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Abstract

Critical Whiteness studies has emerged as an academic discipline that has produced a lot of work and garnered attention in the last two decades. Central to this project is the idea that if the processes of Whiteness can be uncovered, then they can be reasoned with and overcome, through rationale dialogue. This article will argue, however, that Whiteness is a process rooted in the social structure, one that induces a form of psychosis framed by its irrationality, which is beyond any rational engagement. Drawing on a critical discourse analysis of the two only British big budget movies about transatlantic slavery, *Amazing Grace* and *Belle*, the article argues that such films serve as the celluloid hallucinations that reinforce the psychosis of Whiteness. The features of this discourse that arose from the analysis included the lack of Black agency, distancing Britain from the horrors of slavery, and downplaying the role of racism.

Critical Whiteness studies has emerged as an academic discipline that has produced a lot of work and garnered attention in the last two decades (Garner, 2007; Gunew, 2007; Moreton-Robinson, 2006). The aim is to shed light on the concept of Whiteness so that it can be addressed, dismantled, or overcome and attempts to be “essential to the liberation of people of colour around the globe” (Owen, 2007, p. 2003). Central to this project is the idea that if the processes of Whiteness can be uncovered, then they can be overcome through rationale dialogue. This article will argue, however, that Whiteness is a process rooted in the social structure, one that induces a form of psychosis framed by its irrationality, which is therefore beyond any rational engagement.

Psychosis is a psychological disorder hallmarked by delusional thinking and hallucinations (Barlow & Durand, 2005). Cashdan (1972) described the delusions at the heart of psychosis as being “false beliefs that the patient maintains in the face of overwhelmingly contradictory evidence” (p. 50). These delusions give rise to hallucinations, which are believed as real to maintain the psychosis. The metaphor of psychosis is advanced as the perfect way to understand how Whiteness is produced and maintained. This article argues that big budget films present as the historical hallucinations to support the distorted view of reality produced by Whiteness.

Before 2006, *Amistad* was the only big budget film in either the United States or the United Kingdom about transatlantic enslavement. The lack of projects demonstrates the sensitivity of the topic that British and American studios have been wary to touch. However, in Britain, the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 2007 presented the opportunity to green light a film on the subject. *Amazing Grace* was released about the work of the abolitionist William Wilberforce. In the United States, the topic came on the agenda of the major studios with the release of three big budget films either about, or with enslavement as a key feature, in a 2-year span: the American counterpart to *Amazing Grace*, *Lincoln* (2012), *Django Unchained* (2012), and *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013). In the post-racial United States of President Obama, perhaps the taboo has been lifted.

In the United Kingdom, *Belle* was released in 2013, telling the story of Belle Elizabeth Dido, the daughter of an English ship captain who was raised by the English aristocracy. Focusing on the British context, the article will present a critical discourse analysis of *Amazing Grace* and *Belle*, to demonstrate how both films present as celluloid hallucinations of the psychosis

of Whiteness. The discourses reinforced in these films represent delusions of Whiteness that, contrary to critical Whiteness studies, cannot be conquered through rational engagement.

Critical Whiteness Studies

The wealth of literature on the subject has placed certain demarcations on Whiteness. Whiteness is categorized as a Eurocentric worldview that produces the privilege of White skin (Harris, 1993). When Whiteness is produced, it becomes normalized and invisible to the White population (Owen, 2007; Roediger, 1992). The concept is not static, it shifts in time and space, in terms of who is and who is not included in the exclusive club (Deliofsky & Kitossa, 2013; Green, Sonn, & Matsebula, 2007; Warren & Twine, 1997). Whiteness is also key to a global system of oppression by the West over the “rest,” being used to mobilize the “civilised” over the “uncivilised” world (Allen, 2001). Whiteness is retained in the post-racial imaginary and shapes how we see and understand the idea beyond biological understandings of race (Feldman, 2016).

Whiteness studies is seen to be a development in the study of racism, because it identifies the responsibility of White people and is meant as a decolonizing call to action. As Green et al. (2007) argue,

Locating whiteness, rather than racism, at the centre of anti-racism focuses attention on how white people’s identities are shaped by a broader racist culture, and brings to the fore the responsibilities that white people have for addressing racism. (p. 390)

By forcing White people to confront their complicity in the system, the aim is to make them reborn as allies to the dark oppressed peoples of the world (Allen, 2004). As a mechanism to do this work, “only a comprehensive theoretical approach will uncover the root system of its functional properties so that it can be dug up and destroyed” (Owen, 2007, p. 213). Participating in a critical engagement with Whiteness is seen as a cathartic and cleansing experience for those with White skin, so that they can no longer avoid race and racism (Leonardo, 2002a).

The practical application of Whiteness studies has been primarily to engage White people in critical pedagogy (e.g., Aveling, 2004; Gillespie et al. 2002; Nichols, 2010; Sharma, 2010). As Giroux (1997) argues,

Cultural critics need to connect “whiteness” with a language of possibility that provides a space for white students to imagine how “whiteness” as an ideology and social location can be progressively appropriated as part of a broader politics of social reform. (p. 384)

This has also been a strategy of Black activist movements, historically. Malcolm X spent a large amount of time touring the United States addressing White audiences. These talks were very different from his message to Black communities. Angela Davis (2004) recalls a talk he gave at Brandeis, a majority White university in the United States:

I was shocked to hear him say, speaking directly to his audience, “I’m talking to you! You!! You and your ancestors, for centuries, have raped and murdered my people!” He was addressing himself to an all-white crowd and I wondered whether . . . other Black people in the audience felt as uncomfortable and outrageously misplaced as I did . . . For White people, listening to Malcolm had been disorienting and disturbing. (pp. 126-127)

This Malcolm example should serve as a reminder that although Whiteness studies as an academic pursuit is relatively new, Black activists and scholars have been calling for White people to acknowledge their complicity in oppression for a long time. Du Bois wrote on the psychological wage of Whiteness in his classic work *Black Reconstruction* in 1935,

exemplifying the point that “radical writings on the topic of white privilege are new to white audiences *who read mainly white authors*” (Leonardo, 2002a, p. 142, emphasis in original).

Angela Davis’s experience of Malcolm X’s talk is instructive because it highlights one of the main problems with the idea of Whiteness studies. Her White colleagues found the talk “disorienting and disturbing,” but they were not cleansed and reborn as allies for Black liberation. This rejection of the messages of critical Whiteness is a common theme in the literature of such pedagogy. As Allen (2001) explains, “we[White people] have a tendency to get angry and aversive as anyone who has done antiracist education with white populations can attest to” (p. 482). A significant tactic once confronted with the guilt of Whiteness is to avoid these feelings, and “many white students will attempt to reinterpret any pedagogical strategy that disrupts their sense of entitlement and comfort” (Gillespie et al. 2002, p. 240). Obviously not all White people who counter such pedagogy violently reject it, but it does appear as though those who are hostile to the ideas remain so. Levine-Rasky (2000) is highly critical of the idea of critical pedagogy as a solution because the “heroic acts of confession” it seeks to draw from White people “reveal a supreme faith in the individual to discern and act upon the world, to be her or his own vehicle for effecting change” (p. 277).

Critical Whiteness studies has come under criticism due to these limits of its transformative potential. Stevens (2007) expresses the fear that Whiteness studies gets incorporated into the neo-liberal architecture of the university and loses

its impetus and becomes a site for intellectual indulgence and theoretical postulation . . . The development of a subfield called “white studies” could, then, be highly problematic especially if power relations, antiracist politics and a legacy of white racisms are too quickly glossed over, deconstructed or imploded. (p. 744)

A key issue in the field has been the distinction between White privilege—the benefits to those with White skin—and White supremacy—the system of oppression (Leonardo, 2002a). Arguing for a focus on White supremacy is an attempt to deal with the issue of Whiteness studies neglecting the key concern of structural oppression. In this account, the focus of study and activism is on dismantling the White supremacy itself, though there are surely limits to the role that universities—bastions of Whiteness—can play in dismantling White supremacy.

Whiteness as a Psychosis

A central thesis of critical Whiteness studies is that it presumes that Whiteness can be reasoned with, treated, or even abolished (Roediger, 1994). However, if we see Whiteness as a psychosis, then we understand that it is hallmarked by irrationality and a distinct inability to see reality in any other way than the distorted view it creates. As Allen (2001) explains,

To be accepted as a member of the white-race-at-large . . . a white person is culturally required to internalize a dysfunctional view of reality . . . We tend to live under the illusions of our own self-manufactured image of ourselves: we believe that we are nice, kind, benevolent and caring folk and, more importantly, that is how other racial groups see us. Many whites in the United States have even constructed and internalized the baseless fantasy that *we* are the most oppressed of all racial groups. (p. 482)

It is interesting that scholars recognize this dysfunctional view of society, this fantasy created by Whiteness, but still believe it can be reasoned with, even after their numerous encounters with people and students who reject any rational analysis.

Whiteness exists as a psychosis to deal with the dissonance between what Hess (2007) calls “white mythologies” and the reality that Western capitalism is built on and maintained by racial exploitation. A key theme of the enlightenment and social reformers at the emergence of

modernity was their belief that they were ushering a new era of equality and change. Payne's *Rights of Man*, Kant's sovereign individual subject, and even the American constitution promising "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" aimed to provide freedom and justice. These ideas are key to the West's version of itself, the benevolent actor who gets involved in world affairs to bring about justice. However, in creating these mythologies, they have entirely missed out the dark side of modernity (Bhambra, 2007). Slavery, genocide, and colonialism are foundation stones of Western modernity, and through neo-colonial economic policies and exploitation of developing world labor is the system maintained. The system is held together by ignoring the chasm between myth and reality, which is why Whiteness manifests itself as a psychosis. It is this psychosis that explains how the founding fathers of the United States could declare liberty for all, while owning enslaved Africans, a distorted and self-referential view of society, which allows facts to be transformed into fiction so that the people can continue to feel good about a world in which they reap the benefits of exploiting the poorest. Without the psychosis of Whiteness, the system might fall apart because the reality may cause people to seriously consider systemic change.

The psychosis is so endemic that it engulfs academics who get trapped in the madness of repeating the same prescriptions even though they continuously achieve the same negative results. Probably, the best example of the psychosis of Whiteness in academia is the so-called "new abolitionists," who do not want to reason with Whiteness, but destroy it.

Noel Ignatiev, author of *How the Irish Became White* (1995), has been at the forefront of new abolitionism. In 1997, he gave an address where he argued that,

So-called Whites must cease to exist as Whites in order to realize themselves as something else; to put it another way: White people must commit suicide as Whites in order to come alive as workers, or youth, or women, or whatever other identity can induce them to change from the miserable, petulant, subordinated creatures they now are into freely associated, fully developed human subjects.

The basic argument of new abolitionism is that White people need to give up their Whiteness, to "acknowledge their unearned privileges and disinvest in them" (Leonardo 2002b, p. 37). The thesis on the surface sees the rootedness of Whiteness in the system of oppression, but if you dig deeper in reality, they are downplaying the structural role of racism. If Whites can simply disinvest in their privileges by "defying white rules" (Ignatiev, 1997), then Whiteness itself cannot be systemic. Ignatiev gives an instructive example in the disproportionate experiences of police brutality by Black communities. In his analysis, the police treat Black people as enemies because they assume they are subversive due to their Black skin. By contrast, White people are assumed to be loyal. Ignatiev wonders what would happen if the police could no longer dole out beatings based on these perceptions if Whites started to commit treacherous acts against Whiteness. He concludes that,

Whites who are poor would find themselves on the receiving end of police justice as Black people now do . . . With color no longer serving as a handy guide for the distribution of penalties and rewards, European-Americans of the downtrodden class would at last be compelled to face with sober senses their real condition of life and their relations with humankind. It would be the end of race.

The problem with Ignatiev's logic here is, first, that he misattributes the problem of police brutality to the level of individual police officer's perceptions and treatment of suspects. The police treatment of Black people is based on a system of oppression that produces particular conditions and responses from a police force. Police do not beat Black people because they are

seen as disloyal; they beat them because they exist as quasi-citizens at best, and quasi-human at worst. There is no mechanism for White people to “become Black” in this way.

The more myopic psychosis in his argument is displayed in the idea that without the benefits of their Whiteness, poor Whites would see the “real conditions” that they live under. Ignatiev seems oblivious to the reality that the conditions facing poor Whites are not the same as those facing poor Blacks, in large part because of police abuse. Differential relations between the Black and White poor are not a mirage that can be lifted by treason to Whiteness; these are real structural inequalities that exist for the Black population. In Ignatiev’s view, Whiteness has “held down more whites than blacks,” as it has tied them to a capitalist system that relies on their oppression. The problem with the new abolitionists is that they are unpinned by the same psychosis of Whiteness as orthodox Marxism, the denial of the central and structural importance of racism. Poor Whites have been shielded from the worst forms of oppression that are essential to capitalism (genocide, slavery, and colonialism), and continue to be so because of racism. Leonardo (2002b) is right when he argues that “the realistic appraisal is that whites do have a lot to lose by committing race treason” (p. 37), which is precisely why Whiteness is such a pervasive psychosis. It is necessary to maintain the status quo, and no one who benefits from that is in any hurry to give it up.

A further example of the psychosis of Whiteness is the title of the project the “new abolitionists.” Ignatiev argues that the abolitionists to slavery were able to succeed even though the system was so strongly rooted in society; therefore, he argues Whiteness is equally moveable if pressure is applied with a concerted effort. What this argument entirely neglects is that transatlantic slavery was abolished for economic and practical reasons, not due to the great moral crusade of the abolitionists. In fact, the celebration of the heroism of the abolitionists is a historical delusion that is key to the psychosis, which will be explored during the analysis of *Amazing Grace* and *Belle*. The slave system had become unworkable for a number of reasons. First, resistance by enslaved Africans made the system increasingly unprofitable, with the Haitian revolution being the catalyst for the abolition of the trade (not system) in 1807 (Hart, 1985). In the United States, the North needed the bodies of African Americans to win the Civil War, and emancipation had begun to make economic sense with the onset of industrialization (Du Bois, 1911). Slavery ended, because it was in the interests of Whiteness not as a concession to its power. Once slavery was “abolished,” different forms of racial oppression came in, segregation and Jim Crow in the United States and colonialism in the Caribbean. Once those systems were dismantled, they were replaced with economic and social discrimination that is still in place today. The idea that abolition is some transformative event to embrace is a key delusion, central to the psychosis of Whiteness.

Analyzing *Amazing Grace* and *Belle*

Whiteness as a psychosis goes beyond critiquing the irrationality of Whiteness. Rather, Whiteness is defined in itself and at its root as irrational, a discursive psychosis that cannot be tamed through reason. When patients suffer a psychotic break, hallucinations produced by the psychosis reinforce it, convincing the person of their distorted reality (Cashdan, 1972). Whiteness shapes mainstream cultural production producing celluloid fantasies, which work as hallucinations produced by and reinforcing the psychosis.

In order to make the case for these discursive hallucinations, this article focuses on the only two big budget British films on the topic of transatlantic enslavement, *Amazing Grace* and *Belle*. By critically analyzing the discursive repertoires of cultural texts, we can identify underlying societal discourses (van Dijk, 2001). The discourse underpinning the films has been analyzed and aims to demonstrate how pervasive the psychosis of Whiteness is, to the extent it is reproduced in these films. Central to the argument being put forward is that there is no conspiracy behind media representations of Whiteness, no orchestration by a grand puppet

master. Instead, the “truth is far worse than that” (Gillborn, 2008, p. 9), with the psychosis of Whiteness creating a distorted view of society that is replicated on film.

The two films in question were produced by different studios, written by different writers, and had different directors. In fact, both the writer (Misan Sagay) and director (Amma Asante) of *Belle* are Black women. Yet the two films reproduce remarkably similar discursive patterns of Whiteness, as outlined below. The psychosis of Whiteness is not reserved for White people, it is a distortion that is rooted in Western society and can be reproduced by those of any hue. Thus is the power of the psychosis.

Both films make attempts to shed light on some of the horrors of transatlantic slavery, and both also point to the economic impact of the trade on Britain. However, from the analysis, there were key discursive instruments that demonstrate the psychosis of Whiteness present in both projects.

Lack of Black Agency

One of the most notable features of both movies is the distinct lack of Black characters in either. Across both movies, there are only three Black characters with speaking roles; in *Belle*, there is the title role and a maid who has a few lines. In *Amazing Grace* Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave who wrote an infamous book about his experiences, is the only Black speaking character, and gives little more than a cameo appearance. Both these films credit abolition to White agents who emancipate the passive and tortured slaves on their behalf.

Amazing Grace is a film based on exploits of William Wilberforce, whose narrative is built on the premise that he is the driving agent behind abolition. The film opens with a scene that works as an allegory for the entire project. We see two men whipping a Black horse that has collapsed in the driving rain. We follow the approach of a carriage, gallantly pulled along by two White horses, which stops when it reaches the scene. Out of the carriage steps William Wilberforce, whose name is enough to stop the men from beating the horse. The film consistently depicts Wilberforce as the central and almost lone figure in the battle for abolition. The movie describes abolition as his God given mission and at one point, he is told that it is “you against them” referring to the 300 members of parliament (MPs) who are in the slave traders’ pocket. The film builds up to the crescendo of Wilberforce being honored in parliament; “the slave trade is no more” because of this great man.

The film presents a number of distortions in order to present the Wilberforce as savior narrative. The most glaring one is that it misrepresents his project and achievements. Wilberforce was instrumental in achieving the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. However, the film repeatedly gives the impression that the act, and by extension Wilberforce, brought about the end of slavery. For instance, at a key point in the film, when assuring the group involved in the fight for abolition that they must press on with the legislation, the abolitionist character James Stephen gives an emotive appeal explaining that while he was in Jamaica, he “heard a woman saying that someone was coming across the sea to save them . . . they said it was King Wilberforce.” This quote demonstrates not only the messianic figure for the enslaved that Wilberforce is being depicted as but also the historical inaccuracy at the heart of the movie. The act that Wilberforce worked so hard to pass did nothing to end the system of slavery in the British Empire. Slavery was not abolished until 1834, and was followed by a three “apprenticeship,” which was essentially an extension of enslavement. Therefore, this enslaved African in Jamaica derived absolutely no benefit from Wilberforce’s life’s work.

Black people in Wilberforce’s narrative are reduced to playing the role of ghosts that haunt the hero of the piece. We are first introduced to a Black character after 10 minutes, the image of a young slave in chains haunting Wilberforce in his reflection. Such images appear dotted around the film and are used as a medium to show the horror that spurs Wilberforce on. The

only speaking part afforded to a Black agent is for Olaudah Equiano, who is introduced as part of the delegation that goes to Wilberforce's house to convince him to get involved in the abolition campaign. Even in this scene Equiano is marginalized, as it is Thomas Clarkson who speaks to the torture and brutality of slavery. Equiano has a very limited role in the film and is reduced to category of ghost by the end, as he dies before the bill can get through parliament.

Even though the titular role in *Belle* is a Black woman, the film equally produces a narrative that excludes Black agency from abolition. *Belle* is the story of Belle Elizabeth Dido, who was raised by her uncle Lord Mansfield, who was the Chief Justice of the nation. The story tells of her growing up as a Black woman in the English aristocracy and is intertwined with the famous case of the massacre on the slave ship *Zong* in 1781, over which Lord Mansfield presided. However, as in *Amazing Grace*, there are very few Black characters, aside from Belle herself. Belle is the central feature of the movie, of course, but she is a passenger on the vehicle of abolition. Belle is represented in the film as almost completely unaware of the horrors of slavery, locked away as she is in the wealthy estate of Lord Mansfield. She eventually becomes involved in trying to influence her grandfather's ruling in the case of the slave ship *Zong*, but she is convinced to do this by her fictional love interest in the film, John Davinier, who works tirelessly to provide evidence in the case. The agency in the abolition cause in *Belle* is afforded to Chief Justice Mansfield, who is presiding over the *Zong* case, and the film accords him the power to "bring down the institution of slavery" with his ruling. However, this is a distortion of the reality in relation to Mansfield and the *Zong* trial.

Zong

The *Zong* was the infamous case of a slave ship whose captain murdered 132 enslaved Africans by throwing them overboard. His rationale was that it was necessary to save the ship as they were running low on resources and otherwise everyone on the ship would have perished (Smith & Friedman, 2014). The case is a key part of the narrative in the movie, which focuses on the decision that Lord Mansfield has to give on whether the ship can claim insurance for the 132 Africans thrown overboard. The finale of the movie is when Mansfield gives his ruling against the ship captain much to the delight of Davinier and Belle. It is this ruling that paints Mansfield as a great abolition hero and a blow against the slave trade. A slogan that is repeated throughout the film is a legal maxim Mansfield was fond of, "let justice be done, though the heavens fall," to denote his credentials as a campaigner for justice in the court system.

As with *Amazing Grace*, however, this representation does not stand up to scrutiny. The *Zong* ruling was made in 1783 and the institution of slavery managed to survive for another 51 years despite it. However, the ruling was not anti-slavery because it sided with the insurers who were an absolutely essential part of the trade. To rule in favor of the ship captain may actually have been a stronger blow for abolition because if his actions were deemed legal, it would have been much harder to secure insurance for voyages. In fact, the case was actually an appeal by the insurers after an earlier ruling in the favor of the captain, for this very reason (Krikler, 2007).

Rupprecht (2007) explains how the case at the time was not a major event, going almost unreported in the press. The horror of the acts involved with the murder of the Africans on board was later picked up by the abolition movement as it was such a vivid story demonstrating the barbarity of slavery. She explains that "the narrative helped to shape the archive of abolitionism, and thus it became iconic within the cultural memory of slavery" (p. 330). Mansfield never formally ruled in favor of the insurers, the case ended when he ordered another hearing as there was sufficient evidence to cast doubt on the claim, but the hearing apparently never took place (Krikler, 2007).

In terms of Mansfield himself, though he displayed a certain antipathy for slavery, his ruling in the *Zong* case had nothing to do with an abolitionist crusade. Rather, it was due to his desire to uphold his reading of maritime law (Smith & Friedman, 2014). In fact, Mansfield refused to acknowledge that the criminal act of murder had been carried out, and restricted himself to the question of insurance. He ruled in favor of the insurers because evidence was provided that showed the ship had ample opportunity to stock up on water and, therefore, the captain was unable to claim insurance for his incompetence. This was not a moral crusade against slavery, and as Krikler (2007) explains,

Mansfield emphasizes that the slaves are property to be treated by the parties concerned as no different from any other animate chattel. In effect, he kills the victims of the *Zong* a second time. The slave-traders had physically destroyed them in the massacre; Mansfield refused them a posthumous human existence under the law. (p. 37)

To some extent, the film itself “kills the victims” a third time as it discursively endorses this line of thinking, with the emphasis of finding evidence that the captain was at fault for the lack of water on board. There is no suggestion in the film that this should be a murder trial, it is limited by the logic of Mansfield’s courtroom: that slaves are legally chattel and should be treated as such. Even so, *Belle* paints the case and Mansfield as abolitionist heroes. In the scene where Mansfield gives his ruling, he quotes the following lines to give the impression that it was an issue of principle and morality:

The state of slavery is of such a nature, that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political; but only positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasion, and the time itself from whence it was created, is erased from memory: It’s so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law.

The only problem is that these words were never uttered in the *Zong* case; they are taken from a ruling in an earlier case that Mansfield presided over. Although it may represent his views on slavery, in the case of the *Zong*, which the film is centered on, Mansfield provides a legal justification for the murder of slaves and sides with the insurers on a technicality. The weight of the quote being used in the movie is to present an alternative narrative, one that places Mansfield at the center of abolition. As with *Amazing Grace*, this White savior narrative works to deny Black agency and is a key ingredient of the psychosis of Whiteness.

Britain Was Involved in Abolition, Not Slavery

The Mansfield quote above is taken from his ruling the case of James Somerset in 1772. This was a case of an enslaved African in Britain whose master wanted to send him to Jamaica to be sold (Finkleman, 1994). Mansfield ruled that slavery was contrary to English common law and that Somerset could not be sent to Jamaica and must be set free. The result of the ruling was to effectively outlaw slavery in England, however in practice this did not happen. In keeping with the *Zong* ruling, and his overall judicial career, Mansfield strictly applied the law of the land in his ruling. In English law, there was no provision legitimizing the practice of slavery and, therefore, the courts could not uphold it. It is telling that in the quote he twice mentions “positive law,” saying that only a direct statute from parliament could be enough to legalize slavery in England, and as none such existed, it was illegal. However, from his ruling in the *Zong* case and, his insistence here, it is clear that had such a law existed, he would have enforced it like any other. The most important distinction in this case, however, is the clear separation between English law and that of the Empire. Mansfield and the courts were keen to insist on certain laws in England that simply were not applied elsewhere. Mansfield’s ruling had no bearing on the legal basis of slavery in the Empire, or even for the maritime law that

was so pivotal in the Zong case. A key distortion recurrent in the psychosis of Whiteness is the distancing of Britain from the horrors of African enslavement.

In the psychosis of Whiteness, slavery happened elsewhere and is not part of Britain's legacy, whose role in slavery was to abolish it, something that the whole nation should be proud of. Prime Minister David Cameron outlined this view when arguing against Scottish independence in 2015, he claimed that Britain was a nation worth saving because breaking it up "would be the end of a country that launched the Enlightenment, that abolished slavery, that drove the industrial revolution, that defeated fascism." It is this view of Britain's role in slavery that spilled over in the "celebrations" of the bicentennial of the abolition of the British slave trade in 2007. Rupprecht (2008) captures the spirit of these celebrations when describing a large-scale event in London, which involved a contemporary warship sailing down the Thames, accompanied by a replica of the Zong. The event was titled "Free at Last: The Spirit of Wilberforce" and she explains how

The combined might of the military, church and state had come together to commemorate their own historic roles in the abolition of the slave trade. It also seemed to be a straightforward exercise in reinforcing the image of the British Navy as the global humanitarian maritime police swathed in imperial nostalgia. (p. 267)

Rupprecht perfectly captures the discourse underlying the two films, which are celebrations of abolition, rather than explorations of slavery. Imperial nostalgia is resplendent from the outset in both films as they are set in the grandeur of wealthy 18th-century London. In both films, the majority of the action takes place in the grand estates and mansions of the nobility. The attention to details with the ornate costumes and staging gives the films the appearance of being period dramas. In keeping with the genre, they both have a love story narrative running throughout the film. In fact, Amma Asante (2014) who directed *Belle* explained that she wanted to give "little [Black] girls" a protagonist "who wore those clothes, the fine silks and the lovely jewellery and who was the love interest" in the "romance of the Austen-esque British drama." She very much embraced the "production design, the costumes, just the entire romance of it all." No setting for films about slavery could be so far removed from the horrific reality of the system. Before its release, *Belle* had been billed as the "British version of *Twelve Years a Slave*" in the press (Doward, 2014). The contrast between the two films, however, could not be any sharper. The American project focuses on the brutality of enslavement, while the British version eschewed any scenes of violence, or in fact, slavery at all.

Deepening the "nostalgia," both films engage with key foundations stones of the progressive Britain narrative. *Amazing Grace* engages in the crucible of the House of Commons, where Wilberforce has to battle to make the abolitionist case. By the end of the film, he has won over the house who applaud his endeavors and life's work. The epitome of imperial pomp is presented in the closing scene from the film. While words on the screen tell the viewer that Wilberforce's fight for a better world was successful, the camera opens up a shot of a British army regiment of bagpipers, in full dress, playing the song *Amazing Grace* outside Westminster Abbey. This heraldic ending of the film reinforces the idea that Wilberforce's victory was a victory for Britain, the country that "ended the slave trade."

In *Belle*, the key setting is the British court system, and in considering the Zong case, we are treated to scenes set in historic settings as Mansfield deliberates and rules. As with *Amazing Grace*, there is a key discourse being presented that the victory in the case is one for the British legal system, which *Belle* puts forward as being central in the abolition of the slavery.

It is not a coincidence that these settings are used in the films because they work to distance period drama Britain being presented and the brutal system of slavery. In rewriting the narrative of Britain's involvement in the slavery, the system becomes something that happened elsewhere, in the colonies and not in the nation itself. Across both films, there is only one

enslaved African that we see on British soil. He is owned by one of Wilberforce's enemies, the Duke of Clarence who calls for an aide to "fetch his Nigger" and offers him up in a bet with Wilberforce. Part of the reason the scene is memorable is because it is so exceptional, and though it tacitly admits that slavery happened in Britain, it is presented as so controversial, and outrageous, that the film presents the idea that keeping slaves in Britain was not commonplace. Other than the ghosts that haunt Wilberforce, the other Black characters in the movie are a freed slave (Equiano), a maid and Belle, the English lady. If the only knowledge that a viewer had of slavery in Britain came from watching these two films, they could be forgiven for assuming that slavery never happened on British soil. In reality, at the time Mansfield gave his 1783 ruling, he estimated that there were at least 15,000 enslaved Africans in Britain (Finkleman, 1994).

It's About Class Isn't It?

Another key element of the psychosis of Whiteness is to minimize the importance of racism in society. There has been a post-racial turn in how problems are understood, and a key element to this is to argue that other factors are more important than racism. Class is key to the psychosis because the idea that poor Whites suffer equally to or worse than Black communities allows issues of racism to be obfuscated. *Belle* consistently reinforces this discourse throughout the film.

We are introduced to Belle in the opening scene in which her father rescues her from a slum, telling her, "I am here to take you to a good life, a life that you were born to." He then leaves her with Lord Mansfield, while he undertakes a voyage and she is raised in the splendor of the Mansfield Estate. The film does not entirely ignore the racism that she faces. Among other things, Belle is forced to eat dinner out of sight when guests come and it is made clear to her that she will never be able to marry because of her color. However, through the relationship with her cousin, Elizabeth Murray, who was also brought up by the Mansfields, the film creates a discursive position that minimizes the impact of race in comparison with class and gender.

In the film, Elizabeth Murray is portrayed as a lady in title but absent of wealth. She is raised by Mansfield but her father has left her no estate to speak of. One of the main narratives of the story is her fruitless search for a husband. She is consistently rejected as "pennyless" and, therefore, not a good match for prospective husbands. Her rejection by suitors is in direct contrast to Belle, who was led to believe she would never marry. However, in the film, her father dies at sea, leaving her a substantial inheritance of £2,000 a year. This provides the sharp contrast of fortunes of Belle and Elizabeth in the narrative. One of the suitors, Lord Ashford, who eventually rejects Elizabeth, courts Belle because of her fortune. This causes much friction between the two cousins, and when Elizabeth tells Belle that she is beneath the Lord because of her color, Belle's response is "it is not me who is beneath him." Clearly being constructed in this narrative is that Belle's wealth overrides the privileges of her cousin's Whiteness. In the end, Belle chooses to reject the Lord so that she can marry the person she loves, the clerk to Lord Mansfield who stokes her abolitionist passions. The problem with the narrative, however, is that it is entirely false, a hallucination by the filmmakers caused by the psychosis of Whiteness.

In reality, Belle and Elizabeth did not enjoy equal status or wealth in the Mansfield household. Adams (1984) explains how Elizabeth's annual allowance from the Mansfields was five times that of Belle's, who received slightly more than a First Coachman would have done at the time. Although Belle did receive an inheritance that would support her from Lord Mansfield when he died, her annual allowance was £100, not £2,000 (King, 2004).

Regarding the marriage narrative, Elizabeth Murray had no problem finding a husband, marrying at the age of 20, and leaving Belle still living in the Mansfield Estate. Although Belle did marry John Davinier, his representation of him in the film is entirely fictitious. Little is

known about him, and her marriage took place after Lord Mansfield had died in 1793, 10 years after her cousin had left (King, 2004). The jealousy of her cousin toward Belle was a narrative that was purposefully brought into the film by the writer. It works to create an entirely false impression as to the status of Belle and her Blackness, an impression that presents as a delusion of the psychosis of Whiteness.

Another narrative that has a strong discursive role in the film is that of gender oppression. Lady Elizabeth's plight is largely tied to her gender, as she is dependent on a husband for her future. Belle rides along on her fictional tour of different estates to find a suitor and we are introduced to marriage as a transaction. Belle succumbs to this logic and agrees to marry Lord Ashford, spurning her true desire. At one point in the film, she equates the bondage of gender to that of slavery, lamenting to her cousin that "we are but their property." It is this intersection of class and gender that makes Lady Elizabeth's character so downtrodden. She is unable to break the shackles of her gender, because of the limitations of her class. She ends up engaged to the brother of Lord Ashford, who is presented as a villainous character who attacked Belle. Lord Ashford even ends up spurning Lady Elizabeth, who only learns of this when she reads about his marriage to another woman in the newspaper. This is in complete contrast to Belle's romantic fortunes, who changes her mind about marrying Lord Ashford and follows her heart to marry the fictional Davinier. By the end of the film, Belle has managed to overcome both her race and gender oppression to the point where she pushes through the all-White male crowd at the courthouse to see the momentous ruling from Lord Mansfield on the Zong case. Her class has cleansed her of racial oppression and she is free to take her place in the world. It is these kinds of celluloid hallucinations that underpin the psychosis of Whiteness.

Conclusion

Whiteness cannot be reasoned with through rational teachings and debate. It is a psychosis, hallmarked by a distorted view of reality that is in part reinforced by producing self-affirming hallucinations. For Whiteness, these hallucinations take place on screen, by presenting distorted narratives and interpretations of history. This article has considered how the only two British major motion pictures about the transatlantic slave trade present as such celluloid hallucinations, feeding the psychosis of Whiteness.

Both *Amazing Grace* and *Belle* depend on remarkably similar discursive devices to minimize the legacy of slavery for Britain. In these British period dramas, far removed from the savagery of slavery, Britain is constructed as active in the fight to end the unjust slave system. Black agency, and even Black characters, are drained from the narratives to present Britain and Whiteness in the role of savior. Race is diminished as a form of oppression for more overarching issues such as class and gender. The narratives of both films allow the viewer to feel that slavery was wrong, but that it is in the past and Britain can be proud of its role, and herein lies the purpose of the psychosis.

Western capitalism is built on and sustained by a system of racism that exploits the people and nations of the darker parts of the globe. It is also sustained by a series of myths of progress and enlightenment about the good that the West has wrought. The dissonance between the reality and these myths is too great for the system to survive, so Whiteness becomes a psychosis that prevents society from engaging in the disturbing reality. This psychosis of Whiteness is essential to understand when fighting racism. There is no rational argument to those trapped in a psychosis, as there is no reasoning with Whiteness. Until the conditions that create Whiteness are destroyed, the psychosis will govern the thoughts and actions of Western society.

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