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All of us phantasmic saviors

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from interviews and conversations with US American volunteers at an international aid organization in Tanzania, I argue that the subject constitution of US volunteers is dependent upon foreclosures that remove questions of their colonial and racial presence from conscious awareness. I explain how these foreclosures are covered by a white savior fantasy, and trace how volunteers at this particular organization use two primary tools to avoid facing their foreclosures and traversing their fantasies: denial and irony. In conclusion, I explore the implications of this study for reflexivity in critical rhetorical fieldwork, as well as aid practice.

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A year after completing fieldwork at a rural nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Tanzania, I came to the audio recordings I had been dreading to transcribe. The process took a long time: I paused my typing over and over, throwing down my headphones and pacing about the room in discomfort. It was difficult to force myself to relive the recorded interactions.

As a critical rhetorical researcher at the NGO, I had not only observed the relational politics at the organization, but also participated in them myself, working with the Tanzanian staff and the Western managers, Sarah and Tim, to address communication problems and neocolonial dynamics. As part of this work, Sarah requested that I lead reflection sessions for a high school volunteer group that came through the NGO while I was there. Sarah and Tim were under pressure from two white, wealthy Canadian donors who provided about 40 percent of the NGO's annual budget to reduce "voluntourism" at the organization. The reflection sessions were an attempt to ameliorate a perceived problem with white savior attitudes among volunteers.

These particular reflection sessions had a second impetus for their inception. Sarah and Tim had not wanted the high schoolers to come, and they felt tricked into allowing their visit. Typically, they did not accept volunteers under 18, or those lacking professional skills that the NGO could use. The leader of the group had exploited a miscommunication between staff to secure access for the students, and then dropped them off in the village and returned to town himself. As the manager in charge of volunteers, Sarah felt both deceived and burdened with another person's responsibility in taking care of this group. The reflection sessions were a means of trying to make the best of an unfortunate situation where unskilled volunteers were burdening the NGO's staff and time.

While transcribing the sessions a year later, I could almost feel the tension in the room as I listened to our previous selves ask the predominantly white students from across the United States to explain why they were volunteering in Tanzania. No matter how gently we asked the students to reflect on the assumptions of whiteness and US American exceptionalism encoded in their explanations, we were met with defensiveness and anger. I had been frustrated that I could not get these students to understand their own role in neocolonialism—and it was painful and embarrassing to relive through transcription.

The way I envisioned myself in relation to these students was not unique, but rather emblematic of how Western volunteers at the NGO related to each other. Throughout the process of reviewing my fieldnotes and transcriptions, I noted example after example of Western volunteers displacing questions of their own involvement in racist and neocolonial dynamics by focusing on the involvement of others, or how they were an exception to the normative volunteer rule. Nearly every volunteer I talked to at the NGO had some understanding of neocolonialism as a problem, and knew that being a “white savior” or a “voluntourist” was bad. Yet each Westerner also seemed to feel as if she had a right to be in Tanzania when others did not. If volunteers were to take their own critiques of other volunteers seriously, they—or, I should say, *we*—would have a very difficult time *being* in Tanzania. In an unfamiliar cultural and linguistic context, what does a Westerner have to offer that cannot be traced back to an assumed privilege—of country of birth, of skin color, or of both? How is it that most volunteers are able to see this privilege in others, and go to such lengths to avoid it in themselves?

I argue that the subject constitution of Western volunteers is dependent upon foreclosures that (initially) remove questions of our own colonial and racial presence to the unsymbolizable Real.¹ Even though the Real affects symbolic life, it cannot be put into words or conceptualized as such. If the subjectivity of the Western volunteer is constituted through a foreclosure of the neocolonial self, accusations of neocolonialism may be leveled at others without a recognition of the same in oneself. To build this argument, I first describe the process of subject construction for US American volunteers, what foreclosures it depends on, and how US volunteer subjects are racialized through fantasies of being a “white savior.” In the next section, I explore how US American volunteers maneuver symbolically to avoid the dissolution and reconstitution of subjectivity that would come with traversing their fantasies. Finally, I demonstrate the theoretical relevance of this argument for critical scholars, and the practical relevance for the NGO.

Rhetorical fieldwork at the children’s village

The interactions, interviews, and conversations that form the basis for this essay are part of a larger project on the politics of aid relationships between managers, staff, donors, volunteers, and community members at a small internationally funded NGO, Children’s Village, located in a rural Tanzanian area. Children’s Village is managed by a US American/Canadian couple named Sarah and Tim, and the organization’s staff is entirely Tanzanian with the exception of three long-term Western volunteers—a pediatrician, a dentist, and an educational assistant. The NGO currently has 10 departments that have developed over time in relation to community desires.

For this project, I analyzed 335 pages of fieldnotes, interviews, and conversations with two volunteer groups and four individual volunteers who came through the Children’s

Village while I was there for two months in 2015. The first volunteer group comprised college students in a study abroad program run through a public US university. The group was racially diverse, and students spent 2.5 days at the NGO accompanied by their instructors: a white US American woman, a Kenyan woman, and a Tanzanian man. The second volunteer group was described above—a group of high school students from throughout the United States who had come as part of a “service and leadership” trip, and stayed at the NGO for six days. The two teachers accompanying them were African American women, and the students were almost all white. They had spent the two weeks prior teaching English in urban primary and secondary schools. I also draw from interviews and interactions with individual US volunteers: Dr. Baker, a white woman doctor, and Tiffany, a white medical student, who both stayed for three weeks at the NGO; Mary, a white high-school graduate who had been working at the NGO for over a year; and Sue, a white high-school graduate who was volunteering for a month making promotional videos.

Although rhetorical work in the field has existed for quite some time, it has only recently been brought together under the aegis of a particular methodological commitment. Rhetorical field methods attend to both “the processual forms of rhetorical action that are accessible only through participatory methods,” and “the rhetorical intervention into rhetorical spaces and action in which we engage.”² In other words, rhetorical field methods are concerned not only with understanding rhetorics as they are constituted in action, but also with intervening into such processes. Here, researchers are participants in the work they observe, engaging with their subjects so as to move rhetorical actions toward more just consequences. As such, they must reflect on the political implications of their participation.³

In this essay, I demonstrate and reflect on what it means to be a participatory critical researcher in rhetorical fieldwork. As a scholar who is invested in destabilizing neocolonial power relations, I made myself available to the managers and staff to provide assistance on communication issues if desired. I thus found myself leading tours when staff members were busy, helping the managers draft emails to donors, and assisting with the aforementioned reflection sessions. I was not the first researcher at the NGO, and past projects had led to useful information for the organization. Thus, the managers and staff were invested in my *utafiti* (research) and asked that I share my results when finished. I returned to the Children’s Village in December 2017 to present my arguments to the Tanzanian staff in Swahili, and to garner their feedback for my final revisions. I reflect on this experience in the conclusion.

Constructing US American volunteer subjects

Foreclosures and fantasies

My sense of foreclosure is derived from the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, as used by Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. For Lacan, the subject is fundamentally constituted through a misrecognition of herself as whole, and the simultaneous foreclosure of the possibility of the subject ever actually being whole or self-knowing.⁴ To be a subject requires foreclosure, a structural limitation to self-reflexivity. Butler explains that, “to the extent that one is a subject, [one is] always at a distance from oneself, from

one's origin, from one's history."⁵ Since foreclosure is the condition that makes subjectivity possible, the subject's "veritable subsistence [would be] abolished by his knowledge."⁶ In other words, it is impossible for a subject to fully know herself, recognize herself, understand herself.

At the same time, foreclosure creates the possibility for agency. A subject can act only on condition that "certain things become impossible"⁷ for her. The subject then develops fantasies that work to cover what is foreclosed through a narrative of possible wholeness. Fantasies "offer, simultaneously, a frame within which to exercise agency and a shield from the horror of contingency."⁸ Through fantasy, a subject can narrate her past experiences in a way that produces meaning,⁹ and thereby defend herself from recognizing her own structural inability to ever be coherent as a Self. These fantasies are culturally constructed, though internalized differently.¹⁰ For a US American volunteer defining herself as an international agent of good, the primary cultural fantasy is that of the white savior.

Racing neocolonial fantasies

The white savior fantasy takes shape in the foreclosures inherent in conceptualizations of international aid and US national identity. As Spivak explains, "to the extent that ... the North continues ostensibly to 'aid' the South—as formerly imperialism 'civilized' the New World—the South's crucial assistance to the North in keeping up its resource-hungry lifestyle is forever foreclosed."¹¹ Aid from the United States to Tanzania, including volunteers, is premised on a foreclosure of the ways economic relations with countries such as Tanzania make aid possible in the first place. In addition, prevalent cultural invocation of the myth of "American exceptionalism" indicates an underlying foreclosure constitutive of US American subjectivities. American exceptionalism hails the United States as a uniquely superior nation, and "allows for a unquestioningly positive construction of humanitarian aid," thus foreclosing the possibility that aid can do harm.¹²

Volunteers constituted by these foreclosures internalize the fantasy of the white savior to create a fiction of wholeness and stability that hides the terror of dissolution heralded by the Real. Being a white savior incorporates both the idea of national autonomy found in the conceptualization of aid, and the idea of superiority found in American exceptionalist ideology. In the fantasy of the white savior, the US American volunteer can "find herself"—that is, find wholeness, be complete—in other countries, by saving other people. By making a difference, a volunteer can be the Self she wants to be.

The fantasy of white saviorism depends on racial privilege. Teju Cole describes how "Africa serves as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism,"¹³ where "a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior."¹⁴ Here, whiteness is tied to the nationalistic idea of US American exceptionalism—where anyone, regardless of qualifications, has the ability to be a savior in Africa simply because of their national identity. The assumption of a white body is inherent in cultural narratives of the Global North as purveyor of aid,¹⁵ and US Americans as exceptional.¹⁶

Yet, even as an African man living in the United States, Cole recognizes that he is not outside of dynamics of power.¹⁷ Although foreclosures and fantasies are clearly racialized in certain ways, nonwhite volunteer subjects may still be positioned within them. Aimee Carrillo Rowe describes subject constitution as a function of differential belonging, emphasizing the contingency of social relations that form the subject and the

contradictory narratives that the subject imbibes.¹⁸ As Amina Mama argues, for black British subjects this differential belonging produces subjects “born out of an imposed contradiction between blackness and British-ness, British-ness being equated with whiteness in the dominant symbolic order.”¹⁹ A similar conflation of US-ness and whiteness occurs in the context of international aid. Whiteness is an embodied phenomenon that has different manifestations in different spaces and places.²⁰ Since the fantasies internalized by US Americans volunteering internationally assume whiteness, volunteers of color are more likely to be faced with a contradiction in their experience that may cause them to question their role abroad or construct it using different cultural fantasies than white volunteers.

Undoing and redoing in US American volunteer subjects

Contradictions offer a means of recognizing foreclosures that underlie subjectivity, thereby undoing both the foreclosures themselves—once they are recognized they are no longer foreclosed—and the subject as such. The subject does not completely dissolve, but rather, becomes a new subject; she is reconstituted on the basis of a different foreclosure. As Butler explains, “while we are constituted socially in limited ways and through certain kinds of ... foreclosures, we are not constituted for all time in that way.”²¹ By addressing a foreclosure, the subject “can renew the meaning and the effect of the foreclosure.”²²

The way to address foreclosure is by traversing the fantasy that covers it. Dana Cloud, quoting Žižek, explains that “[t]o ‘traverse the fantasy’... is to recognize it as a signal of unrealizable hopes, to come into traumatic awareness that there is ‘nothing “behind” it, and to recognize how fantasy masks precisely this “nothing.”’”²³ However, it is not as simple as it sounds to recognize the fantasy that one has been using to make sense of her life is “nothing.” How are subjects brought to such an awareness?

Carrillo Rowe argues that “deep connections along lines of difference are a transformative source”²⁴ in relation to subjectivity. When connections are forged across what she calls “power lines,” it changes how subjects are formed, since subject constitution “arise[s] out of the collectivities into which we insert ourselves or are inserted.”²⁵ From this perspective, volunteering includes the possibility of forming connections across difference that can force the subject to face her foreclosures and be reconstituted in ways that make her capable of acting against the very power relations formative of her subjectivity.

This may make it sound as if the only thing necessary to create reflective subjects is to bring contradictions to their attention. However, providing the critical conceptual tools to understand whiteness does not always result in subjects willing to challenge it.²⁶ Subjects have means of avoiding subjective undoing. US American volunteers at the Children’s Village displayed this in two main ways: through denial of contradiction, and through an ironic rendering of themselves as outside of the fantasy. Denial is the response when a fantasy is so strongly internalized that the subject cannot (yet) question it. Irony is the response when a fantasy is recognized as such, but not as one’s own.

Popular critiques of aid are currently rampant on social media.²⁷ Many young volunteers are therefore “fully aware of the relation between their work and parodies of it, as well as the cultural and political critique of the ‘white savior complex.’”²⁸ Elsa Gunnarsdottir and Kathryn Mathers argue that millennials’ heavy use of social media has led them to “turn aid ... into an entirely affective economy, switching emotional resonance for

political and economic landscapes of inequality.”²⁹ What is “good” in aid is individualized as positive affective resonance, leading young volunteers to find “no contradiction in being both critical of and a participant in voluntourism,”³⁰ and allowing them to be aware of the white savior fantasy without traversing it.

The idea that one can both participate in aid and critique it at the same time functions as an experiential irony bribe. Dana Cloud describes how “the *irony bribe* wins viewers to participation in an ideological discourse by tempting them not only with mass social and political fantasy, but also with the possibility of protection against rampant archaic desires by the reflexive *rejection* of the fantasy.”³¹ The irony bribe for aid tempts subjects to believe that simply being savvy about the contradictions in aid narratives will allow one to get the savior thing right oneself, and simultaneously be able to reject the attempts of everyone else.

Through irony, recognition of the fantasy can counterintuitively work to shore up the foreclosures on which the fantasy depends. Irony allows a US American volunteer to “avoid the traumatic encounter by imagining that s/he is somehow outside of the fantasy and its spectacular failures to deliver on its promises.”³² Precisely because US volunteers have the ability to recognize that being a white savior is a bad thing, they are able to claim that they are *not that*, and so avoid the only recognition that would allow for the reformulation of the volunteer subject as a decolonial ally: the recognition that they *are* the white saviors they love to hate.

Avoiding dissolution of US American volunteer subjectivity

In this section, I trace two ways that US American volunteers react to challenges to their white savior fantasies in ways that restabilize them. First, I explore how denial figures an inability to recognize the fantasy itself in volunteer explanations. Denial functions through slippages, claims that initial statements were worded incorrectly, and attempts to decontextualize. Second, I trace how an ironic rendering of oneself as outside fantasy allows volunteers to recognize that other people have white savior fantasies, but they elide that recognition in themselves. In particular, I look at how whiteness grounds ironic displacements of the fantasy onto others, and assumptions that one is an exception to the fantasy.

Denial: inability to recognize the fantasy

Kristen Lavelle theorizes denial as “integral to how dominant groups are accustomed to managing both their past *and* their present.”³³ As *integral* to managing self-narrations, “denial is *normal*,” an everyday activity that unconsciously and habitually reinforces normative power relations. Denial allows white US volunteers to avoid facing the racial and colonial bases of their fantasies. Perhaps the most blatant form of denial came from Sue, a young white volunteer just out of high school. In an interview, Sue kept referring to the problem of “dependence” in aid: that Tanzanians will become lazy and entitled if an organization simply hands out free goods to them. As this recurred, I asked Sue questions to try to encourage reflection on how assuming “dependence” as a key problem in aid requires an inherent power inequity:

Sue: I like the idea of providing resources that like don’t create dependence, but maybe like resources that help people who want to make a difference in their own country. I think that could be cool? I don’t know.

- Jenna:* But is that really putting them in charge? ... Or is it just another way of screening a power relation?
- Sue:* Exactly, yeah, I mean it depends on the stipulations. I think it would be cool ... theoretically. But that's the thing too, so much stuff, like, you know—David Giles' idea of colonialism as a way to regulate the Tanzanian government and, like, its corruption! Like, in theory, you're like wow, maybe that's not so bad. But then you think about it, and you're like, you know, in practice that would just cause more corruption ... and, so obviously in practice ... that's not how things work. Power gets corrupted very easily.

When I tried to get Sue to think about how her formulation still puts Western people in charge of aid, she avoided facing the assumption of Western dominance central to her fantasy and instead reinforced it by talking about how “in theory” colonialism is “not so bad.” She had recently had a conversation with a neighbor, David Giles, who is a vocal proponent of reinstating a British-controlled government in Tanzania. Although Sue came to the conclusion that colonialism would be bad, she got there through a route that did not disturb her assumption of Western dominance. Rather than reflect on how colonialism is *inherently bad*, Sue instead focused on how it would result in “more corruption.” In addition to Sue's clear avoidance of questioning Western dominance, there are three primary ways that US American volunteers in the Children's Village deny or avoid addressing the foundations of their fantasies: slippage, rewording, and decontextualization.

Denial through slippage

When volunteers avoid traversing their fantasies by denial through slippage, they avoid directly answering the question that was asked by reorienting it around a minor aspect, thereby avoiding the implication that would disturb the white savior fantasy. Mary provided an example in an interview:

- Mary:* Most NGOs are started by Westerners. So, if you're looking at it from that side [that NGOs should be managed by local people], eventually you would be passing it off to Tanzanians ... you're empowering Tanzanians to do that work that you're doing.
- Jenna:* Why do you think the Westerners are needed to start it in the first place?
- Mary:* Money. I would say, is probably a big thing. And then I think that it would be hard—impossible—to like, give money to—like if I wanted to start this NGO, I found Damas [a Tanzanian staff member], and I gave him all the money to start this NGO without me being a part of it at all. I don't think that that would go down very well.
- Jenna:* Why?
- Mary:* Um, cuz, I don't think he—I can't—I don't know if there's like one person who's—who has all that knowledge. Anyway. And who'd be able to do that. Even in America. If you just gave money to one person, and they would just know exactly the best way to, like, do it.

Here, instead of facing the question of why Westerners are needed to lead an aid organization in the first place, Mary used the terms of her own answer to slip from the question of *Western* control into a question about *individual* control. Mary could not quite break through the fantasy of white saviorism. When faced with the knowledge that her position was based in an idea that Tanzanians could not be trusted to handle money themselves,

she denied it by slipping between Tanzanians and *a* Tanzanian, allowing her to claim that the reason Westerners were needed to start an NGO is that one person cannot be trusted with money—a clear *non sequitur*. Yet, by claiming that this is true “even in America,” she could make it seem as if her statement treats Tanzanians and US Americans equally, and deny her implication in white savior fantasies.

Denial through rewording

The high school student group was adept at parroting language of the NGO leadership and their teachers to avoid responsibility for saying something offensive or problematic, as well as reflection on what led them to speak in that way. During the reflection sessions, the students were so concerned that they might *say* the wrong thing that they were unable to stop and ask if they were *doing* the wrong thing by being there to “help” in the first place. When asked to reflect, they would often simply reword their statements. The implication was that they had expressed themselves *ineffectively* instead of having expressed a perspective that required further reflection. For example, Neill commented in the first reflection session that he had come to Tanzania in order to “better the people”:

- Neill:* Well, also, because I know that I want to work with people and try to help in some way, and so that’s why I came here also is to see how I can help to better the people, and not just how I think I should better them.
- Sarah:* To better the people in what way?
- Neill:* In the way that they want to be bettered. In the ways that like I could be, I guess, respected amongst them because I’m listening to what they have to say and ... what they want from me, and then giving them what they need and not what I think they need.
- ... *Jenna:* Is there already a certain assumption, or what assumptions are being made in the idea that you *can* help, even if you are listening to how they need to be helped?
- ... *Sarah:* So the pushback is—you said “giving them.” So, the word to “give” people implies that there’s a hierarchy of, also, of power, of have and have-nots. What do you think about that?
- Neill:* Oo. Okay, well, putting it in that way, I think I would re-word my—I would choose a different word. I would think more of, I, I don’t know. Cuz like, I don’t want to make it seem like there’s a hierarchy, because I’d rather set myself as equal ... and I just want to have—to have sort of exchange, really ... like, they might need water, I don’t know, I don’t know. I don’t know what they need, and that’s why I’m here to figure it out. But whatever they *needed*, then that’s what I want to figure out. Like, kind of just like, fill in where I’m *needed*, not to *give*.

When Sarah and I tried to prod Neill into questioning why he assumed he could “better the people” in Tanzania, he first tried to refocus on how he would make sure to “giv[e] them what they need.” When we again tried to get him to think about the assumption of US American dominance in that statement, he explicitly said that in answer to us he would “re-word ... choose a different word.” Here, Neill used attempts at rewording to avoid challenging the fantasy that he innately has something to give that can help “better the people” of Tanzania.

Denial through decontextualization

On the third reflection night with the high school group, Dr. Baker and Tiffany, the two medical volunteers, came in to talk with them about the systemic issues involved with getting people in the village access to treatment. As an example, they told the students about all the problems they had faced just that day in attempting to get a dying baby on HIV/AIDS medication—and how it still had not happened. They were attempting to point out the importance of systemic inequalities to healthcare access, and to disturb the white savior narrative of an individual being able to save lives alone. Dr. Baker summed up the heart of their presentation by saying:

... when it comes down to it, it doesn't matter how smart I am, and how well-educated I am—it just doesn't, um, it doesn't matter if you don't have a system around you to support you. Um, I need to have nurses and lab techs and machines and medicines and pharmacists and all that sort of stuff and that's how I do my job. Here, when those things aren't available, it's tough, and you try to pull yourself up by your bootstraps—I can look up doses, I can mix medicines, I can give shots, that sort of thing—but when you have an entire *system* failure, where this mama's been to three doctors. And nobody helps her. And even now, I'm like, this baby's dying! And I don't have an emergency room to send them to. What can you do?

The medical workers challenged a central theme of the white savior narrative: that a decontextualized individual can, as Dr. Baker says, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps.”

However, some of the students felt this attack on their fantasy, and denied it by decontextualizing the narrative. One of the students asked the medical workers: “I know happy endings aren't really real-world, but you guys are obviously in this field for a reason, and I was wondering if you could just share a story of, just like overcoming—not a miracle, but ...” The student trailed off, unable to find another word for what she was asking. Dr. Baker again took the opportunity to directly undermine the lone savior fantasy, answering, “When we turn the bad stories into systemic change.”

At the following reflection session, it was clear that some students still could not face the fantasy. Instead, they internalized that the medical workers must have “just” had a “bad day.” We had asked the students to describe a metaphorical rose, bud, and thorn of their weeks, or high point, new beginning, and low point. Alicia began with her thorn:

So my thorn was actually, um, I think this last night when the doctors came and talked to us. I really liked all ... they were saying and I totally understood where they were coming from, with like having a bad day, but like they kind of had a negative attitude towards helping and they kind of were saying that like everything was hopeless. And I'm—I'm sure that they don't normally talk like that, I'm sure that was just their bad day, but that kinda just—I think that affected everyone else in the room—just mainly, it kinda just like brought everyone's spirits down. Why are we here if we can't help? Why is anyone here if there's no hope? And it was kind of a rough few minutes.

Instead of reflecting on the way their work fits into a difficult system, Alicia dismissed the medical workers' presentation as “having a bad day,” “a negative attitude,” and not how they “normally talk.” This, then, allowed her to have a “rough few minutes,” rather than taking the time necessary to think through the challenging aspects of their stories.

Irony: imagining oneself as outside of and superior to the fantasy

If denial involves being unable to face the assumptions underlying a fantasy, irony involves facing them as aspects of someone else's fantasy, and not one's own. Cloud describes how irony allows subjects to recognize a fantasy, but to posit themselves as "*outside of*" and "*superior to*" it.³⁴ In this way, the very white supremacist and neocolonial attitudes that underlie the fantasy of white saviorism counterintuitively provide grounds for volunteers to avoid recognizing themselves as partakers of the fantasy, and instead posit themselves as different or exceptional volunteers. Mary provided a clear example of irony in my interview with her:

- Mary:* Well, I think, I mean, when you start out, I think you have like a savior complex.
... Jenna: Do you feel like you started there, too, or that you had a different attitude?
Mary: I feel like I just came ... or at least I tried to come with an open mind and just try to push myself. To get out of my comfort zone. I'm—I think I'm pretty integrated.

Mary started by claiming that the general volunteer, when she starts out, has a "savior complex," but went on to excise herself from this general claim. Although she recognized the white savior fantasy of US volunteers, she imagined herself to be different than everyone else.

In the following subsections, I address two primary ways volunteers demonstrated recognition of, and yet ironic investment in, white savior fantasies: through displacement onto others, and thinking oneself an exception to the phantasmic rule. Displacement allows volunteers to implicitly figure themselves as *outside of* the fantasy by laboring to contain others within it. Exceptionalism provides a means for volunteers to figure themselves as *superior to* the fantasy through invocation of whiteness and national privilege—the very things that should spur recognition of one's own fantasy, yet ironically do not.

Irony through displacement

In displacement, volunteers locate themselves outside of the white savior fantasy by ironically recognizing it in someone else. A key moment of ironic displacement occurred at the NGO when one of the African American teachers who accompanied the high school student group, Jalisa, attempted to engage Sarah in reflection over her position as NGO manager:

- Jalisa:* I just wonder ... like how ... how do we change their mindset about being saviors when it seems like that's kinda what we see everywhere we go. Like, everywhere we've gone there's always been like a group of white people that are—
Sarah: Like church missionaries come in, and doing something, or building a building?
Jalisa: Or even like, *here*. It's like, all white people like living in the big house. Or all the volunteers—I haven't met all the volunteers, but all the volunteers that I've met have been white. How do we—
Sarah: Here specifically at this NGO or in the country?
Jalisa: Just, period. How do we change that narrative, when that's the narrative that we are seeing? ... Like, I don't know how to do that when that's what we are being presented with.

As someone else entered the room, the thread of conversation was lost for the remainder of the meeting. Jalisa was attempting to get Sarah to reflect on how she presents herself to the volunteers who come to visit. Yet after each point that Jalisa made about whiteness, Sarah

interrupted her to displace her own position from the center of reflection by attending instead to “church missionaries,” or to aid workers in the country writ-large. Even when confronted with details about this particular organization, such as the “big house” Sarah lives in with her family, Sarah managed to displace attention from herself onto others. Sarah recognized the white savior fantasy, but ironically figured herself *outside* of it.

Displacement can also function more implicitly: one displaces oneself from inclusion in the fantasy by fixating on *others'* inclusion. In the following example, white volunteers labor to contain African American volunteers within the white savior fantasy in order to displace attention from themselves. For African American volunteers the white savior fantasy is disturbed by a recognition of their double presence as both *home* and *not home* in the continent from which their ancestors were taken.³⁵ However, white volunteers for whom the white savior fantasy fits undisturbed have a hard time recognizing the struggles of African American volunteer subjects. Instead of letting the double-experience of African American volunteers critique white saviorism itself, unreflective white US volunteers instead level critiques at African American volunteer attitudes. By fixating on the singular dimension of *foreignness* assumed in volunteer fantasies, white volunteers are able to avoid facing questions about the *whiteness* of their subject construction.

Consider the following conversation in which Julie (the US instructor), Sarah, and I discussed the legitimacy of African American perspectives in the college group:

Julie: There is a thing with the African American kids. Like, they're like, *we* can just blend in, and *we* are different. And a little bit of like self-segregation in the group ... Like, even in Dar. When Jason [her husband, the trip manager] was with them in Dar and they went to the mall, and he definitely heard a couple of them saying, “I wish we could just walk away from these white people because then we could just blend in.” And Jason's like, “Wake up honey, you're a foreigner just as much as everybody else.” You know? Like you walk different, you act different, you dress different. And as soon as you open your mouth—yeah. Anyway.

Sarah: That's interesting.

Julie: Yeah, it's an interesting dynamic. Jason always—he says he gets that kind of chip-on-your-shoulder attitude kinda thing from the African American students all the time. Like, “What are you, white guy? What do you have to teach me about Africa? This is my homeland.” ... I mean, one was born in Kenya, okay. But she lived in America. One's Ghanaian, ethnically, but she grew up in America.

Jenna: Is, um, the man from Nigeria, like *from* Nigeria?

Julie: Yeah, but until he was like 5 ... They've all grown up in America.

Even when it is pointed out that three of the students are *from Africa*, they are still rationalized as within the fantasy—and thus within our ability to judge—because they grew up in the United States. Rather than trying to engage with the students' perspectives, and address the assumptions of whiteness in our understandings of US volunteer presence in Tanzania, or the different experiences that US volunteers of color bring, we in the conversation instead recentered the white savior fantasy by forcing others to fit within it. By focusing on African American volunteers, we displaced attention from ourselves and implicitly positioned ourselves outside of the fantasy.

Irony through exceptionalism

Perhaps an even larger degree of irony is found in exceptionalism. When rendering themselves as an exception to the white savior fantasy, volunteers utilize the very logics of white

supremacy and neocolonialism that underlie the fantasy to provide an argument for why they are *superior to* it. In exceptionalism, volunteers recognize their privilege, yet rather than using this recognition to traverse their fantasy, they instead ironically use it to bolster the fantasy's perceived necessity and naturalness.

For instance, when asked why he had come on this “service and leadership” trip to Tanzania, one high school student named Ben said:

Yeah, so, I've been blessed—I've been like so fortunate in my life to be able to travel all over the world, Asia and Africa, and I just feel so blessed, and like, I just want to be able to see the different cultures, and like—there's like a stereotype that like Africa's so poor and impoverished, at least that's what I've heard, and um, so I've always wanted to come here and help and I feel like I've been so fortunate.

Ben used his blessings and privilege as evidence for why he believed he can help “Africa.” The irony here lies in the way Ben used recognition of his privilege (implicitly, as a white, US American with the financial means to travel regularly) to support the white savior fantasy rather than challenge it. Though he is careful to note the idea that “Africa's so poor and impoverished” as a “stereotype,” he still used it as grounds for why he has the ability to help—implying at least a partial belief in the accuracy of the stereotype, as well as a belief in his own naturalized ability stemming from his fortune.

On the group's initial tour of the NGO grounds, we had discussed with them the need for volunteers to have usable skills, desired by the local staff, in order to begin avoiding the neocolonial pitfalls of voluntourism. And yet, Ben ironically avoided the question of whether or not he has useful skills as a volunteer by attributing his ability to help to his seemingly natural blessedness. Ben ironically used recognition of his privilege to reinforce the white savior fantasy rather than challenge it.

Ben's assumption of ability to help due to blessedness resonates with a second exceptionalist strategy whereby volunteers profess *not having the requisite skills and yet still working* as an ability that makes them exceptional volunteers. This counterintuitive logic allows volunteers to posit themselves as exceptions to the white savior fantasy through a special ability to perform work without the requisite training. However, this special ability is again dependent on the very white supremacist and neocolonial logics it purports to rise above.

Mary demonstrated how a display of not having the requisite skills and yet still working could be used to ironically render oneself *superior to* the white savior fantasy. In her interview, Mary said, “I wasn't working in education before I came here,” before describing how her work had been “progressing ... knowing that ... I'm working myself out of a job.” “Working yourself out of a job” is a common approach to empowerment discourse in aid. The phrase functions to discursively distance the speaker from the white savior attitude of assuming Western dominance. The key here is that Westerners have been trained and/or are skilled in some areas about which Tanzanians do not have access to proper education. Claims to be working oneself out of a job can then posit Western dominance while countering its inherency. I responded to Mary, asking:

Jenna: You said you're working yourself out of a job. So what is it that right now you need to bring, that you can eventually train them [in]?

Mary: Um, I think—some of the—still—like goal-setting I think is still hard. And I think I—*you know, I'm still learning as well. You know? Um, and I—as I learn I can teach.*

You know? So there's this always developing to it. It's not like I'll just run out of everything, and be done.

Mary belied her own statement about wanting to work herself out of a job by claiming that there will always be more that she can teach the Tanzanians at the NGO. Mary argued paternalistically that she will always have more knowledge than Tanzanians, and thus always have necessary skills that the NGO needs. Mary thus reinforces her uniqueness as a volunteer: Although she knows good volunteers—the kind that are not white saviors—should be working themselves out of a job, *she* is the exception. She is different because she is always learning.

Mary's explanation is particularly interesting given how she represented herself earlier in the interview. When I asked why she was volunteering in Tanzania, Mary answered:

I wanted to know more about myself. And what my interests were. And what, um, kinds of things I was capable of ... I—I didn't try very hard in high school ... and then I'm doing minimum wage jobs in the US. So I'm *not*, like, going to live up to my potential at the minimum wage job! It's like, doing something else that maybe I could like put more of myself into, and like more of my heart, and see if I work really hard like what kinds of results could come of that.

Mary explained how she was unqualified for anything but a minimum wage job in the United States, because she “didn't try very hard in high school,” but that a minimum wage job would not give her the opportunity to live up to her potential. She implied that she can, however, live up to her potential at the Children's Village, even though she later related that she had no qualifications to work in education when she first arrived. Like Cole's description of white saviorism, where “a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior,”³⁶ Mary's narrative is based in an assumption that one does not need to be qualified to work in Africa, because being a (white) US American is qualification enough to help. In this way, her recognitions of whiteness and neocolonialism are ironically used to shore up her investment in the white savior fantasy, allowing her to construct herself as an exceptional volunteer.

Political and practical implications of volunteer foreclosures

Ruminating on how volunteers construct themselves as exceptional led me to think back to my own interactions with those high school volunteers. While transcribing, I was so uncomfortable that I threw down my headphones, paced about the room, and flinched at my past questions. Why? What was I avoiding facing?

I spoke with a colleague about my frustrations regarding the reflection sessions, and the trouble I was having with transcription. She responded, “So much of the wanting *them* to get there is about proving *you* are already there yourself.”³⁷ Her comment struck me. I could not face my failure to reach these high school students because to do so I would have to face my own failure to understand white savior politics. Throughout the reflection sessions, the act of transcribing them, re-reading to perform the analysis, and even writing up my arguments regarding ironic reinvestment in white savior fantasies, I managed to avoid reflecting on how I, too, was complicit in white savior irony. I foreclosed my own collusion in the fantasy through an assumption that I already understood such politics,

and thus could focus my attention instead on critiquing them in others. By assuming that I had an exceptional understanding of whiteness and neocolonialism in aid, I had enacted the very same irony I was critiquing in other volunteers.

It would be easy to dismiss this ironic foreclosure as a simple oversight, wherein I had not paid enough attention to the data or properly reflected on my positionality. The problem with this perspective, however, is that one cannot be done with foreclosures. As a white, US American researcher committed to anticolonial and antiracist praxis, I will continually foreclose the same questions that I study, and be faced with contradictions in my own subjective fantasies. The question, then, is not “How do I get rid of foreclosures?” but “How do I continue with them in a way that centers justice?”

I avoided listing my positionality characteristics at the beginning of this essay because I think, too often, doing so encourages critical scholars to conceptualize reflexivity as something that can be achieved—a requirement that can be met if the researcher pays close enough attention. But the nature of subjects is such that we exist only through foreclosure; to be a subject at all, there must always be things to which we cannot attend. There will always be political relations in which we are involved, and that we cannot (yet) understand. Reflexivity must be a constant process of subjective reiteration—one that can never be complete. By facing one foreclosure, we are undone and redone as subjects on the basis of another. Only by continually attempting to face our subjective contradictions—even though we will never do so fully—can we work against racism and colonialism to make the world more just.

In this way, reflexivity and subjectivity become matters of import not only theoretically, but also practically: How we understand ourselves and others as subjects politically affects the ways in which we interact with one another. On this note, I would like to use the conclusion of this study as a call for critical/cultural scholars to consider how even “high theory” may have important practical applications. To do so, I describe my presentation of this research to the Tanzanian staff of the NGO, and how they were able to use it to implement changes in the organization.

I met with the staff before having done the reflexive work above, and I struggled at the time to put conclusions about subjectivity in practical terms. Taking a cue from Butler, who reminds us that every foreclosure is productive as well as restrictive,³⁸ I tried to find what is produced by the denial and irony found in US American volunteer subject construction. Denial and irony produce subjectivities dependent on the white savior fantasy, and also reinforce the pathways for maintaining that fantasy. In order for work at the NGO to become more politically just, the fantasy of white saviorism needs to be destabilized. Recognizing that interactions between Western volunteers often serve to shore up the fantasy, I began to ask if perhaps there was a way to *replace* those interactions with interactions between Westerners and Tanzanian staff.

Denial and irony tend to make it difficult for Westerners to give other Westerners advice about their relationships with Tanzanians. Many volunteers and donors come to the NGO with both a steadfast desire for what they would like to accomplish and yet no idea how to navigate the cultural context. Sarah, Tim, and the Tanzanian staff often immediately recognize that these ideas will not work. In such cases, the NGO’s leadership team had assumed that Westerners would be better able to say “no” to other Westerners. However, when the managers attempt to communicate that an idea will not work to

volunteers or donors, they are seen as jealous. They are challenging the fantasy, and the response from volunteers and donors often follows the path of irony.

During our meeting, I suggested to the Tanzanian staff that they actually have a much stronger position from which to say “no” to donors and volunteers than the permanent Western staff—thereby stopping culturally inept projects before they start and saving valuable staff time and organizational resources. When Tanzanians explain to volunteers that their projects will not work, volunteers have a harder time maintaining the white savior fantasy. Whereas a Westerner leveling a critique could be dismissed through pathways of ironic displacement, a Tanzanian leveling a critique cannot. Without another Westerner with whom to compare oneself, Western volunteer subjects lose the ability to displace the fantasy, or construct themselves as exceptional in opposition. If a Tanzanian who grew up in that village is saying something will not work, his explanation undermines the fantasy in a way that does not provide the typical mechanisms of avoiding subjective dissolution. Without claiming a direct, colonial superiority over a Tanzanian, a Westerner cannot refuse the critique. Being directly challenged by another Westerner can stay within the bounds of the fantasy; being directly challenged by a Tanzanian fractures the ability to claim one is not a white savior like everyone else.

As an extension of this suggestion, the staff and I developed other means of forging connections across difference. We talked about how volunteers had problems recognizing their positions as working *under* Tanzanian leaders, and how this was connected to the white savior fantasy of superiority. Mary, for instance, continually repeated that she and her Tanzanian coworker, Nuru, were equals. Actually, Nuru is the head of a department, and Mary is her assistant. Through our conversation, the Tanzanian staff came up with the idea of having longer-term Western volunteers working at the organization undergo performance reviews, like the staff members themselves do, where they are given an overview of their work from a Tanzanian superior.

These two changes in the organization are attempts to help create more possibilities for subjects to “forge connections across power lines” and learn “to listen and speak *differently*.”³⁹ We cannot begin to escape the irony of being a volunteer under the conditions of white supremacy and imperialism—and we never fully will—without deep and abiding transracial and transcultural connections. Those conditions also highlight precisely why disturbing white savior fantasies is of the utmost importance. As a local missionary put it, “This is not a playground. These are people’s lives, and this is the future of a community. And this is not about how Americans feel about things. It’s not.”

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Notes

1. “The Real” is that which cannot be symbolized by a subject, and is impossible to represent. Even though the Real cannot be conceptualized, it still affects subjectivity and rhetorical action. Jacques Lacan, “Response to Jean Hyppolite’s Commentary on Freud’s ‘Verneinung,’” in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 324.
2. Michael K. Middleton, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Danielle Endres, “Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods: Challenges and Tensions,” *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (2011): 387.
3. Michael Middleton, Aaron Hess, Danielle Endres, and Samantha Senda-Cook, *Participatory Critical Rhetoric: Theoretical and Methodological Foundations for Studying Rhetoric in Situ* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).
4. Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 671–702.
5. Judith Butler, “Changing the Subject: Judith Butler’s Politics of Radical Resignification,” in *The Judith Butler Reader*, eds. Sara Salih with Judith Butler (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 332.
6. Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 679.
7. Butler, “Changing the Subject,” 333.
8. Joshua Gunn, “Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 1 (2004): 19.
9. *Ibid.*, 8.
10. *Ibid.*, 10.
11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.
12. Jenna N. Hanchey, “Constructing ‘American Exceptionalism’: Peace Corps Volunteer Discourses of Race, Gender, and Empowerment,” in *Volunteering and Communication Volume II: Studies in International and Intercultural Contexts*, eds. Michael W. Kramer, Laurie K. Lewis, and Loril M. Gossett (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 234.
13. Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 6.
16. Hanchey, “Constructing ‘American Exceptionalism.’”
17. Cole, “White-Savior Industrial Complex.”
18. Aimee Carrillo Rowe, *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 15–6.
19. Amina Mama, *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 114.
20. Godfried Asante, “Glocalized Whiteness: Sustaining and Reproducing Whiteness Through ‘Skin Toning’ in Post-colonial Ghana,” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 9, no. 2 (2016): 92.
21. Butler, “Changing the Subject,” 333.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Dana Cloud, “The Irony Bribe and Reality Television: Investment and Detachment in *The Bachelor*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, no. 5 (2010): 416.
24. Carrillo Rowe, *Power Lines*, 4.
25. *Ibid.*, 10.
26. Danielle Endres and Mary Gould, “‘I Am Also in the Position to Use My Whiteness to Help Them Out’: The Communication of Whiteness in Service Learning,” *Western Journal of Communication* 73, no. 4 (2009): 419.

27. See, for instance: SAIH Norway, “Africa for Norway—New charity single out now!” *YouTube*. Humanitarians of Tinder, “Humanitarians of Tinder,” <http://humanitariansoftinder.com>; Barbie Savior, “Barbie Savior,” <https://www.instagram.com/barbiesavior>.
28. Elsa Gunnarsdottir and Kathryn Mathers, “‘Doing Good’ in an Age of Parody.” *Africa is a Country*. January 11, 2017. <http://africasacountry.com/2017/01/doing-good-in-an-age-of-parody/>
29. *Ibid.*
30. Endres and Gould, “I Am Also in the Position.”
31. Cloud, “The Irony Bribe,” 415.
32. *Ibid.*, 416.
33. Kristen M. Lavelle, *Whitewashing the South: White Memories of Segregation and Civil Rights* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). This and the next quote are from p. 189, emphasis in original.
34. Cloud, quoting Kenneth Burke, “The Irony Bribe,” 416.
35. Saidiya Hartman, “Come, Go Back, Child,” *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2007), 84–100.
36. Cole, “White-Savior Industrial Complex.”
37. Constance Gordon, personal communication.
38. Butler, “Changing the Subject.”
39. Carrillo Rowe, *Power Lines*, 11, 13.