The White-Savior Industrial Complex

By Teju Cole

If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement.

Left, Invisible Children's Jason Russell. Right, a protest leader in Lagos, Nigeria / Facebook, AP

A week and a half ago, I watched the Kony2012 video. Afterward, I wrote a brief seven-part response, which I posted in sequence on my Twitter account:

Teju Cole
@tejucole

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1- From Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to TED, the fastest growth industry in the US is the White Savior Industrial Complex.

12:33 PM - 8 Mar 2012

1,146 RETWEETS **380** FAVORITES

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2- The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.

12:34 PM - 8 Mar 2012

1,095 RETWEETS **432** FAVORITES

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3- The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm.

12:35 PM - 8 Mar 2012

744 RETWEETS **282** FAVORITES

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4- This world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people and Oprah.

12:36 PM - 8 Mar 2012

651 RETWEETS **255** FAVORITES

These tweets were retweeted, forwarded, and widely shared by readers. They migrated beyond Twitter to blogs, Tumblr, Facebook, and other sites; I'm told they generated fierce arguments. As the days went by, the tweets were reproduced in their entirety on the websites of the *Atlantic* and the *New York Times*, and they showed up on German, Spanish, and Portuguese sites. A friend emailed to tell me that the fourth tweet, which cheekily name-checks Oprah, was mentioned on Fox television.

These sentences of mine, written without much premeditation, had touched a nerve. I heard back from many people who were grateful to have read them. I heard back from many others who were disappointed or furious. Many people, too many to count, called me a racist. One person likened me to the Mau Mau. The Atlantic writer who'd reproduced them, while agreeing with my broader points, described the language in which they were expressed as "resentment."

This weekend, I listened to a radio interview given by the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nicholas

Kristof. Kristof is best known for his regular column in the *New York Times* in which he often gives accounts of his activism or that of other Westerners. When I saw the Kony 2012 video, I found it tonally similar to Kristof's approach, and that was why I mentioned him in the first of my seven tweets.

Those tweets, though unpremeditated, were intentional in their irony and seriousness. I did not write them to score cheap points, much less to hurt anyone's feelings. I believed that a certain kind of language is too infrequently seen in our public discourse. I am a novelist. I traffic in subtleties, and my goal in writing a novel is to leave the reader not knowing what to think. A good novel shouldn't have a point.

But there's a place in the political sphere for direct speech and, in the past few years in the U.S., there has been a chilling effect on a certain kind of direct speech pertaining to rights. The president is wary of being seen as the "angry black man." People of color, women, and gays -- who now have greater access to the centers of influence that ever before -- are under pressure to be well-behaved when talking about their struggles. There is an expectation that we can talk about sins but no one must be identified as a sinner: newspapers love to describe words or deeds as "racially charged" even in those cases when it would be more honest to say "racist"; we agree that there is rampant misogyny, but misogynists are nowhere to be found; homophobia is a problem but no one is homophobic. One cumulative effect of this policed language is that when someone dares to point out something as obvious as white privilege, it is seen as unduly provocative. Marginalized voices in America have fewer and fewer avenues to speak plainly about what they suffer; the effect of this enforced civility is that those voices are falsified or blocked entirely from the discourse.

It's only in the context of this neutered language that my rather tame tweets can be seen as extreme. The interviewer on the radio show I listened to asked Kristof if he had heard of me. "Of course," he said. She asked him what he made of my criticisms. His answer was considered and genial, but what he said worried me more than an

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> There has been a real discomfort and backlash among middle-class educated Africans, Ugandans in particular in this case, but people more broadly, about having Africa as they see it defined by a warlord who does particularly brutal things, and about the perception that Americans are going to ride in on a white horse and resolve it. To me though, it seems even more uncomfortable to think that we as white Americans should not intervene in a humanitarian disaster because the victims are of a different skin color.

Here are some of the "middle-class educated Africans" Kristof, whether he is familiar with all of them and their work or not, chose to take issue with: Ugandan journalist Rosebell Kagumire, who covered the Lord's Resistance Army in 2005 and made an eloquent video response to Kony 2012; Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani, one of the world's leading specialists on Uganda and the author of a thorough riposte to the political wrong-headedness of Invisible Children; and Ethiopian-American novelist Dinaw Mengestu, who sought out Joseph Kony, met his lieutenants, and recently wrote a brilliant essay about how Kony 2012 gets the issues wrong. They have a different take on what Kristof calls a "humanitarian disaster," and this may be because they see the larger disasters behind it: militarization of poorer countries, short-sighted agricultural policies, resource extraction, the propping up of corrupt governments, and the astonishing complexity of long-running violent conflicts over a wide and varied terrain.

I want to tread carefully here: I do not accuse Kristof of racism nor do I believe he is in any way racist. I have no doubt that he has a good heart. Listening to him on the radio, I began to think we could iron the whole thing out over a couple of beers. But that, precisely, is what worries me. That is what made me compare American sentimentality to a "wounded hippo." His good heart does not always allow him to think constellationally. He does not connect the dots or see the patterns of power behind the isolated "disasters." All he sees are hungry mouths, and he, in his own advocacy-by-journalism way, is putting food in those mouths as fast as he can. All he sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for the need.

But I disagree with the approach taken by Invisible Children in particular, and by the White Savior Industrial Complex in general, because there is much more to doing good work than "making a difference." There is the principle of first do no harm. There is the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them.

I write all this from multiple positions. I write as an African, a black man living in America. I am every day subject to the many microaggressions of American racism. I also write this as an American, enjoying the many privileges that the American passport affords and that residence in this country makes possible. I involve myself in this critique of privilege: my own privileges of class, gender, and sexuality are insufficiently examined. My cell phone was likely manufactured by poorly treated workers in a Chinese factory. The coltan in the phone can probably be traced to the conflict-riven Congo. I don't fool myself that I am not implicated in these transnational networks of oppressive practices.

And I also write all this as a novelist and story-writer: I am sensitive to the power of narratives. When Jason Russell, narrator of the Kony 2012 video, showed his cheerful blonde toddler a photo of Joseph Kony as the embodiment of evil (a glowering dark man), and of his friend Jacob as the representative of helplessness (a sweet-faced African), I wondered how Russell's little boy would develop a nuanced sense of the lives of others, particularly others of a different race from his own. How would that little boy come to understand that others have autonomy; that their right to life is not exclusive of a right to self-respect? In a different context, John Berger once wrote, "A singer may be innocent; never the song."

One song we hear too often is the one in which Africa serves as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism. From the colonial project to *Out of Africa* to *The Constant Gardener* and Kony 2012, Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected. It is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied. Many have done it under the banner of "making a difference." To state this obvious and well-attested truth does not make me a racist or a Mau Mau. It does give me away as an "educated middle-class African," and I plead guilty as charged. (It is also worth noting that there are other educated middle-class Africans who see this matter differently from me. That is what people, educated and otherwise, do: they assess information and sometimes disagree with each other.)

In any case, Kristof and I are in profound agreement about one thing: there is much happening in many parts of the African continent that is not as it ought to be. I have been fortunate in life, but that doesn't mean I haven't seen or experienced African poverty first-hand. I grew up in a land of military coups and economically devastating, IMF-imposed "structural adjustment" programs. The genuine hurt of Africa is no fiction.

And we also agree on something else: that there is an internal ethical urge that demands that each of us serve justice as much as he or she can. But beyond the immediate attention that he rightly pays hungry mouths, child soldiers, or raped civilians, there are more complex and more widespread problems. There are serious problems of governance, of infrastructure, of democracy, and of law and order. These problems are neither simple in themselves nor are they reducible to slogans. Such problems are both intricate and intensely local.

How, for example, could a well-meaning American "help" a place like Uganda today? It begins, I believe, with some humility with regards to the people in those places. It begins with some respect for the agency of the people of Uganda in their own lives. A great deal of work had been done, and continues to be done, by Ugandans to improve their own country, and ignorant comments (I've seen many) about how "we have to save them because they can't save themselves" can't change that fact.

Let me draw into this discussion an example from an African country I know very well. Earlier this year, hundreds of thousands of Nigerians took to their country's streets to protest the government's decision to remove a subsidy on petrol. This subsidy was widely seen as one of the few blessings of the country's otherwise catastrophic oil wealth. But what made these protests so heartening is that they were about more than the subsidy removal. Nigeria has one of the most corrupt governments in the

world and protesters clearly demanded that something be done about this. The protests went on for days, at considerable personal risk to the protesters. Several young people were shot dead, and the movement was eventually doused when union leaders capitulated and the army deployed on the streets. The movement did not "succeed" in conventional terms. But something important had changed in the political consciousness of the Nigerian populace. For me and for a number of people I know, the protests gave us an opportunity to be proud of Nigeria, many of us for the first time in our lives.

This is not the sort of story that is easy to summarize in an article, much less make a viral video about. After all, there is no simple demand to be made and -- since corruption is endemic -- no single villain to topple. There is certainly no "bridge character," Kristof's euphemism for white saviors in Third World narratives who make the story more palatable to American viewers. And yet, the story of Nigeria's protest movement is one of the most important from sub-Saharan Africa so far this year. Men and women, of all classes and ages, stood up for what they felt was right; they marched peacefully; they defended each other, and gave each other food and drink; Christians stood guard while Muslims prayed and vice-versa; and they spoke without fear to their leaders about the kind of country they wanted to see. All of it happened with no cool American 20-something heroes in sight.

Joseph Kony is no longer in Uganda and he is no longer the threat he was, but he is a convenient villain for those who need a convenient villain. What Africa needs more pressingly than Kony's indictment is more equitable civil society, more robust democracy, and a fairer system of justice. This is the scaffolding from which infrastructure, security, healthcare, and education can be built. How do we encourage voices like those of the Nigerian masses who marched this January, or those who are engaged in the struggle to develop Ugandan democracy?

If Americans want to care about Africa, maybe they should consider evaluating American foreign policy, which they already play a direct role in through elections, before they impose themselves on Africa itself. The fact of the matter is that Nigeria is one of the top five oil suppliers to the U.S., and American policy is interested first and foremost in the flow of that oil. The American government did not see fit to support the Nigeria protests. (Though the State Department issued a supportive statement -- "our view on that is that the Nigerian people have the right to peaceful protest, we want to see them protest peacefully, and we're also urging the Nigerian security services to respect the right of popular protest and conduct themselves professionally in dealing with the strikes" -- it reeked of boilerplate rhetoric and, unsurprisingly, nothing tangible came of it.) This was as expected; under the banner of "American interests," the oil comes first. Under that same banner, the livelihood of corn farmers in Mexico has been destroyed by NAFTA. Haitian rice farmers have suffered appalling losses due to Haiti being flooded with subsidized American rice. A nightmare has been playing out in Honduras in the past three years: an American-backed coup and American militarization of that country have contributed to a conflict in which hundreds of activists and journalists have already been murdered. The Egyptian military, which is now suppressing the country's once-hopeful movement for democracy and killing dozens of activists in the process, subsists on $1.3 billion in annual U.S. aid. This is a litany that will be familiar to some. To others, it will be news. But, familiar or not, it has a bearing on our notions of innocence and our right to "help."

Let us begin our activism right here: with the money-driven villainy at the heart of American foreign policy. To do this would be to give up the illusion that the sentimental need to "make a difference" trumps all other considerations. What innocent heroes don't always understand is that they play a useful role for people who have much more cynical motives. The White Savior Industrial Complex is a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage. We can participate in the economic destruction of Haiti over long years, but when the earthquake strikes it feels good to send $10 each to the rescue fund. I have no opposition, in principle, to such donations (I frequently make them myself), but we must do such things only with awareness of what else is involved. If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement.

Success for Kony 2012 would mean increased militarization of the anti-democratic Yoweri Museveni government, which has been in power in Uganda since 1986 and has played a major role in the world's deadliest ongoing conflict, the war in the Congo. But those whom privilege allows to deny constellational thinking would enjoy ignoring this fact. There are other troubling connections, not least of them being that Museveni appears to be a U.S. proxy in its shadowy battles against militants in Sudan and, especially, in Somalia. Who sanctions these conflicts? Under whose authority and oversight are they conducted? Who is being killed and why?

All of this takes us rather far afield from fresh-faced young Americans using the power of YouTube, Facebook, and pure enthusiasm to change the world. A singer may be innocent; never the song.