonist's desire for a reformed, recognizable Other" (186).

The concept of identity has long been central within sociological inquires into sport (Jarvie 15). It is often underlined that national, political or ethnical identity in sport may serve a number of purposes, such as facilitating social change, fighting unjust world order and regime, shaping role models for spectators and promoting values of fair play and sportsmanship among youth. Yet globalized, today's sport places the issue of identity central to those countries which, for example regained their independence and subjectivism (like the former USSR states) or are developing their position as serious players among superpowers in terms of their infrastructures, financial investments, sporting performances, etc. (South American states may serve as a suitable example.) Grant Jarvie, however, criticizes the term identity itself and considers it "plastic" and insufficient. He urges critics and researchers to acknowledge that "contemporary struggles for recognition in and through sport often take on the guise of particular forms of social identity. This is often aimed at championing the cause for a particular social difference or form of representation" (16). That recognition, in turn, may only be achieved through fair distribution of resources that would facilitate athletes worldwide equally.[2]

Is it not the craving for recognition that shapes these tense identity negotiations and constant state of inbetweenness in the worlds of the mainstream and the minorities? It is especially visible in the realm of sports and in the situation of the athletes of color pursuing their sporting careers in the western world. I find reasons for that scheme at least twofold. Firstly, sports and games exist only within the constraints of their rules, and these rules have been set and observed mostly by the mainstream. Interestingly, Justin Wolfers and Justin Price's research shows that during the 13 NBA seasons from 1991 to 2004, white referees tended to call fouls at a greater rate against black players than against white players and that the game outcomes are themselves the result of

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2   Jarvie follows in Foucault's (2008) footsteps who argues that neoliberalism breaks down social relationships by forcing the human experience into an economic framework. The broader issues of class and capitalism replace discussions of systematic racism.

biased evaluation (2). Does that mean the ethnic majority are officially subjected to different, preferential and privileged treatment in the world of sports? Most certainly not, but it is probably not a coincidence that the infamous referee from New Jersey prevented an African-American teenager wrestler from taking part in a match unless he cut his dreadlocks (*The Guardian* 2019). In addition, the very act of performing in professional sports is inseparably linked with a state of continuous transformation. Competing athletes naturally undergo various personal struggles related to the challenges and stress they face. Additionally, being part of a high-performance team may provoke conflicts, tensions and personal grudges. The need for recognition, appreciation and validating one's identity and state of belonging becomes especially delicate, yet critical in such circumstances.

The white savior trope

The Hollywood industry has long ago discovered that feel-good stories of ethnic harmony and mutual friendship make successful blockbusters. Critics have observed a peculiar pattern in creating such stories and developing characters that would fit into the scheme of the so-called white savior narrative. The plot of the movie usually revolves around a white persona who bears responsibility for saving supporting characters (mostly black or Hispanic) from oppression and racial discrimination (Hughey 475). As Kerry B. Wilson observes, "[w]hite savior narratives centralize and normalize the white experience through the representation of people of color as unable to escape their social and cultural marginalization without the guidance and leadership of a single white actor" (24). The movies feature a group of nonwhites who struggle financially and socially, whereas it is the white protagonist who makes the effort and performs heroic sacrifices. Consequently, nonwhite characters are transformed, saved and redeemed (Hughey 475). It is, however, the protagonist's transformation that towers over the redeemed, hence the film's audience is not offered an elaborate picture of the perspective of the minorities' experience and their fluxing identities. Viewers are left with rather simplified answers to complex conundrums. Do nonwhite characters assimilate and achieve their goals? How does their mindset change? Are they even significant to this story?

Researchers and scholars have distinguished film plots and characters typical of the white savior mode. Roopali Mukherjee categorizes social problems as portrayed in cinema into (1) assimilation, (2) affirmative action and (3) nostalgia. The assimilation kind of productions follow an immigrant's struggle to achieve the American dream by thorough integration into American culture. Affirmative action movies problematize the "liberal intentions of the sixties and take contemporary anxieties over racial and

gender integration as their central problematic" (87), whereas nostalgia films critically review the racial and gendered transformation of the past by shifting the attention away from the minorities' experience to the salvation of the white protagonist. Mukherjee argues also that white savior narratives attempt at validating race-neutral meritocracy by diminishing the impact race has on the lives of people of color.

    White saviors take various, yet predictable, forms and play conventional roles in the narratives they are vehicles of. They may be inspirational teachers in stories of lower-class, urban non-whites who struggle with the educational system. A white teacher makes the supreme sacrifice and undergoes a demanding transformation themselves to save their students and indirectly offer them a better future (Hughey 475). Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon (18), on the other hand, notice cinematic white saviors as men of principle who come to black people's defense in the light of racist oppression, usually in the American South. Characters of color are relegated to the story's background; they become passive and helpless observers of their savior's bold actions. The abovementioned protagonists, which comes as no surprise, are mostly men, yet female characters have also carved their path in this convention. It suffices to mention one of the most widely discussed and acclaimed white savior blockbusters in recent years, Tate Taylor's *The Help* (2011). The exemplary list of Hollywood productions of strong white savior orientation may include, but is most certainly not limited to: *Blood Diamond* (2006), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Django Unchained* (2012), *Gran Torino* (2009), the *Matrix* trilogy, *The Last Samurai* (2003), *The Legend of Tarzan* (2016), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Avatar* (2009), *Green Book* (2018), and many more. It is noticeable that sports movies have become a breeding ground for white savior narratives, for which I find several reasons. They show the shaming face of high exclusivity of American sport on both amateur and professional levels, though it prides on being democratic (Johnson 20), inclusive and open for everyone regardless of their economic status or ethnicity. A white savior fable easily fits the scheme of the oppressed, aspiring athletes and the redeemer in the shape of a compassionate and noble coach, who frequently plays a didactic, fatherly role. What is more, sport films every now and then exploit the motif of people of color trying to prove their value to the society through their hard work and athletic excellence. Physical struggle is metaphorical for social struggle; defeat in competition represents life failures, whereas sporting victory stands for climbing the social ladder and overcoming personal demons.

"You belong to me" – Jesse Owens and Lawrence Snyder in *Race*

Steven Hopkins' 2016 sports biopic *Race* tells a story of an African-American athlete, Jesse Owens – a prominent figure of light athletics who won four gold medals at the

shrouded in controversy 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. It was on the eve of the II Word War that Owens made history excelling on the sporting arena, but also contributing to the civil rights movement struggle in the light of segregation in American higher education, the unease of global politics of the 1930s and the Nazi oppression in Germany. Though Owens' story is a matrix of complex and sensitive relations between the sporting and sociopolitical realms, Hopkins seems to put his emphasis elsewhere. He clearly sketches the portrait of Owens' contemporaries, but the movie focuses rather on the relationship he had with his coach Lawrence Snyder. A track and field athlete himself, Snyder served as a coach at Ohio State University from 1932 to 1965, met Owens there and contributed to his remarkable success. In the movie Snyder is portrayed by Jason Sudeikis; though it is supposed to be a supporting role, his story more often than not comes to the fore. Hopkins' Snyder comes across as a likeable, yet coarse, figure. He prides on being highly professional and demanding, constantly in search of young talents. When meeting Owens for the first time, he treats him in a patronizing manner, instantly spotting the young athlete's inexperience and gaucheness. Snyder undoubtedly plays a role of a charismatic and opinionated leader, who romanticizes his own athletic success and finds it difficult to face the fact that his records may be beaten. His dedication to work and his Jesse's prospective success dominate his life and overshadows personal problems; it is clearly indicated the coach has a drinking problem and a failed marriage to his name. Sudeikis skillfully shows Snyder's two-faced attitude: on one hand, he is a caring, just and devoted mentor who would do anything to support his mentoree. On the other, in a moment of strong emotional disturbance he shouts to Owens: "You belong to me!", objectifying him and re-centering attention on his own experience. A crucial scene takes place when Owens confronts him about his doubts whether to boycott the Nazi Olympic. The *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* representative has visited his family and persuaded him to do so.

> "Snyder erupts telling Owens—'I don't care about any of that.' The quote lays it all on the line breaking down the uneasy comparison and contrast between the two main characters. The quote also dangerously nudges at post-racial fraudulent colorblindness that might resonate with a 21st century audience. Snyder does not have to care about Owens' race or him being a "Race Man" in 1930s segregated America—it is his privilege to be colorblind" (Schlabach 2016).

As a noble and wise mentor, though, Snyder develops as a person, accepts his past failures and moves on, forming a friendly bond with Owens. He becomes a fatherly figure for him (the athlete's real father is a rather insignificant persona in the movie's plot); it is clear that Owens owes him his career and success, and would never accomplish anything on his own. Whereas it is true for most prominent athletes that it is the team of coaches and assistants who work for one individual success, Snyder takes most

of the credit. A question may arise whether the athlete himself undergoes a change, acquires a new identity, grows to be an independent, self-conscious individual. As an athlete and a forerunner of people of color in professional sport – undoubtedly. But as a person and an American? The movie's finale gives a telling answer to that dilemma. Owens and his wife arrive at the gala which is held to honor his achievements, yet need to enter the building through the back door, as Afro-Americans are not allowed to use the front entrance.

"I'm guessing running's the best thing you got" – Jim White in *McFarland*, USA

Whereas one could probably wonder who is the real protagonist of *The Race*, Niki Caro's *McFarland, USA* leaves little doubt. The 2015 sports drama is based on a true story of coach Jim White (no pun intended) and a Latino high school cross country team from McFarland, California. In 1987, White took under his wings a group of seven Mexican-American boys from poor families leading them to winning state championships. Caro's White fits the savior profile most closely. Not free from flaws, White lost his previous job accidentally injuring one of his players and moves to provincial MacFarland. Struggling to adapt to the new place, he discovers athletic potential in a septet of Hispanic students and embarks upon an ups and downs journey for victory with them. The obstacles on their way are pretty cliché: the boys need to support their families; they have neither motivation nor money to go to college, let alone time for athletic practice and resources for running shoes and uniforms. White inspires self-agency in them and, along the way, undergoes a transformation himself. As Robert C. Bulman notices, "he gains respect for the culture and work ethic of the boys. The white hero is personally transformed as he comes to appreciate the humility, tenacity, and integrity of the residents of McFarland" (2015).

In spite of this appreciation to the team and their community, the film does not offer proper character building to the boys. Only three of them get any personalities and not very flattering ones: the overweight runner that nobody, except coach White, believes in, a reformed womanizer and the coach's favorite. Caro would rather sketch a portrait of the community as a whole; she depicts loving, hard-working minority families facing prejudice and financial obstacles. The film puts coach White in a position of a leader who gives them a chance for a seemingly better life.

The movie's final scene shows that White did, in fact, manage to provide that. Real life characters run in slow motion and the captions inform the audience who they have become and what they have accomplished. It is highlighted how valued members of their community they are, what education they have received. They started their own

families and some of them still reside in McFarland. Among them, there is Jim White riding a bike, as he used to when they were practicing together: a familiar, proud and friendly leader who empowered them to leave the lot of misfits behind.

"You're changing that boy's life" – Michael Oher and Leigh Anne Touhy in *The Blind Side*

Critically acclaimed John Lee Hancock's *The Blind Side* has been widely discussed not only due to its story being based on the NFL's offensive tackle, Michael Oher, but also due to its very strong inclination toward the white savior pattern. The storyline features Oher, a teenage orphan from the impoverished areas of Memphis, Tennessee, who has been adopted by a wealthy white Touhy family, which enables him to pursue a career in sport. Since Michael's mother abandoned him, he is homeless and struggles at school. Leigh Anne Toughy instantly spots him and, in one of the scenes depicting the emergence of their bond, literally saves him as her family drive by and notice that he is wearing just a t-shirt in cold and rainy weather. He has no place to stay, so they take him home and that becomes a permanent solution.

As Erin Ash observes, this is just one of the instances when the movie alters the story for its screen adaptation. Michael Oher, "Big Mike", as the community calls him, had been, in fact, taken care of by a number of people, before Leigh Anne and his husband Sean became his legal guardians. The cinematographic version of real events would undoubtedly always be fictionalized and modified, yet Hancock's choices juxtapose the false image of other adults being neglectful of Michael (94). The same pattern is followed regarding the young player's athletic abilities. "Tuohy's liberation and protection of Oher from the black culture are not limited to sheltering him […] The most striking modification of Oher's story, and one that manifests as a main story line of the film, is that Oher needed to be taught how to play football" (94). At first, Michael is portrayed in practice as helpless and confused. In one of the scenes, Leigh Anne interrupts the practice and coaches Michael telling him he needs to associate the game with the will to protect his family. The audience is left with no doubt that she is a sole and direct agent of his later success and that she is the one who gave him the sense of emotional belonging to her family.

Both Leigh Anne and Michael's characters are somewhat conspicuously shaped. She is a former cheerleader married to a millionaire, a contemporary Southern belle holding a Republican worldview and "being a good Christian". Sandra Bullock (given the Academy Award for her performance) offers a lively, opinionated and high-maintenance, yet caring and always doing the right thing persona. Devoted as a mother and confident in this role, Leigh Anne instantly becomes a motherly figure for Michael.

As with most white savior narratives, she goes through a process (e.g. facing her white friends who suggest Michael might be dangerous for her teenage daughter Collins), which the film pervades and explores. Oher, on the other hand, is an introvert, and a traumatized teenager who has issues tackling peer group dynamics and underperforming school, who, by the end of the film, maintains a positive, close relationship only with his new family. Hancock does not highlight the transformation he has undergone, but recenters focus on Leigh Anne. "Am I a good person?" she asks her husband craving validation of her good deeds, as she develops her identity of a savior.

Conclusions

As has been demonstrated, the white savior trope finds a breeding ground in sports dramas. The theoretical framework provided gave an interdisciplinary outlook at findings regarding cultural identity, seeking recognition through sport and the notion of white savior narratives in cinema. The trope and its characteristics were identified in the titles selected for analysis. Minorities as portrayed in those productions, and ostensible protagonists who represent them, share a set of very similar traits: these are aspiring athletes whose sport career is uncertain due to poverty, social rejection and discrimination. Inspirational coaches, and in the case of *The Blind Side* a foster mother, rescue them from social oppression, enable them to pursue an athletic career and help them achieve considerable success. As has been shown, white savior narratives place focus on the mentor, highlighting personal transformation they undergo, rather than the mentoree, which changes the dynamics of their relationship and diminishes young athletes' experience. At the end of that journey the oppressed express profound gratitude and form an emotional bond with the saviors. The sporting terrain makes the savior almost as indispensable to the athletic performance as the champion. After all, the top is not such a lonely place for people of color; there is usually a savior to share that success with.

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Filmography

McFarland, *USA*. 2015. Dir Niki Caro
Race. 2016. Dir. Steven Hopkins
The Blind Side. 2009. Dir. John Lee Hancock.

Abstract: In this article I strive to contribute to the discussion on sports white savior narratives and the portrayal of emerging cultural identity as shown in sports dramas. By examining selected movies, I argue that sports dramas extensively use the tropes of white savior narratives and, thus, offer biased understanding of the ethnic minorities' experience and their identity formation process in the United States. An extensive body of literature exists to serve as a theoretical basis of the project. I will draw from the theoretical findings on cultural identity by Stuart Hall, Grant Jarvie's seeking identification and recognition through sport, and Matthew Hughey's writings on the white savior tropes, among others. The corpus of material selected for analysis consists of three mainstream Hollywood productions of the last decade based on true events: Steven Hopkins's *Race* (2016), Niki Caro's *McFarland, USA* (2015), and John Lee Hancock's *TheBlind Side* (2009).
Key words: white savior, sport films, ethnical minorities, identity