

Hegemony and Service

Questions:

What is the role of North Americans in responding to crises in other countries?

Teju Cole, Nigerian-American author and photographer, coined the term “White-Savior Industrial Complex” to describe what he regarded as the United States’ posture toward global crises. His use of the term appeared in his now infamous seven-part Twitter response to the Kony2012 video phenomena:

- “From Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to Ted, the fastest growth industry in the US in the White Savior Industrial Complex.”
- “The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.”
- “The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm.”
- “This world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people and Oprah.”
- “The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.”
- “Feverish worry over that awful African warlord. But close to 1.5 million Iraqis died from an American war of choice. Worry about that.”
- “I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.”

Having read Cole’s brief response (that was retweeted thousands of times and had hundreds of Facebook posts), think about Conor’s journey to Little Prince’s and his efforts at returning children to their parents. What emotions does Cole’s analysis evoke for you? Write these thoughts on the board or in a journal. Explain why Cole’s analysis, which can be applied to Conor’s work, makes you feel this way.

Now let’s look a little more closely at Cole’s statements:

(You may want to read Teju Cole’s article, “The White Savior Industrial Complex” in The Atlantic Magazine where he elaborates on his response.

- What do you think he means when he uses the term “white savior”?
- Why does he talk about US interventions in troubled areas as a “growth industry”?
- Why does he disparage sentimentality and enthusiasm as motivations for action?
- Why does he describe American sentimentality as “deadly”?
- How is helping a validation of privilege? (And what does he mean by “privilege”?)
- How does his reference to the Iraq war fit into this whole response?

When you unpack Cole’s language, do you get a better sense of his point of view? What might be influencing his perspective?

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Back to Conor. Use Cole's tweets to critically reflect on the book.

- Can you identify examples from the book where Conor might be seen as motivated by sentimentality or enthusiasm?
- How is his work enabled by American privilege?
- Revisit the subtitle of the book: *One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*. Is this a promise he can make? What assumptions are embedded in this statement?
- Did you wonder why the Nepalese people weren't doing more to bring home the kidnapped children?

- Read this review of *Little Prince's* by Kevin Wolfe who has worked in child welfare in Nepal for a dozen years :

There's a couple points I would like to make that I hope will provide readers and future readers with some perspective, not just on the issue of child trafficking and Mr. Grennan's work, but also matters of development and how we represent those who we would help.

First, in my experience, Mr. Grennan overstates the problem of child trafficking in Nepal. I realize this is a statement that will raise many objections. Even one is too many! I agree. Why does Mr. Grennan overstate the problem? For one, it makes for a better drama and serves to validate his work and the organization that has sprouted up around it. I am not saying trafficking does not occur. I know first-hand that it does. But here's the harsher reality... many families knowingly relinquish their children because they simply cannot afford to keep them. Of course, when confronted with the news that their children were not given education and/or care as the traffickers promised, they exclaim outrage or disbelief.

However, I am not criticizing these Nepalese families at all. They live in a poverty we in the US cannot imagine. Ground down day by day, having to work every day of their lives just to subsist. Working harder in every day of their lives than most of us know in a single day. It's a constant feeling of treading water with a pack on your back and no coastline in sight. If someone came offering to alleviate your burden, you might be inclined to believe that person--even if you had suspicions.

Second, and to me this is the more troubling matter, there are people and organizations in Nepal who have been doing this work for a long time but haven't gotten the recognition (Anuradha Koirala is a lone exception), nor do they seek the recognition that Mr. Grennan would capitalize on for his personal (yes, personal) gain. Yes, he has helped reunite some cheated families with their children and this is a great and wonderful and worthwhile thing he has accomplished. But there something unseemly about (yet another) white person from the West who goes to a poor country to enlighten the rest of the world to their plight. Another white Jesus to help the feckless natives. Yes, perhaps a few more people are touched and made aware by his story, but in the end this tale does little more than position Mr. Grennan for more acclaim, more opportunity, while the forces that contribute to child trafficking (inequality--gender, wealth) continue unabated. Meanwhile, the Nepalese toil, as they always have done, with too few resources at their disposal. In the end, this book (and his earlier NGN blog, now defunct) reads like a narrative with Nepalese cast in one of two roles: villainous or easily duped, while Mr. Grennan represents himself as the bright-eyed, hard-scrabble young'un--making mistakes, self-effacing and humble, yes, but his pure heart will prevail.

Child trafficking is abominable, but the reality is much more complex. However, we don't want to read that story in the US... the one about global inequality, excessive Western consumption, and people half a world away living in such terrible poverty that they are forced to "play" the dupe in order to have one less mouth to feed. Putting this as delicately as I can... it seems to lack a certain grace to valorize oneself (One Man's Promise...) on top of other people's misfortune.

If you would really like to do something to fight child trafficking... make the extra effort and find some Nepalese organization already involved in that work... try [Maiti Nepal](#) for starters. The Nepalese can fight their own fight... but they need your help. Not the help of some Westerner who takes most of the credit.

- If you were to summarize Mr. Wolfe's points, what would they be? What context does he bring to his review of the book, and to the question of the role of Americans abroad?
- Mr. Wolfe's review was one of 267 reviews on Amazon—99% of which were positive. Does the overwhelming popularity of the book give it greater authority than critical reviews such as Wolfe's? Why do **you** think American readers have responded so positively to *Little Princes*?