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Saving the souls of white folk: Humanitarianism as white supremacy

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Introduction: Moving beyond a Eurocentric critique of humanitarianism

White saviourism is a much-discussed aspect of humanitarian action (Richey, 2016; Wearing et al., 2018). Acknowledgment of the colonial dynamics of white saviourism at play in contemporary humanitarianism have led the sector to diversify its staff, but, like other liberal diversity work addressing systemic inequalities, simply adding more Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) fails to address underlying structures (Ahmed, 2012). I argue that humanitarianism is haunted by more than white saviourism past and present. Instead, I argue that humanitarianism is animated and made possible by white supremacy, defined as 'a logic of social organisation that produces regimented, institutionalised, and militarised conceptions of hierarchised "human" difference' (Rodriguez, 2009: 11). In discussing humanitarianism as white supremacy, I argue humanitarianism plays a historical and contemporary role in the creation and consolidation of what W. E. B. Du Bois ([1920] 1999) termed 'whiteness' and, drawing on Sylvia Wynter (1996), that it veils the racial hierarchies within universalist understandings of the 'human'. This means that humanitarianism as it has developed over time allows white supremacy to go unchallenged *but* also to thrive. As such, humanitarianism offers no reparative possibility within its current terms of reference, which raises questions about the potential for and limits of decolonizing humanitarianism.

Recent work on humanitarianism has begun to draw attention to the white supremacy and racial hierarchies embedded within. Adia Benton (2016) has shown how white supremacy and racial hierarchies shape everyday aspects of humanitarian practice from staff recruitment to professional expectations, while Elisa Pascucci (2018) has shown how labour precarity in the humanitarian sector intersects with racial hierarchies; Lewis Turner (2020) has argued that increasingly neoliberal attempts to foster entrepreneurship among particular, marked, refugee groups – in his case Syrian men – are racializing moves producing racial hierarchies between humanitarian subjects and ultimately upholding white supremacy; and Ida Danewid (2017) has focused on dynamics of empathy and hospitality in the saving of migrants in the Mediterranean that she argues erase structural questions of responsibility and allow for the reproduction of Europe as 'ethical' and 'good' and the maintenance of what Gloria Wekker (2016) calls 'white innocence'.

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Addressing the spectre of racism and white supremacy in humanitarian thought and practice is a necessary continuation of work in international relations that has uncovered the racist origins underpinning its most sacred tenets of anarchy and the state of nature (Henderson, 2013), and, more specifically for *Security Dialogue*, work in critical security studies that has drawn our attention to the racism present in much of our Foucauldian-inspired work (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019). Much critical work on humanitarianism discusses it as a biopolitical security practice concerned with the provision of the necessary conditions for life at a distance that (re)produces differential life chances (see Duffield, 2005, 2007). Such work on humanitarian governance and recent arguments regarding the erasure of race from many of these discussions (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019) make a discussion about racism and white supremacy in the norms and practices of humanitarianism across time urgent, for, as Meera Sabaratnam (2013: 265) has argued, much of the Foucauldian governmentality literature works to consolidate 'Western liberal power' even while being ostensibly critical of it.

Building on the work above, I also suggest that discussions have often been obscured by the language of 'Eurocentrism' – or, more specifically, humanitarianism as a Eurocentric practice. Work on Eurocentrism in international relations has been critical in drawing attention to the role of colonialism in the (re)production of the international and the centring and normalizing of European knowledge and experiences (see Hobson, 2014). However, remaining within a frame of Eurocentrism obfuscates racism and white supremacy. Olivia Rutazibwa (2016: 192) questions 'how . . . Eurocentrism relates to the category of racism and what the consequences are when the two are presented as separate rather than one (Eurocentrism) as one of the manifestations of the other (racism)' and what power structures discussions of Eurocentrism serve? Here, I hold my hands up to discussing humanitarianism as a Eurocentric practice in my earlier research and teaching without adequately considering what is being obscured in such discussions.

As recent contestation within the professional humanitarian community has shown (see Majumdar, 2020; Save the Children, 2020), charges of racism and white supremacist practices emanating from humanitarianism's liberal universalizing claims have not been offset by attempts to challenge Eurocentrism within the sector through localization agendas, participatory programming and attempts to diversify personnel. These attempts remain trapped in what Sabaratnam (2013: 270) calls a 'liberal paradox', where Eurocentric thinking is so dominant that thinking beyond humanitarian responses becomes unthinkable and any attempts at change remain firmly within liberal approaches or those that advocate for greater cultural appropriateness. Instead of liberal fixes, claims of racism speak to the foundations of humanitarianism concerned with the constitution of the human, which, as Black feminist scholars such as Wynter (1996) have shown, is fundamentally and intimately tied to the production of race, racial categories, whiteness and monohumanist, universalist claims alongside the negation of Black and Indigenous life (King, 2019).

Considering negations of life, I am writing this during the Covid-19 global pandemic, where practices of caregiving, humanitarian responses and their intersections with racial hierarchies, and the negation of non-white, cis-het, able-bodied life are made starkly visible (see Hofman, 2020). From uneven distribution of vaccines, to disparities in deaths between white and BIPOC in many countries (Bachelet, 2020; Tai et al., 2021), to repeated amazement from some in the Minority World at how few Covid-19 deaths have been recorded in 'Africa' (Nordling, 2020), the need to confront uncomfortable questions about who is accorded full humanity (see Marhia, 2013), who is considered a humanitarian (see Benton, 2016), and who is assumed to have both competence and the ability to intervene (Henderson, 2013; Hong, 2015; Vitalis, 2000) persist both for our work as scholars of critical security studies and, politically, for us as engaged citizens committed to social, political and racial justice.

The persistence of these questions, before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, animates this intervention especially as, since the first draft was written, the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police in the USA has seen the reanimation of Black Lives Matter protests in the USA and far beyond, alongside continued calls that 'Rhodes Must Fall'. Amid the violence of ongoing white supremacy and a global pandemic, it is both a privilege as a white, middle-class, tenured, able-bodied, cis-het woman from the heart of a white settler-colonial empire and at the same time vital to write this. These ongoing, interrelated injustices, the privileged space that I inhabit within them and, to be perfectly honest, my anger compel me to question the humanitarianism that is so often uncritically presented as a cosmopolitan response/solution to global harms.

The rest of the intervention examines humanitarianism's role in producing and securing whiteness and white supremacy, drawing on the work of both Du Bois and Wynter, before discussing decolonizing humanitarianism in any move beyond its white supremacy.

Humanitarianism: Producing and securing whiteness

> 'But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?' Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! . . . Next it appears dampening generous enthusiasm in what we once counted glorious; to free the slave is discovered to be tolerable only in so far as it freed his master. (Du Bois, [1920] 1999: 38)

In dissecting the 'souls of white folk', Du Bois ([1920] 1999: 37–54) makes clear that what he calls whiteness is linked to an assumed ownership of the earth without end and to mastery over non-white others rooted in colonial exploitation and enslavement, while suggesting that abolitionist moves were undertaken, or made tolerable, because they saved the 'souls of white folk' along with their privileges, profits and property. For Du Bois, whiteness comes into being and asserts itself when faced with the apprehension of imminent loss. It is within this apprehension of imminent loss that I contend humanitarian sentiment and interventions played (and continue to play) an important role.

Policies targeting the well-being of enslaved and/or newly emancipated populations and the targets of white settler-colonial violence not only saved the lives of racialized, Black and Indigenous others but also the privileges accorded to whiteness. Racial superiority was not erased by those who wished to relieve the worst excesses of colonial violence but rather consolidated. Racial hierarchies of civilized and savage races – the 'interracial relations' of international relations – not only influenced colonial attempts to bring order to an assumed 'state of nature' among Black and Indigenous populations, but also influenced protective practices that we would most readily identify with traditional liberal approaches influenced by Kantian notions of humanity, wherein Black people were thought 'incapable of achieving the level of rationality required of moral agents' (Henderson, 2013: 82).

There is a growing body of work charting how humanitarian sentiments and knowledge produced about humanitarian-ameliorative interventions became part of everyday colonial government (see Lester and Dussart, 2014). Travelling between colonial spaces – from plantation economies to white settler colonies – protecting the enslaved, newly emancipated and Indigenous communities from various forms of colonial violence, these sentiments manifested in different forms across British colonial space, while ensuring the continuation of British superiority. Ameliorative practices appeased metropolitan abolitionists while guaranteeing the continued profitability of slave economies through ameliorating the worst excesses of violence. Ameliorative polices were overseen by a 'Protector', usually a member of the slave-owning class, and were also intended to prepare enslaved people for a freedom yet to come by encouraging civilization through Christianization. As Alan Lester and Fae Dussart (2014: 56) suggest, 'through their instructive relationship with slave owners, the British

government hoped, they would redeem cruel and aberrant British colonial societies at the same time that they reformed the benighted subjectivities of enslaved people'. Meanwhile others, such as Seymour Drescher (2004), are even more explicit that amelioration was not about liberation for enslaved people, but following the Haitian Revolution, about more-effective ordering and regulation within an environment of revolutionary upheaval threatening white supremacy.

In writing about the souls of white folk, Du Bois ([1920] 1999: 45) clearly links European colonialism to racial categories, white supremacy and paternalist forms of government aimed at securing a white, colonial Europe:

> How many of us today fully realize the current theory of colonial expansion, of the relation of Europe which is white, to the world which is black and brown and yellow? Bluntly put, that theory is this: It is the duty of white Europe to divide up the darker world and administer it for Europe's good.

Therefore, through seeking to relieve the worst excesses of racist violence, humanitarianism did not challenge whiteness but secured it using a range of controls that worked through logics of care helping to soothe the troubled souls of white folk concerned with both the well-being of Black and Indigenous populations and their own security at the top of racial hierarchies. Fast-forward 150 years and Young-sun Hong (2015: 14) identifies such features in Cold War humanitarianism, where biopolitical, humanitarian interventions, especially those of a medical variety, were part of a strategy for containing the communist threat.

However, any disentanglement of humanitarianism's role in the consolidation of white supremacy requires not just a consideration of humanitarianism as a form of liberal government with colonial roots. It also requires a recognition that while humanitarianism worked – and continues to work – to relieve the violence of colonialism, ameliorative practices are and were also racializing moves producing what Alexander G. Weheliye (2014) would call a racializing assemblage within which whiteness was, and remains, supreme. For instance, alongside paternalist practices securing whiteness, humanitarian action has also demonstrated distinct anti-Black racism towards colonized Africans. In her study of the International Committee of the Red Cross's lack of intervention during the Mau Mau rebellion, Yolanda Pringle (2017) draws attention to the perceived primitivity of African populations that rendered them outside of and incapable of comprehending humanitarian sentiments, with the result that this placed them beyond concern and assistance. In such a racializing assemblage, white supremacy is intimately tied to the production of the human and humanity as supposedly universal categories *and* – as Pringle's work points out – to the concomitant negation of Black and Indigenous lives inherent within this production (see King, 2019). Here, the work of Sylvia Wynter is instructive.

Even while racism has animated and structured humanitarian practice, the figure of the universal human underpinning humanitarianism's commitment to saving lives, relieving suffering and upholding human dignity provides humanitarianism with its normative power. However, the figure of the universal human allows humanitarianism to sidestep questions of race and racism in its practice and in historical and contemporary understandings of the human. Even in critical discussions of the 'politics of life' and hierarchies of humanity generated through humanitarian practice (e.g. Fassin, 2012), race and racism are a spectre haunting discussion of inequalities exterior to humanitarianism itself rather than an active animating agent. Importantly, the tensions around who is accorded full humanity that haunt wider bodies of humanist thought through proximity to, or distance from, racialized 'states of nature', placement on modernist gauges of development, or what Wynter (2003: 260) calls the 'overrepresentation of (white bourgeois) Man' in understandings of the universal human are not erased or overcome through the declaration of an ethical commitment

to all human life. If we follow Wynter's 'human view', such ethical commitments come into being though colonial encounters that were generative of a

> culture-specific conception of being human, allowing it to be posited *as if* it were the universal of the human species, and ensuring thereby that all actions taken for the sake of the well-being of the human referent object continue to be perceived *as if* they were being taken for the sake of the human-in-general: *propter nos homines*. (Wynter, 1996: 43, italics in original)

Universalizing claims such as these are powerful normative moves helping to perpetuate the idea that humanitarianism is above race. These powerful normative moves erase the foundational part played by racialization in humanitarianism and its understanding of humanity. As Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (2010: 9) have argued,

> a claim to speak on behalf of humanity stakes out a powerful position. It is one of the few categories that is meaningful across political, religious, and social divides. While people may disagree on the source of its power, almost everyone agrees that humanity should be considered sacred. As a universal subject, the claims of humanity should, it seems, be paramount – and to speak on its behalf should bring discussion to a close, permit action to begin, and enable lives to be saved.

Therefore, humanitarianism's universalizing claims invisibilize racial hierarchies and the white supremacy embedded in its foundations. Meanwhile a recalibration of the human challenges the ways in which life is universalized and rendered equal in biopolitical understandings of humanitarianism, and discussions of race confront humanitarianism with distinctly political relations that unsettle both universal norms and the claims of (professional) humanitarianism to be impartial and apolitical (see Pringle, 2017).

It should be clear by now that an acknowledgement of the Eurocentrism of humanitarianism or the dynamics of white saviourism is not enough if humanitarianism is animated and made possible by white supremacy. With this in mind, I want to ask: Are postcolonial critiques of humanitarianism enough?

Decolonizing humanitarianism?

A postcolonial critique of humanitarianism is certainly not enough when we consider the 'repetitive process of making the modern human through extinguishing Black and Indigenous life' (King, 2019: 39) or Rutazibwa's (2016: 196) argument that 'racism is the oil in the system of colonial power that makes a sustained discrimination of and violence against certain people not only possible but also invisible and acceptable'. Moving forward, race and racism need to be taken seriously as features within the structures of humanitarian thought and practice. Alongside this, it is necessary, for scholars and practitioners alike, to acknowledge that humanitarianism, with its universalist claims, acts as a salve for sustained racial discrimination and violence, working if not to entirely invisibilize racial hierarchies within suffering, then to make the racial underpinnings of such suffering acceptable through supposedly universal practices of care.

The 'parasitic relationship' (King, 2019: 39) between the death of Black and Indigenous people and the humanitarian subject requires us to take a step beyond the postcolonial and towards a decolonial re-evaluation of our understandings of the human at the heart of humanitarian thought and practice. A re-evaluation of the human subject of humanitarianism, as opposed to the sleight of hand made possible through the universalist recognition of the humanity of all, is necessary to avoid the erasure of race and the continuation of white supremacy already discussed. Simply put, recognition is not enough. As has been recently argued by Kerem Nişancıoğlu (2020:

44) in his discussion of racialized sovereignty – and what is humanitarianism if not a form of sovereignty as responsibility? – recognizing the humanity of racialized others is a form of 'recognition' that works as a form of 'redemption, containment and closure' of past colonial injustices and hides their continued importance. Therefore, if we want to move beyond a humanitarianism working to secure whiteness, what is left for humanitarianism without a radical reappraisal of the human? In such an undertaking, any reappraisal must elevate and amplify – not just include for the sake of diversity – those voices traditionally excluded from setting the boundaries of humanity.

But does humanitarianism need or deserve to be saved? Swiftly followed by: Can we and do we want to imagine a world where those who suffer are left to die even while we recognize that those putting out the fire are also the arsonists, as Rutazibwa (2019) argues? For example, what opportunities are there for an international practice of care that does not rely on or reproduce racial hierarchies, or create – as Jasbir K. Puar (2017: 139) has argued of humanitarianism – debilitated forms of life located beyond a bio-necropolitical binary at a third point of will not let/make die? Is a transversal practice of care even possible beyond supremacy or hierarchies of some kind, seeing as humanitarianism relies on the power to intervene? Such questions almost inevitably lead to thinking about localizing humanitarian practices of care. But calls for the 'local' have become a buzzword go-to solution in humanitarian practice over the previous decades. As Kristina Roepstorff (2020) argues, the 'localization agenda' pitches the local in binary opposition to the international and reproduces processes of exclusion. The local in these contexts is always thought to mean the Majority World of humanitarian intervention, while the Minority World retains the mantle of the global, reproducing as it does so, traditional humanitarian geographies and, as Sabaratnam (2013: 266) argues, reproducing processes of 'Otherness'. In contrast, Parvati Raghuram (2016) has argued, an ethics of care needs 'emplacing': recognizing the relational aspects of care that exist across different spaces but avoiding the subsumption of once-radical moves – like localization – by institutions and practices concerned with sustaining themselves through limited reform. Emplacing, then, suggests opening up humanitarianism to different ontologies of life and what care for that life might look like, while allowing for a recognition that humanitarianism is already emplaced within a particular racialized colonial history.

Opening up to alternative ontologies of life is of critical importance as humanitarian practice is confronted with anthropogenic climate change that requires a reconfiguration of the subject of care. Thinking about relational aspects of care where species-humans are only one life form at risk from climate change asks us to think differently not only about who the human is in humanitarianism, but also about what life humanitarianism saves. However, recent critical work on the Anthropocene has argued that the Anthropocene 'is a naming event unfolding within a genre of white epistemology; only when scrubbed clean of its particularity does the Anthropocene acquire its unmarked universality. . . . Its whiteness determines not only who can be heard in that space but also the very terms on which the Anthropocene debate unfolds as an object of public concern' (Baldwin and Erickson, 2020: 4; see also Tuana, 2019). Accordingly, what are the possibilities opened up by thinking in more-than-human terms? What do attempts to reconfigure the human do to humanitarianism, and how might they themselves perpetuate particular racist logics?

Here, I am thinking about certain post-humanist approaches that appear to offer radical potential for moving beyond particular, universalized ideas about life. And yet the tensions around who is accorded a full humanity and the racial hierarchies that result are not magically erased through a change of ontological lens that opens up a consideration of relations between human and non-human actors. As some have argued, post-humanist approaches can reproduce the very same racial hierarchies through marking bodies in relation to pre-modernity and the natural world that animated racial hierarchies in the first instance (see Panelli, 2010; Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2016), or, as Weheliye (2014: 8) argues, they simply 'ignore race as a constitutive category when thinking about the parameters of humanity'. Importantly, here the production of racialized people is not only

discursive, 'as an effect of the very way in which we think, know and inhabit the world' (Ahmed, 2002: 47), but also occurs in relation to processes of inhabiting places and spaces and more-than-human entanglements.

However, relational ontologies are found in a range of Indigenous knowledge traditions (Todd, 2016: 9), where it should be noted that ontology does not need to be given the adjective 'relational', and in fact so doing continues to maintain Eurocentric approaches against which other forms of classification and knowledge systems are categorized and measured (Smith, 1999). Therefore, what opportunities do Indigenous approaches to the human and to care open up for a decolonizing of humanitarianism, and what are the risks of 'perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples' (Todd, 2016: 16) in such an approach? Should humanitarianism 'Columbus' Indigenous knowledge systems and how compatible are emplaced Indigenous approaches to care and the relief of suffering with the humanitarian industry as it is currently structured? In her intervention on the ontological turn in the social sciences, Todd argues that material can be drawn from anywhere, any time and anyone (see also Holbraad et al., 2014), but should be accompanied by an ethical responsibility that 'requires us to pay attention to who else is speaking alongside us', positioning 'us, first and foremost, as citizens embedded in dynamic legal orders and systems of relations that require us to work constantly and thoughtfully across the myriad systems of thinking, acting, and governance within which we find ourselves enmeshed' (Todd, 2016: 19). But consideration of Indigenous ontologies must be accompanied by consideration of, and emplaced within, ongoing struggles against colonial violence, white supremacy and climate change, and we must be vigilant in relation to the continued role of saviour narratives around such struggles and about being careful not to see such Indigenous cosmologies as pathways to once again securing whiteness. Considering Indigenous ontologies is certainly not a panacea but can go some way in the necessary unsettling of not only what life is being saved but also the paternalist politics of saving itself.

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