SPECIAL ISSUE: THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN 'AFTER RACE'

Remixing the Burden: *Kony 2012* and the wages of whiteness[1]

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This paper examines the centrality of whiteness to the Kony 2012 *campaign, arguing that both* Kony 2012 *and the broader saviour-industrial complex are predicated on a benign and unchallenged whiteness.* Kony 2012 *is predicated on a geo-political virtual reality of unmarked whiteness. This occurs because Facebook communities are relatively socially isolated, enabling the whiteness of these communities to remain invisible and unchallenged. A focus on injustice 'elsewhere' contributes to an unscrutinised notion of white privilege as likewise existing 'elsewhere'. It contributes to the formation of an imagined community of 'us' that is defined by a shared belief in doing good, and in doing good 'we' are showing that we are not driven by prejudice and racial animus. 'We' care … just look at 'my status update'. "Remixing the Burden," thus, argues* Kony 2012 *needed the technologies of Facebook and social media as a whole, and likewise online activism for white America requires campaign such as* Kony*, which put the performance of white charity and post-privilege along side of a fulfilled desire to help without threatening social standing with peers, communal power, and lived privilege.* Kony 2012 *cannot exist without social media because of the ways that social media activism allows whiteness off the hook.*

Keywords: Kony 2012, social media activism, Facebook, whiteness, saviour-industrial complex, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown

Introduction

This paper examines the centrality of whiteness to the *Kony 2012* campaign, arguing that both *Kony* and the broader saviour-industrial complex are predicated on a benign and unchallenged whiteness. *Kony 2012* is predicated on

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[1] This essay includes and builds on three written essays and a presentation from the author; see Leonard (2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2014).

a geo-political virtual reality of unmarked whiteness. It needs and reflects the power of a new media technology that allows for activism at a distance. This distance produces a culture of unchecked privileges and limited accountability. This occurs because Facebook communities are relatively socially isolated, enabling the whiteness of these communities to remain invisible and unchallenged. A focus on injustice 'elsewhere' contributes to an unscrutinised notion of white privilege as likewise existing 'elsewhere'. It contributes to the formation of an imagined community of 'us' that is defined by a shared belief in doing good, and in doing good 'we' are showing that we are not driven by prejudice and racial animus. 'We' care … just look at 'my status update.'

Social media activism exemplified in the *Kony 2012* campaign puts an emphasis on the performance of outrage (Ahmed, 2004) or alerting the world to events that occasion outrage, as opposed to fostering action to address social injustice, which results in unexamined privilege and unchecked whiteness. In other words, the performative outrage, especially within homogenous Facebook communities, becomes the end goal, leaving little room or need to participate outside of these Facebook communities. These performances provide evidence of the care and concern of today's white youth but do not foster action, accountability, or involvement in struggles for justice.

As an effort that neither threatens whiteness nor undermines the hegemonic racial schemata that structure geo-political alignments of wealth, technology and capital, the *Kony* campaign is reflective of the power of neoliberalism and white paternalism within contemporary culture. In a sense, *Kony 2012* defined whiteness not only as benevolence but also as the ability to help others through consumption. Despite claims of post-racialness, and arguments that *Kony 2012* proves that race doesn't matter, the methods and message tell a different story. "Remixing the Burden," thus, argues *Kony 2012* needed the technologies of Facebook and social media as a whole, and likewise online activism for white America requires campaigns such as *Kony*, which put the performance of white charity and post-privilege along side of a desire to help without threatening social standing with peers, communal power, and lived privilege. *Kony 2012* cannot exist without social media because of the ways that social media activism allows whiteness off the hook. It needed social media because the campaign reaffirmed the power of white middle-class Western identity. The absence of connection between these online communities and activists on the ground, the lack of critical interrogation of positionality and privilege, and the focus outward highlight the limitations of this movement.

The focus here is not simply about the technology or Facebook activism but rather how whiteness and privilege are empowered through these spaces, how segregated online communities that are neither accountable nor indebted to long-term participation in social justice or anti-racism campaigns, contributed to the success of *Kony 2012*, and that there is an absence of a comparable movement involving white participation for racial justice in the United States.

Kony 2012 refers to a video created in 2012 with the hopes of fostering a global movement to capture Joseph Kony, the leader of the rebel group the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Invisible Children, the organisation that conceived and produced the video, capitalised on the distribution power of social media, and retained news and media salience throughout much of 2012. The campaign

included an initial video distributed through YouTube and Vimeo, but relied on Facebook and Twitter for mass distribution.

As the focus is on the dialectics between whiteness, Facebook activism, and *Kony 2012*, there will be limited discussion of the video itself. This paper is not concerned with the history chronicled in the video, Invisible Children's politics or the widely critiqued failure of the campaign to arrest Joseph Kony or significantly alter United States' foreign policy. My focus instead is on the mobilisation of historically troubling narratives and stereotypes of African 'dysfunction' in the context of 'white saviour' narratives. According to Connor Cavanagh, "Commentators bemoaned the recurrence of a familiar narrative—that of middle-class and predominately white young Americans saving Africans 'from their own self-imposed miseries'" (as cited in Butagira, 2012; see also Fisher, 2012; Pflanz, 2012). What was striking with *Kony 2012* was not simply the recycling of "white saviors" (Danielle, 2012) and the pathologising of Africans as either helpless/invisible victims or evil murderers (Mnthai, 2012), but how this sort of new media 'activism' fostered apolitical consumption. In many ways, such activism fit perfectly with the nature of whiteness in the United States, especially in a purportedly post-racial, post-civil rights, and post-Obama moment. As individuals deployed their consumptive power in the *Kony* campaign, whiteness would be visible and invisible, marked as absent and present as instigating global change. In fact, participation in such campaigns rarely brings whiteness and the role of white people in propagating violence and inequality into the spotlight, whereupon privilege, power, and the white body might be subject to questions and challenges. I argue that the privileges and power of whiteness are not questioned in these forms of apolitical media activism but instead used to reinforce the discursive, ideological and moral associations between whiteness and 'goodness' from inside a protected digital bubble engineered by racial segregation inside and outside of social media.

Kony 2012—Background to the campaign

In 2012, (white) America came together in the name of justice. Demonstrating unity and purpose, white college and high school students banded together to demand accountability. The cause was not marijuana legalisation, or fighting for their right to party (as those things have already been won for white youth), but finding Joseph Kony. Invisible Children, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded in 2003, released a video as a purported experiment: "Could an online video make an obscure war criminal famous? And if he was famous, would the world work together to stop him?" (Invisible Children, 2012). Hoping to shine a national spotlight on Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), *Kony 2012* worked to convert consciousness into action, knowledge into power.

Within six days, the video had been viewed 100 million times across the Internet (to date, it has been viewed almost 101 million times on YouTube alone with another 18.5 million on Vimeo). At its height, it attracted 1 million hits per hour (Invisible Children, 2012b). During this initial period, 3.7 million people committed to joining the *Kony 2012* struggle. Although unsuccessful in "ending war," or the goal of "stopping the LRA and their leader," *Kony 2012* was effective in galvanising support from white youth throughout the nation (Invisible Children, 2012). White college students revealed extensive commitment to the

Kony cause. Many gave money to Invisible Children, purchasing the "tool kit," which included bumper stickers, t-shirts, and additional commodities of justice. Others embraced *Kony 2012*, designing their own clothing and posters, in an effort to raise "consciousness" (Invisible Children, 2012b) and cash for their cause. They wanted the world to know that they were outraged by the atrocities going on in Uganda or at least the atrocities said to be occurring at some point in recent history.

The popularity and success of *Kony 2012* is not surprising. Invisible Children used social media in important ways by firstly deploying a narrative of good versus evil through which to anchor its campaign information, creating an affective appeal for young consumers to invest in a movement to stop a man intent on turning young males into soldiers and young women into sex slaves. Secondly, the organisation embraced new media technology that allowed participation with a click of a button where consumers could instantaneously share the video on social media, make a donation, or order some *Kony* apparel. One could purchase penance and buy peace.

Invisible Children was effective in selling the idea that a credit card and 5 minutes made one part of the solution in combating child soldiers. The video and the campaign played upon longstanding ideas of the white man's burden—that white America has a responsibility and a duty to help the oppressed elsewhere. In its initial video, Invisible Children called upon participants to join their 'experiment' where they would come together to disseminate knowledge about these known atrocities. It was their hope that this spotlight and the growing world consciousness would compel action. The video seemingly imagines social media and the spread of the video as a wave. Each share and like across online communities added to the power of the wave, which ultimately would crash onto the shores of Uganda. Imagining change and justice as inevitable and participants in the *Kony 2012* as agents of change, the campaign was successful in generating online and news media attention because, I argue, it tapped into ideas of white benevolence, American exceptionalism, and the outward movement of justice, freedom, and equality. That is, the wave of American exceptionalism evident in the care for the people of Uganda and the determination to foster justice would be spread from one Facebook community to the next, coalescing around a shared vision and commitment to arresting Kony.

The video itself, and the subsequent discourse surrounding Uganda, Sudan, the Congo, and Africa as a whole, construct Kony as 'evil', as the source of all pain and suffering for the people in the region. (white) Westerners by contrast are imagined as saviours and beacons of hope, change, and peace.

Kony 2012—The White Saviour Complex

In one of the *Kony 2012* video's most disturbing scenes, Jason Russell, the film's director shows a picture of Kony to his son so that he can see "evil" and what a "bad guy" looks like. The scene feels like a postmodern twist of Kenneth Clark's famous doll test in which black children were asked to describe black and white dolls (bad versus good) as evidence of the consequences of white supremacy. In this case, a white child and his father locate evil in the body of an African man with whiteness remaining as goodness since we are saving the many African

children suffering because of Kony. Can you imagine such a video in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's killing with a picture of the unarmed Florida boy who was shot while walking home from the store, and George Zimmerman juxtaposed? What sort of response might that elicit? How might it shine a critical spotlight on whiteness and its power within the dominant imagination?

The difficulty in imagining a similar video inside a US context highlights the ways *Kony 2012* relies upon "white saviour narratives." With "the Soft Bigotry of Kony 2012," Max Fisher (2012) highlights the racially comforting narrative offered by the documentary.

> The much-circulated campaign subtly reinforces an idea that has been one of Africa's biggest disasters: that well-meaning Westerners need to come in and fix it. Africans, in this telling, are helpless victims, and Westerners are the heroes. It's part of a long tradition of Western advocacy that has, for centuries, adopted some form of white man's burden, treating African people as cared for only to the extent that Westerners care, their problems solvable only to the extent that Westerners solve them, and surely damned unless we can save them. First it was with missionaries, then "civilizing" missions, and finally the ultimate end of white paternalism, which was placing Africans under the direct Western control of imperialism. And while imperialism may have collapsed 50 years ago, that mentality persists, because it is rewarding and ennobling to feel needed and to believe you are doing something good.

Similarly, Natasha Jackson (@NatashaTheory) focuses on benevolent racism with her discussion of *Kony 2012*:

> White liberals who have dedicated their lives to 'helping' people of color have a hard time seeing, let alone addressing, the benevolent racism that can undermine even their best intentions. How can they be racist when they want to help so badly? (2013)

Campaigns that emphasise helping others, technologies that limit accountability and critical responses, and issues that don't implicate whiteness have elicited far greater support that cuts across race, class, and gender lines. From fundraising efforts in the aftermath of the Tsunami in Thailand to the Haitian earthquake, from mobilizing efforts surrounding famine in Africa or *Kony 2012*, a pattern is clear: campaigns that respond to 'natural' disasters or those seen as resulting from organic evil compel action. Compare this to the lack of attention and support for anti-racist campaigns surrounding police violence in the United States, or the deaths of immigrants crossing the Southern border in the United States.

Akin to a *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* (1985), a film in which the protagonist John Rambo returns to Vietnam to not only free any remaining POWs but to bring Communism to it's knees, Invisible Children/the West is re-imagined as white saviour, as a source of peace and tranquillity for the despair facing Uganda. As with *Rambo*, the potential violence directed at Joseph Kony or others is justifiable in the eradication of evil. As noted by Susan Jeffords (1997) and by Richard Manson, in his dissertation on white masculinity, the white saviour has been central to a North American national reconstructive project since the 1980s:

> Led by the Ronald Reagan cowboy image, the decade saw the appearance of He-Man, Rambo, and the Terminator, one powerfully over-muscled white male image after another which relocate the white male at the center of power in the imagined American community. To this day, the 'normative body that enveloped strength, labor, determination' which is 'like Reagan's own, male and white' body has retained if not increased its potency, likely as a result of 'winning' the Cold War. (Jeffords, as cited in 2004, pp. 224-225)

In a Twitter conversation about *Rambo* and ultimately *Kony 2012*, Sarah Jackson (@sjjphd) rightfully identified the film as an example of how "white violence is framed as necessary to save humanity, but the black violence … [is Uganda, Sudan, and Democratic Republic of Congo's] downfall" (Jackson, as cited in Son of Baldwin 2012). The representation of blackness as evil, as a threat to humanity and peace, as unredeemable and perpetually dangerous, especially in comparison to a kind, gentle and benevolent white body, not only justifies the mythical Rambo figure or the *Kony* campaign, but mass incarceration and daily forms of violence against African Americans and people of colour in the US. The white saviour complex imagines black violence as a threat to civilisation. Thus, any form of state violence, whether international war or the prison industrial complex, is repositioned as 'saving' and 'civilising'.

The merging of longstanding technologies—white supremacy, white man's burden, white paternalism—with the new technologies associated with Facebook and social media demonstrates that not only did these methods of organising not change the racial dynamics anchored by white paternalism and the privilege to be unaccountable but in a sense these technologies, which perpetuate isolation and segregated individualism, contribute to more of the same. It was the embodiment of twenty-first century paternalism all while protecting and rendering whiteness as invisible. As an embodiment, as an interlocutor with technology and consumerism, *Kony 2012* allowed for the white man's burden to manifest without having to confront the ideological and real-life tensions that manifest within face-to-face contact between whiteness and its others.

In this sense, *Kony 2012* represented a remixing of the burden that utilised virtual reality to not only 'touch' racial others across the globe but do so in the absence of a critical interrogation of whiteness. Teju Cole persuasively argues that an erased whiteness is central to "White-Saviour Industrial Complex."

> There is an expectation that we can talk about sins but no one must be identified as a sinner: newspapers love to describe words or deeds as 'racially charged' even in those cases when it would be more honest to say 'racist'; we agree that there is rampant misogyny, but misogynists are nowhere to be found; homophobia is a problem but no one is homophobic. One cumulative effect of this policed language is that when someone dares to point out something as obvious as white privilege, it is seen as unduly provocative. Marginalized voices in America have fewer and fewer avenues to speak plainly about what they suffer; the effect of this enforced civility is that those voices are falsified or blocked entirely from the discourse. (2012)

Kony 2012 not only remixes the long-standing tradition of whites saving the racial other unable to save him/herself but does so through both marking and unmarking whiteness.

Invisible Whiteness (rather than invisible children)

Ruth Frankenberg (2001) defines whiteness as a "location of structural advantage" (p. 76). At both an individual and collective level, within culture and institutional arrangements, whiteness represents "standpoint, a location from which to see selves, others and national and global orders" (p. 76). Despite the hegemony of an invisible and erased whiteness, it constitutes "a site of elaboration or a range of cultural practices and identities, often unmarked and unnamed or named as natural or 'normative' rather than specifically racial" (p. 76). Complementing those who have focused on the dialectics between power, whiteness, and the imagination of a racial other (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; hooks, 1997; Morrison, 1993), Frankenberg highlights the ways that whiteness exists as invisible and hyper visible, as an unnoticed but cashed-in commodity of privilege and power. In other words, the cultural meaning, social existence, political positioning, and structural advantages of whiteness tend to remain overlooked as "if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being" (Dyer, as cited in Kusz, 2001, p. 393; see also Roediger, 1999; Lipsitz, 1998). Better said, laws, institutions, dominant discourses, and representations render whiteness as "a privileged place of racial normativity" (Wray & Newitz, 1997, p. 3). Joe Feagin, Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon further argue that,

> One difficulty in studying the white self is that until recently, it was an invisible and non-regarded category, even difficult to name and not perceived as a distinctive racial identity. Even today, most white Americans either do not think about whiteness at all or else think of it as a positive or neutral category. (Feagin, Vera & Gordon, 1995, p. 296)

Building on the work of W.E.B DuBois, James Baldwin, Kobena Mercer, and Richard Dyer, bell hooks argues that the popular imagination has envisioned whiteness as "synonymous with goodness" (1997, p. 169). hooks concludes that whites have been "socialized to believe the fantasy that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and non-threatening" (p. 169). Dyer concurs, arguing that, "as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (1997, p. 1).

Such an understanding of whiteness as both 'invisible' and normative is imperative not only in terms of the narrative offered in *Kony 2012*, or even the pleasure and appeal of this campaign, but in the technologies used within the campaign. As opposed to other movements, whether culturally based (hip-hop) or those organised around politics (anti-apartheid; civil rights; prison-based), whiteness could literally remain in the dark. Adam Mansbach, in discussing white privilege and hip-hop in the 1980s and 1990s, reflects on the spatial importance of racial formation and the way integration—especially in spaces where whiteness is seen as exceptional, whether that be hip-hop or within anti-racist activist organisations—impacts politics:

> For a long time there was not a critical mass of white people. So if you were a white hip-hop head, you were going to be the only one in the room … It's a very individual kind of thing. And if you were a white hip-hopper, you were made to be aware of whiteness. You had to be aware of your own physicality; your own race; your own privilege. You had to think about the ways historically that black culture has been co-opted by white people … You would walk into a hip-hop party, and

someone would say, "What are you doing here?" And that was a good question; made you think. Now that has changed … changed significantly in the last 15 years. We have gone from a situation where whiteness is put on the table, made to be recognized; white folks have to think about it, to a time a when white people in hip-hop are some of the most complacent around. White people have walked into hip-hop like it's our parent's living room, thrown our feet up on the coffee table. This is a major change … And a lot of it has to do with an attempt to escape from our own privilege. (2009)

Similarly, when thinking about the history of anti-racist organising in the United States, it is important to note how cross-racial organising has not only forced whiteness into a place of visibility but accountability. To participate in Freedom Summer during the 1960s, anti-Apartheid movements in the 1980s, or anti-prison organising over the last 15 years, brought white youth into cross-racial alliances where they were forced to account for whiteness, for their privileges, for their complicity and implication in an ongoing history. It would be impossible to participate in these spaces, in meetings, within organisations, and not recognise one's whiteness. *Kony 2012* thus allowed white people the pleasure of change and proving oneself as anti-racist, without the pain, difficulty and obstacles of being challenged. In many ways it fosters not only activism from a distance, clicktivism without accountability, but also a desire to create spaces of change that affirm whiteness while minimising the accounting for whiteness. It provided the possibility to 'engage in change' elsewhere without having to look to change and examine oneself.

Facebook Activism

The 2012 "Stop Kony" viral video was emblematic of a strain of Facebook activism rampant in the United States and throughout the Western world. It offered and reflected the sort of activism that has become commonplace within middle-class white communities—one based in commodities, performative justice, and moralism. The extensive amounts of clicktivism have recently received ample discussion and media coverage as to its significance and usefulness.

While described as click through activism (clicktivism), or cyber activism, my interest here is more in the formation (and existence) of Facebook communities that exist apart and in isolation from Ugandan communities. This isolation embodies and contributes a movement based on apathy, limited knowledge, and overall disengagement with social/political issues and thus facilitating a form of slacktivism. This social media technology enables and thrives because of the insulation of whiteness. The *Kony 2012* campaign is a telling example of the ways new media technology can undermine struggles for justice. It is a movement for, by, and about middle-class white identity. *Urbandictionary.com*, usually not a source of theoretical insights, captures the essence of clicktivism with its definition of Facebook Activism:

> The illusion of dedication to a cause through no-commitment awareness groups. Specifically in reference to Facebook groups centered around political issues.
>
> Dave: Man, this genocide in Darfur is terrible. I sure wish I could make a difference.

> Jenna: Well, I made a Facebook group about it. We have almost one million members!
> Dave: That's great! Are you all going to donate money to refugees or something?
> Jenna: No, but now those murderers will really know how sad we are!
> Dave: Sounds like you're really into your Facebook activism!
> (Rag Man, 2009)

With *Kony 2012*, although part of its agenda clearly is getting people to donate to the Invisible Children organisation or buy its tool kit (for 30 dollars), the video frames the issue as one of awareness where global pressure will lead to justice. In other words, merely 'sharing' the video on Facebook, via Twitter or tumblr, is advertised as bringing about change. Chris Csikzentmihalyi, co-director of the Centre of Future Media at MIT, compares "click-through activism" to "dispensations the Catholic Church used to give" (as cited in Hesse, 2009). As penance, the complicity of whiteness is erased or at least never accounted for in critical ways. Whether posting the video online, donating to the organisation, or raising funds or awareness, participation in the *Kony* campaign becomes absolution for a history of wrongdoing and even any potential complicity in the problems facing the world. That is, since people are 'doing good' by demanding justice, by raising awareness about Kony, war crimes, or any number of issues, they are absolved from responsibility. According to Csikzentmihalyi, such forms of activism are problematic because at best the impact is ephemeral. To Csikzentmihalyi, social media and its technologies limits accountability, limits pressure, and minimises demands that individuals "carry on the spark" (as cited in Hesse, 2009). Social media activism is more about absolution and redemption of self without correction, without any accountability and without any need to evaluate the policies and conditions that give rise to the Konys of the world and the consequences of US-supported policies on the health and welfare of people around the globe. Just as the privileges of whiteness minimise critique of whiteness, thereby limiting accountability and introspection, the technologies of "click-through activism" demand limited responsibility.

> There are a growing number of cases in which people are using social media tools like Facebook to express their interests in a variety of social and political causes. Maybe it's signing up as a fan of an environmental or local community cause. In several other instances Facebook users are creating groups finding that it is an effective and efficient way to coordinate their efforts, share information, and generate momentum for their respective causes. (Hesse, 2009)

The number of users, the flexibility afforded by Facebook, its user-friendly nature, and its power within online culture has led to an increasing reliance on Facebook by activists.

Of course, the ease of participation and the lack of any sort of process of determining the effectiveness of participation results in members who are either disinterested or who may lack a skill set to convert knowledge, interest, and shared identity into change. Membership doesn't make a movement for change. Cyber activism isn't necessarily activism in that the nature of the technology limits possibility of activating change. According to Mary Joyce, co-founder of DigiActive.org, a new media organisation that focuses on assisting grassroots activists to use digital technology,

> Commitment levels are opaque. Maybe a maximum of 5 percent are going to take action and maybe it's closer to 1 percent. In most cases Facebook group members do nothing. I haven't yet seen a case where the Facebook group has led to a sustained movement. (as cited in Hesse 2009)

Commitment is especially important when there is no expectation or possibility of action, sharing the *Kony 2012* video or donating was the goal rather than a sustained movement. The allure of participating in justice overseas further isolates and limits potential involvement on the ground. Whereas struggles against police violence in the US or incidences of racism on college campus engender Facebook activism, along with other forms of virtual resistance *and* grassroots organising and action, *Kony 2012* requires nothing outside of the virtual. The persistence of racially segregated America, whereupon the average white youth that has only 1 black friend—with 75% of whites having no friends of colour at all—is an important factor for understanding the lack of cross-racial social activism. As we see parallel levels of homogeneity online, it is no surprise that clicktivism functions in similarly racially homogenous communities. The pleasure that results from 'helping the other' mandates racial segregation. The likely questions and challenges that might force accountability and examinations of whiteness within a more integrated space are minimised through the structure of social media activism and a racially segregated online world. By design, the level of accountability is minimal (Ingraham, 2014).

Anders Colding-Jørgensen, a Danish psychologist, helps us understand this process and the problematic inherent in Facebook Activism (as cited in Hesse, 2009). He created a group on Facebook that insinuated city officials were planning to tear down the Stork Foundation, a famous monument in Copenhagen, Denmark. He invited numerous friends to join the group, and within a few hours 125 joined the cause. Shortly thereafter, the group had 1000 members. By day three, the group was adding two members per minute during the day, culminating with over 27,000 group members. Within a short period of time, 27,000 joined a fictitious cause, to protest the made-up removal of a fountain. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Colding-Jørgensen explained his experiment in the following way: "Just like we need stuff to furnish our homes to show who we are, on Facebook we need cultural objects that put together a version of me that I would like to present to the public" (as cited in Hesse, 2009). Users had little interest in educating themselves about the situation or finding out ways to thwart this fictitious injustice, but, rather, clicked "to parade their own feelings of outrage around the cyber public" (Hesse, 2009).

Likewise, Sherri Grasmuck, a sociologist from Temple University who has conducted research about Facebook profiles, has found that users "shape their online identity implicitly rather than explicitly: that is, the kind of campaigns and groups they join reveals more about who they are than their dull 'about me' page" (as cited in Hesse, 2009). She concludes that Facebook does not foster action or cultivate a social movement but instead individualises the process: "I become the social movement as an affirmation of my identity, rather than choosing the social movement because it matches my identity" (as cited in Hesse, 2009). Such critiques are important, but they often erase race. The power of cultural objects, whether it be posting the *Kony 2012* or "Kony 2012: Part II— Beyond Famous" videos, decorating your car or notebook with a "STOP KONY" bumper sticker, or purchasing a 'Kony with a Purpose' t-shirt, is trafficking in

racial benevolence. The pleasure of clicktivism and its related consumerism, which given the power in dollars and credit cards is more like swipetivism, emanates from its distance and insulation from criticism. It results from not only financial privilege but also a technology that allows for participation without the burden or responsibility of being challenged or examining one's own complicity in injustice.

Writing about Gap's Red campaign, which sought to raise awareness and money for the global fight against AIDS, Margaret Sarna-Wojicki argues that the Gap's efforts embody a broader trend of "causumerism" which "is portrayed as a voicing of radicalism and dissent, yet to a degree the 'activism' is limited to the shopping mall" (2008, p. 16). The *Kony 2012* campaign is no different although the 'activism' takes place in the home disconnected from the voices, struggles, and organisations already engaged in fights for justice and empowerment in Uganda and throughout Africa. In an effort to help the silenced, *Kony 2012* not only perpetuates their own silencing, embracing as noted by Sarna-Wojicki, "distinctions of 'self' and 'other' that draw a strict line between empowered 'first world consumers' and Africans" (2008, p. 26), but constructs benevolent power through consumerism. A movement based in/on new media allows for this process with great ease and comfort. Clicktivism or sharetivism reaffirms the power of the white middle-class Western identity not only to purchase and consume but also to use that power and privilege to help the poor other. This power and pleasure is predicated on a particular definition of whiteness and racial otherness as well as the technology that transports the white Western body into far off lands all the while protecting these same bodies from questions, challenges, and other potential spotlights on whiteness. Working in concert, social media allows for activism from the safety of one's home—there will be few questions about whiteness, about privilege, about stereotypes, or about assumptions about Africa or blackness in the United States. Whiteness will remain unmarked and unchecked, fulfilling the allure of an authenticated post-racial and anti-racial self.

Visible Whiteness—Saving across the globe

In the wake of 9/11 and the ongoing war on terror, the United States has increasingly relied on national narratives that offer certainty, comfort, and security. In catchphrases and sound bites, pundits and politicians remind Americans of the importance of protecting the homeland, the role of all Americans in safeguarding national space and American democratic values, the need to guard against the enemies of freedom and civilisation, and the promise of spreading democracy throughout the world. As countless bodies fell, injured and dying, shattering families and communities over here and over there, multinational corporations have profited from an increased militarism, diminishing natural resources, and public panics. Within this climate, many in the United States have sought refuge in comforting narratives of good versus evil, civilisation versus savagery. The American public has sought refuge in the neoliberalist dreams of saving the world through individual consumerism. In such an environment we can see the power and appeal of *Kony 2012* and the relative silence on (white) Facebook pages or (white) Twitter timelines regarding Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown and several other killings of black youth, which have led to mobilisation within the black community. *Kony 2012* reaffirms the profitability

and pleasure of an ethos based in American exceptionalism, white benevolence, and the power of middle-class economic status, the killing of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and Eric Garner, all unarmed young black males, who lost their lives at the hands of 'self-appointed' security guards or the police, undermines ideas of American exceptionalism, spotlights the entrenched realities of anti-black racism, and spotlights the realities of race and class privileges.

The power and cultural importance of these narratives has been evident with the murder of Trayvon Martin and in the spectacle of *Kony 2012*. Whereas white youth could participate in a fight against Kony and the human rights violations in Uganda without accounting for whiteness, without accounting for middle-class privileges, the spatial power of suburban America, to engage the killing of Trayvon Martin did not allow for such erasure and complacency. To understand Trayvon Martin was to understand white privilege. To participate in discussions about George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin and racial profiling resulted in a spotlight on whiteness, a light that pointed to the connections between Zimmerman and whiteness, between perpetrators of violence and whiteness.

At the halftime of the 2012 National Basketball Association (NBA) All Star game, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American, decided to walk to the local store to get some candy and drinks. Tragically, it appears that he died because he was walking while black in a predominantly white, gated community in Florida. Shortly after calling 911 to report a 'suspicious' person within his community, George Zimmerman, a neighbourhood watch captain, confronted Martin, who was armed with skittles and an Arizona Ice Tea. What happened next is unclear, yet what is irrefutable is that Zimmerman shot Martin dead with a Kel Tek 9mm semi-automatic gun. Identified as a 'threat' Martin fell victim at the hands of a gun.

In a world where African Americans, particularly black male youth, are consistently represented as threats to the security, peace, culture, calm, and order of American society, how can 'threat' be seen outside of the context of race? In a world where racial profiling is routine and where explicit and implicit bias has created the "criminalblackman" (Russell, 1998) is it even possible to think about the confrontation and ultimate death of Martin outside of the paradigm of a criminalised black body? The 911 call, the confrontation, and the ultimate death fits a larger racist pattern whereupon blackness is consistently imagined as threat, as danger, and as evil. As a cultural and social pariah blackness needs to be controlled, disciplined, and ultimately punished. According to Michelle Alexander,

> Just as African Americans in the North were stigmatized by the Jim Crow system even if they were not subject to its formal control, black men today are stigmatized by mass incarceration and the social construction of the 'criminalblackman' whether they have ever been to prison or not. (2012, p. 194)

In a review of Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, Max Kantar describes the spectre of criminalisation as follows:

> This is evidenced in part by dominant media and cultural narratives, institutionalized (and legalized) racial profiling, and police efforts to build mass databases of 'suspected criminals' which contain information almost exclusively on racial minorities who have often done nothing criminal at all aside from having

been born to black and brown parents. In addition to the numerous studies showing that most white Americans see crime in racial (nonwhite) terms, studies conducted by Princeton University also reveal that white felons fresh out of prison are more likely to get hired for jobs than equally qualified black men with no criminal record. African-American men without criminal records are more ostracized and widely perceived as being more criminal than white men who have actually been convicted of felony crimes. That is how deeply black people have been stigmatized as criminals and social pariahs in our society. (2011)

This is the context in which we need to understand what happened to Trayvon Martin not only on the fateful evening but also in terms of the police response and that of the media and general public. Potential involvement in discussions about what happened to Trayvon or joining struggles on or offline bring into focus not only the racial realities highlighted by Alexander but a system that protects, empowers, and privileges whiteness. In other words, attending a rally demanding justice for Trayvon Martin or posting articles on social media calling for the arrest of George Zimmerman would put into focus the ways that white lives are protected, differentially valued, and made visible as victims. *Kony 2012* by contrast, provided a moment to celebrate whiteness, to see white civilisation as benevolence and working to foster peace, organizing against the mass incarceration of more than a million blacks and Latinos, or other forms of state violence, positions whiteness in a polar opposite structural and cultural location.

Unlikely movements—#Zimmerman2012 or #Ferguson2014

In 2012 as *Kony* became a national spectacle, there was much discussion within social media about how race mediated what appeared in people's stream or timeline. Whereas many African Americans were posting about Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis and countless other black young men who had died at the hands of guns held by whites claiming fear, white youth were more likely to post on either *Kony 2012* or the more mundane aspects of life. Fast-forward two years, and the same sort of observations have been evident on how race structure news flows in social media. As many African Americans posted about Eric Garner, Mike Brown and countless other cases of police killing black youth, the Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) Bucket challenge, which saw people dumping water on their heads to raise awareness and dollars to fight this deathly disease, celebrity news, and animal videos are a fixture on their white counterparts' social media. In other words, as we look online we see a racially stratified world, where the issues confronting black and Latino communities and where the issues of police violence and racial injustice rarely penetrated the privileged and insulated spaces of their white peers.

Offering this as part of a discourse around social media, rather than an empirical fact, I use this comparison between *Kony 2012* and #BlackLivesMatters, a national moment protesting police violence and brutality directed at the black community, to conclude. The issues of race and racism evident with the killing of Trayvon Martin or Mike Brown are not limited to the incidents themselves or the police responses but also point to how these killings did not mobilise national outrage, media coverage, or action in ways that were seen in the aftermath of mass shootings at schools in Columbine, Colorado (1999) or Newtown, Connecticut (2012) or even with *Kony 2012*.

Firstly, the differential responses to *Kony 2012*, ALS 2014, or monthly mass shootings is not surprising given racial segregation on and offline. The lack of interaction and the close-knit nature of Facebook led to the reproduction of racial isolation and disconnection. The racial stratification of news feeds embodies and is the result of racial segregation in on and offline communities.

Secondly, the power of *Kony 2012* rests with the limited exposure to critique of American and white power, whether by voices in Uganda or commentators concerned with race in the United States. The campaign's success resulted from its self-imposed insulation from critiques. As Facebook communities were central to its mobilisation, there was limited chance for cross-racial challenges. That is, the persistent segregation of American life, which carries on within (and beyond) Facebook, limited white exposure to critiques and challenges, fostering an environment of admiration and celebration of white benevolence. The emphasis on creating clubs and actions within segregated schools, fraternities and sororities further insulated whiteness from any potential challenges. While Twitter was an important tool, Facebook, marked by its communities, segregation, and siloed realities, was the central platform for *Kony 2012*. This, and the nascent place of Black Twitter,[2] created conditions whereupon a 'white saviour' mentality and 'white tears' for the child victims of Kony resulted in *Kony* activism being relatively unchallenged. Those who participated in *Kony 2012* were not simply purchasing a tool kit, or contributing to 'justice' with their clicks and dollars, but adding to their own white pleasure, to a movement that neither inconvenienced nor challenged their privileges and identities.

Thirdly, *Kony 2012* had a clear goal that could be purchased: exposure, visibility, and global knowledge about Kony and the atrocities happening in Uganda. Exhibiting the neoliberal possibilities of consumption, coupled with "bland multiculturalism", *Kony* demanded little of its participants (Ramamurthy & Wilson, 2013, p. 78). As with the ALS Bucket spectacle of 2014, the limited commitment, the clear goals, and the individualised responsibilities central to neoliberalism contributed to *Kony*'s popularity. We see this in stark contrast to movements in Ferguson or around Trayvon Martin's death. For example, the activism in the aftermath of Martin's death focused on the absence of media attention, the failures of the police to arrest Zimmerman, and the foot-dragging of prosecutors. There were specific and tangible goals, where public shaming and awareness had potential to shape public discourse. As such, it highlighted the power and potential of Facebook activism to bring people into a movement. It was not about the performance of outrage, or spotlighting public concern for violence across the globe, but facilitating justice at a local level. It was not only about a single goal but challenging the everyday criminalisation of black bodies and a culture that continuously says #blacklives (don't) matter.

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[2] Black Twitter is a community, a movement, a space of resistance and opposition. According to Soraya Nadia McDonald, "Black Twitter is part cultural force, cudgel, entertainment and refuge. It is its own society within Twitter, replete with inside jokes, slang and rules, centered on the interests of young blacks online—almost a quarter of all black Internet users are on Twitter. There's no password. The only entry fee is knowledge. If you've spent time steeped in black culture, whether at a historically black college or university or in the company of friends or family, you will probably understand the references on Black Twitter" (2014).

Fourth, with *Kony 2012*, we see the celebration of whiteness, middle-class status, and American identity because they allow for the utilisation of technologies of social media. Caring comes from participation in the campaign but one's ability to participate, from having computer access and the leisure time necessary to partake in social media, to having the necessary money to purchase the required products of protest and being a college student, was tied to one's class and racial status. Likewise, as the campaign mobilised white youth against the ultimate evil, it reinforced the idea that whiteness was the world's moral compass. According to Anandi Ramamurthy and Kalpana Wilson,

> The racism implicit in Kony 2012, which was reproducing colonial narratives about Africans in which white people are constructed as having a moral obligation to intervene to rescue and save black people from chaos, violence and irrationality was also highlighted. (2013, p. 89)

Additionally, the technological prowess and creativity, not to mention the people power, of Western white youth, were part of the narrative of the campaign, especially in juxtaposition to the representation of Uganda as fragmented, chaotic, and pre-modern. Participation in the campaign was part of a performance that authenticated the morality and the benevolence of a white citizenry.

The emphasis on the 'experiment' and participation in *Kony 2012* campaign through sharing the videos and other materials that sought to raise awareness around Joseph Kony and the ongoing conflicts in Uganda required neither individual contributions aside from money nor critical interrogation of positionality. The appeal of *Kony 2012* rests with its construction of whiteness as moral force of good and as a benevolent weapon in the war for peace. The association between whiteness and Western technology, and the importance of Facebook further spotlighted the moral, technological, and political power to enact change anchoring *Kony 2012*. Campaigns against police violence or racial profiling, however, destabilise whiteness as sources of morality and goodness.

Here we see another distinction in comparison to anti-racist movements within the United States. For example, the various Twitter campaigns that followed the shootings of Mike Brown or Trayvon Martin—#iftheygunnedmedown (Chappell, 2014) or #wearetrayvon—sought to bring attention to their deaths, which were all about "SELF." Yes, these movements were about bringing awareness to these injustices, but they were also about interrogating the cost and consequences of anti-black racism on everyday lives. Their concern extended beyond injustices elsewhere to look at how class assumptions about who would be seen as respectable or the level of silence within the black middle-class contributed to these injustices. *Kony 2012* did no such thing, instead locating evil, responsibility, and culpability elsewhere. *Kony 2012* didn't force white American youth to look inward. In fact, it created distance from a source of conflict so that whiteness could be imagined not as embodiment of injustice, complicity or privilege but an instrument of change.

Finally, race matters. The victims of Kony were "legible" (Neal, 2013) as sympathetic figures worthy of sympathy and action. Comparatively, Kony and to a lesser extent Trayvon Martin, were legible only as perpetrators, as violent threats to civilisation, peace, and whiteness. Martin's or Brown's death can be

tied to an ideological and representational reality that imagines blackness as a threat to peace, tranquillity, and civilisation (Shohat & Stam, 1994). A presumed unlawful entry into a white-gated community raised suspicion. Trayvon's criminalised body, as opposed to the innocence and bravery afforded to Zimmerman's white body in the national imagination, is suspect, helping explain both the media and police response to date. While the killings of Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown are the farthest thing from Joseph Kony, the fear they cause, their racialised criminality within the dominant imagination, and their presumed threats to civilisation demanded similar treatments from the police and military despite their polar existences. If this were not the case, maybe we could see a nationwide push to bring about justice for Martin. In this transformative world, financial contributions would not be directed to an organisation that seems intent on supporting military intervention in Uganda, instead money would flow to groups committed to challenging the criminalisation of blackness within the United States and throughout the globe.

It is no wonder that since 2012, there has not been #Trayvon2013, a movement for Renisha McBride, or #Fergusson2014 on Facebook, especially among white youth. No viral videos on #every28hours or experiments seeking to galvanise national attention for Eric Garner or Marissa Alexander or countless others. It is not surprising that the evils of Kony, and not the evils of white supremacy, inspired action. It should not shock anyone that stopping LRA and not stopping police brutality is what inspired a generation of white youth toward activism. The focus on arresting Kony rather than Zimmerman, Darren Wilson, and countless others tells us a lot about race and America. Reflecting entrenched white privilege (the choice when and where to fight for justice), and a yearning to see evil elsewhere, #Kony2012 as opposed to #Fergusson2014 is symptomatic of the politics of whiteness. Focusing on Kony allows whiteness to be reimagined as benevolence and as 'civilisation' whereas #Ferguson forces potential participants to account for white supremacy, anti-black racism, and white violence. Focusing on #Ferguson, #Garner, #McBride, #Martin, #Davis, and the hundreds of black deaths at the hands of police and security shines a spotlight on stereotypes and a racist criminal justice system that empowers white youth to exist without fear of law enforcement and with virtual impunity.

It is not simply an unwillingness to look at the 'imperfections' and problems that litter the American landscape, but that by fighting for justice for #trayvon or #mikebrown one must account for racial profiling. One must look at both the criminalisation of black and brown youth *and* the many ways that white youth are imagined as innocent, the ways that white college students whose bodies exemplify a system and ideology that engenders racial profiling, that enables white drug use with relative impunity, that empowers a criminal justice system reliant on white fear of black criminal bodies (Leonard, 2013; Leonard, 2012c). "White fear of Blackness isn't just something that racist extremists experience," writes Chris Crass (2014). "It's a core part of white consciousness and how structural violence and inequality are maintained" (2014). To become "Accomplices" and not "allies" (2014) of black activists in Ferguson and nationwide is to challenge the anti-black racism that is at the core of white supremacy, to question and dismantle the very belief system that both privileges white bodies and criminalises blackness.

To join the struggle for justice in Staten Island, Los Angeles, Ferguson, Dearborn Heights, or Florida is to say #blacklivesmatter as much as white lives—to challenge white supremacy. To join #Kony2012 was to say #KonyisEVIL or #whitecareisreal. *Kony* was about 'us,' about highlighting our 'values'. The organising on and offline around Renisha McBride, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Shelley Fry, and countless others was also about 'us' (Smith 2014, Leonard, 2012c). Yes, these are movements about justice and a collective pronouncement that #blacklivesmatter, but they are equally movements about white privilege, white supremacy, and demanding accountability from 'us'. In challenging white America to see how not all lives matter equally, culturally, politically, socially, and within the justice system, these recent movements challenged 'us' to ask, why are 'our' lives are protected and worthy of protection. *Kony 2012* demanded no such questions but instead celebrated whiteness for wanting to protect #UgandaLives from evil.

Maybe #whitesupremacy2015 or 2016 is just around the corner. Can you imagine an experiment, the release of video with a simple goal: could an online video about white supremacy or police brutality raise national consciousness? And if we realised the realities, the pain and suffering of racial minorities, would the nation work together to end the violence and inequality, to organise because #everylifematters? Sadly I doubt #justice4Renisha shirts or #saytheirnames stickers will be all the rage for white students in the coming years. I hope I will be proven wrong even in future years.

In the face of criticisms, many supporters of *Kony 2012* argued that 'awareness' was key. While activists pushing for awareness regarding Trayvon Martin or Renisha McBride were frequently accused of fostering racial division or 'playing race card', *Kony 2012* was celebrated, even though it ultimately makes viewers aware of the benevolence of whiteness. Moreover, when 'awareness' is mobilised through a vehicle that says more about 'us' than 'them', that is about affirming our white exceptionalism and benevolence, we are left with little more than a vanity project. "If 'awareness' is the payoff for paternalistic, imperialist, 'white man's burden' NGO campaigns, I don't want it," writes a blogger for *The Sojourner Project* in relation to the *Kony 2012* campaign and the broader white-saviour industrial complex.

> Just the name 'Invisible Children' denies and co-opts the agency of Ugandans—many of whom have organized to protect child soldiers … If you're more comfortable talking about Africans than you are talking to an African person, you really should not be in the business of representing Africa. (2012)

Remixing the burden, protecting the privilege … *Kony 2012*. #DifferentYearSameMethod. Only time will tell if social media activism can activate change on the outside or remain within segregated white communities. Only time will tell if online activism will be about change and justice or merely the performance of outrage, of benevolence and post-prejudicial identity. Only time will tell if white America will use social media to challenge whiteness, to foster a culture of accountability, and create a movement that looks outward and inward. Social media has the potential to remix the movement and reimagine the future but only if it abandons the tropes and traps of an ongoing white supremacist past. It cannot continue to take "everything but the burden" (Tate, 2003) from black culture, and it can no longer perform the white man's burden

but must undertake the burden of accountability, and otherwise critically remixing whiteness in the twenty-first century.

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