**Literature Review**

“Post-racial” Society

Ikuenobe (2013) defined a “post-racial society” as one in which race no longer makes sense as a category and people do not treat each other differently based on racial characteristics. Appiah (1995), Carter (2000), and Corlett (2003), as paraphrased by Ikuenobe (2013) argued that race is meaningless because it does not have any biological or cultural criteria of identification. Ikuenobe identified this statement as problematic since it implies that if there are no races there cannot be racism (p. 627).

Recent media discussions have named the election of President Barack Obama as the end of racism and the insemination of a post-racial society. Yet, as Staples (2010) addressed, Obama’s campaign strategically eliminated him from the white stereotype of the unintelligent, criminal black male. They emphasized his white heritage by showing his relatives in Kansas more frequently than his Kenyan relatives living in the U.S and placed white attendants at rallies behind the camera to conjure greater white support (Staples 2010). Because of the racially-conscious campaign strategies utilized to aid Obama’s chance with white voters, and the apparent racially-motivated comments from his opponents and other conservative representatives, Staples claimed that the United States could not have been truly post-racial then nor would it be in the next century (p. 133).

Post-racial narratives are commonly incorporated into films that also feature stereotypes and harmful ideologies. Baum (2010) analyzed three films that received critical acclamation and attest to the idea that a “post-racial” society has already been achieved. The pictures discussed were *Invictus, Avatar,* and *Precious: Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire,* and Baum highlighted how each had problematic narrative structures that perpetuated white saviors, colorism, and the notion that institutional and systematic racism can be overcome with the collaboration and achievement of a few heroic characters (p. 628).

White Savior Narratives

In American films, especially those claiming a post-racial society, white characters have often been granted the archetype of the savior, most frequently in relation with impoverished people of color. Three films were analyzed by Baum (2010), all of which had evidence of a white savior complex. *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009), was analyzed as part of the group, naming Jake Sully, white former Marine, as a white savior since he decided to enter the world of Pandora and help the native species fight back against a group of scientists (with whom he was previously working) attempting to exploit the land for its resources with the backing of the military (p. 631). Brooks, as quoted by Baum, wrote in the New York Times Editorials that the film “rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic…” (p. 632). Although the film’s futuristic setting attempted to throw off many traditional aspects of the white savior narrative, the film openly projected earthly racial and colonial conflicts onto intergalactic relations. The film also relayed an oversimplified approach to interracial and intercultural relations—one that suggests different races be kept at a distance and undisturbed in their homelands so they can continue in their unique lifestyles.

*Freedom Writers* (dir. Richard LaGravenese)was another American film in which an attempt at a post-racial society is found to be highly problematic in its depiction of whites at pure charitable people in their relation to dysfunctional people of color and (Yosso and Garcia 2008). The film took place in Long Beach, CA after the 1992 Los Angeles gang uprisings, creating a context in which racial tensions were high. The story follows young, white female English teacher Erin Gruwell as she begins her career at Campbell High School and follows her and her remedial, at-risk students over the course of four years as she instills in them a sense of self-value and the motivation to learn. Using her own finances to purchase books for the class, Gruwell uses *The Diary of Anne Frank* to teach the class racial tolerance instead of relating their personal struggles to the greater narrative of racism and discrimination in this country. Gruwell asked the students to commit to making a change for themselves, which is, at the surface, a necessary decision for these students to make, but at the same time ignores some of the larger circumstances attributing to their struggles that they cannot change alone (pp. 174-177).

*The Blind Side* (dir. John Lee Hancock 2008) also features a white savior complex when Leigh Ann Touhy takes in Michael Oher, and with her family’s help Michael is able to progress in school and eventually become a football player in the NFL. Among other critiques, Montez de Oca (2012) analyzed *The Blind Side,* finding that one of the main characters, Leigh Anne Touhy, plays a white savior. The poster for the film shows Leigh Anne and Michael walking away from the dark background and toward the light, both dressed in white pants and dark tops. Although Michael is much larger than Leigh Anne, his head hangs subserviently, and Mrs. Touhy’s hand rests on his back, guiding him. The poster exhibits the distribution of power in their relationship—casting Touhy in the role of the supreme white goddess and Oher in the role of the strong but inferior black male (p. 137).

Black Character Archetypes

Due to the intricate history of racism in this country, complex stereotypes about Black people now exist that are consistently portrayed even in films that support a “post-racial” society. Many of these stereotypes have evolved from late 19th and early 20th century post-emancipation images of black people and many ignore the circumstances by which they were created. Some early stereotypes included the Sambo, which characterized black slaves as cheery, childlike, mentally inferior and lazy and helped make the institution of slavery more palatable as a positive good rather than a necessary evil. The Sambo was most often ascribed to black men, as was the brute or buck, which illustrated black males as overtly hypersexual, violent, and primal. Related to this was the stereotype that black men are uncontrollably attracted to white women, which is based in the fear of mixing races (Ward 2015).

Attributed to black women most commonly was the mammy figure, which illustrated them usually as overweight and dark-skinned, and as willing to take on motherly duties especially for the children of whites. This stereotype utterly twists the role of black women in this time period, since many were forced to play this role even up until the mid-20th century in the form of maids and nannies (Ward 2015).

Modern 20th and 21st century stereotypes began to emerge with the further integration of black people into society and the media and the progression of economical differences. For black males especially, the stereotype of being naturally athletic developed with the emergence of great black athletes in American sports. For black women, the socio-economic status of many black people combined with the insemination of social service programs such as welfare contributed to the “welfare queen”: the lazy, unemployed black single mother who exploits the welfare system as her sole form of income and is stuck in an “impoverished mindset” that is keeping her from getting a job and properly contributing to society (Ward 2015).

These stereotypes are found in characters of films directed by both white filmmakers, including the film *Precious: Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire* (dir. Lee Daniels 2008). Baum (2010) noted that the story of Prec­ious and her life in late 1980s Harlem as an obese, illiterate, and pregnant sixteen-year old revealed some of the ugly truths of black ghetto life, but at the same time perpetuated many negative stereotypes about black people. Precious’ mother, Mary (played by Mo’Nique) fits neatly into the welfare queen stereotype, and her father, who has sexually abused her since childhood and is the father of her two children, represents the dangerous and sexually hazardous black man. In addition, the positive characters in Precious’ life, a teacher that inspires her to read and a social worker who attempts to help her situation, are both very fair-skinned black women, thus contributing to the both interracial and intraracial belief that lighter skin makes a person a higher class citizen (pp. 633-636).

Colorblindness

Colorblindness, when incorporated into post-racial narratives, separate characters of their identifying group due to preconceived notions about that group. Smith (2012) screened 25 films released between 1989 and 2008 for elements of colorblindness and colorconsciousness. Colorblindness was defined as a denial of “the embedded nature of race in our society…and thus allows and justifies the presence of racial inequality” (p. 781). Colorconsciousness was cited from Ullucci & Battey (2011) as the ability to “expose the assumed neutrality of whiteness, validate the experiences and perspectives of people of color, name racist practices, and point out institutional racism. The study showed that many of the selected films had mixed results. *Bringin’ Down the House* (dir. Adam Shankman 2003) was an example of elements of both colorblindness and colorconsciousness. The character Charlene (Queen Latifah) displays all of the characteristics of colorconsciousness since she comically calls out the racist undertones of the white people around her. Even so, her interaction with Peter (Steve Martin), a distinguished lawyer whom she’s conned into helping her expunge her record, leaves an individual impact on Peter and his family. Peter’s assumptions of Charlene change as he helps her over the course of the film, but Charlene is still an exceptional exception in that she remains the only black character they have contact with (pp. 787-789).