An excerpt from
**American Liberation Mythologies: Democracy & Domination in U.S. Visual Culture**
By Kathleen M. Williams, Ph.D.

**Part II: Myths of Intervention**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3: The Strongest of Mythic Imperative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slotkin's Myth of the Frontier                  5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual of the Nation                           9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regeneration Through Consumption               13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4: Violent Intervention – <em>Tears of the Sun</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An Example from the Genre                           18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediating between Terror and Security               21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terror and Economic Segregation                     24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 5: Economic Intervention – <em>Idol Gives Back</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performing Compassion                                29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representing Poverty and Charity                     32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumerism’s Alibi                                  36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.................................................................... 41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Endnotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.................................................................... 42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Part II

Myths of Intervention

“Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence...To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering...is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.”

Susan Sontag

Regarding the Pain of Others

Through both politics and entertainment, U.S. culture declares an identity of liberator to the world's oppressed by repeatedly performing myths of intervention that draw upon the national heritage of frontier mythology. These national efforts of intervention toward liberation assume a strategy of either violence or economics, the performance of which masks the perpetuation of global domination and sustains historically generated inequalities through the repetition of mythic paradigms. In the first chapter of this section, I detail the tradition out of which the contemporary myth of liberation emerges through reference to the scholarship of Richard Slotkin. Here I affirm the structural relationship between violence and economics as well as amend his frontier thesis to include regeneration through consumption. Then, taking one example from the repertoire of cinematic violent interventions, I conduct a myth analysis that presents the prominent binary of terror-security as unexpectedly linked to the economic segregation of the global community. An analysis of economic intervention, in the form of a televised charity drive, demonstrates the racialized binary of poverty-prosperity in which U.S.
generosity can function as an alibi for exploitation by global capital and the consumer culture made possible through the impoverishment of others. U.S. culture’s myth of liberation performs two primary functions of myth: to naturalize and to justify. Economic and violent interventions into the affairs of other societies naturalize global inequality and justify U.S. privilege within the global socio-economic system.
Chapter 3

The Strongest of Mythic Imperatives

Richard Slotkin has contributed greatly to American studies by investigating the mythic traditions of Anglo-America that have historically dominated U.S. culture, both popular and political. Through a careful examination of narratives situated in their historical contexts, Slotkin perceived an adaptive mytho-political pattern centered on the community’s real and imagined experiences of the frontier. Following the adaptation of the captivity narratives of the Puritans, through to the hunter-hero epics of continental expansion, past the vigilante tales of industrialization, into the long era of westerns, disrupted by the cultural upheavals associated with the Vietnam War and into the nostalgic cowboy presidency of Ronald Reagan, Slotkin proved that the myth of the frontier is a powerful, indeed dominant, force within the culture of the United States. Four hundred years after the beginnings of the Puritan press, capture/rescue scenarios still abound in media ranging from action films (Rambo III, Taken), to children’s cartoons (Finding Nemo, Go Diegos Go, The Wonder Pets), to military engagements abroad (Iraq, Libya, Uganda). Citizens present and perform a mythic compulsion to rescue those in trouble, to liberate others from the snares of oppression, injustice and ill fortune. Such rescues, Slotkin notes, are overwhelmingly achieved through violence. The consistency of the use of violence in both entertainment and government action to achieve the stated ends of rescue or liberation led Slotkin to declare warfare as the ritual of transformation that regenerates the body politic. Noting the mythic import of regeneration through violence is Slotkin’s primary contribution to American studies. However, focusing on the history of media and politics, Slotkin’s expansive effort gives little attention to the related history of economics. Despite his assertion that the two main components of frontier mythology are the logic of boom economics and savage warfare, his thesis on regeneration through violence largely dismisses the related patterns of consumption that all regeneration depends upon. Nevertheless, Slotkin’s
contribution to American studies cannot be overestimated. This section describes the common constituent elements of the myth of the frontier, explains how warfare can be understood as a ritual of regeneration, and presents an amendment to Slotkin’s thesis by asserting the significance of consumption in patterns of regeneration. Attending to Slotkin’s contributions to American studies positions the present study within its cultural and academic heritages while adjusting our understanding of U.S. myth to include the often-effaced process of consumption.

Slotkin’s Myth of the Frontier

In three expansive volumes, Richard Slotkin traces the development of a national mythology for the United States by investigating the dominant scenarios of the nation’s narrative traditions. His scholarship follows four hundred years of the entertainment industry’s development and compares the changes in both literature and film with the cotemporaneous realms of political society. Slotkin primarily argues that myth is a kind of historical memory and that the national mythic tradition thrives under a master trope of the frontier. The nation’s founding over more than two centuries of cultural and economic expansion across an unfamiliar continent, followed by a century and a half of economic and military engagement beyond geographical boundaries resulted in the concept of “the frontier” as the loci of cultural interpretations and political understandings. The frontier became a set of symbols and scenarios by which citizens have made sense of their world. Some key components of the myth of the frontier as discerned by Slotkin are capture/rescue scenarios, the hunter-hero, and the use of violence in resolving conflict. This section articulates the recurring aspects of the myth of the frontier in order to establish the heritage from which contemporary culture derives, and provides an historical context for the media that is analyzed in this study.

Slotkin begins his narrative of a developing national myth with the Puritans because their early settler experiences and their strong literary tradition left us with the mythic scenario of capture and rescue that continues to dominate mythic discourse. Having preferred the word
of God to the deeds of man, the Puritans started some of the first printing presses of New England, thereby leaving a strong mark upon the archive of U.S. culture. Slotkin notes that the early literature of the Puritans expressed the group’s anxiety over their emigration, their new environment and their religious worldview. He concludes that the scenario that dominated the Puritan experience was one of captivity and rescue. Reflecting the physical/political realities of intercultural conflict and a stifling socio-religious order, scenarios of captivity and rescue became allegories for spiritual turmoil and renewal. Referring to John Williams’ *The Redeemed Captive* and Mary Rowlandson’s narrative (1682) Slotkin explains how the European female who was captured and rescued stood for the imagined moral and economic superiority of Puritan or European traditions while the Indian man came to symbolize the darker side of humanity, the temptation to sin and the forsaking of God and righteousness. As Slotkin describes it, the female captive’s errand into the wilderness, into savagery, followed by her release and salvation, began the national mythology of regeneration through violence. The racist and gendered roles archived in the earliest of U.S. literature persist today in only slightly modified form; while referents change along with the times a repertoire of cultural meanings persists into the present.

Slotkin’s narration of the history of the nation through an analysis of both literature and political reality offers a historical consciousness attuned to the sanctioned actions of heroes as mediators between savagery and civilization. Slotkin evinces that the narratives of James Fennimore Cooper, which were created during the period when increased emigration pushed European settlements inland from the Eastern seaboard, provided a standard out of which the heroes of U.S. mythology developed because Cooper’s *Leatherstocking* acted as a mediator between the Indians as “disappearing” “noble savages” and the rising civilization of Euro-America. Then, settlements expanded beyond Appalachia and the hero’s quest shifted toward a frontiersman’s narrative of settlement; through a close reading of John Filson’s, “The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon” in *Kentucke* (1784), Slotkin demonstrates how the forests of the
eastern continent emerged in the mythology, and in society, as a site of physical and spiritual renewal for the protagonist hunter-hero who would lead the way for civilization’s advance. As the nation industrialized and acquired the land west of the Mississippi River, Slotkin points out within the correlated literature, that authors equated industrial labor with slavery or created the vigilante-hero of the western deserts who was willing to operate outside the bounds of law and order to achieve his goals. After the Civil War, Slotkin demonstrates, national heroes became military figures endowed with an ideology of paternalism that - in an example of how mythic thought often precedes reality - found full embodiment in the military and political career of Theodor Roosevelt. While the hero as hunter and leader certainly did not originate with the developing culture of the U.S., Slotkin’s scholarship, following the historical arch of the hero’s transformation within national culture from Indian-fighter to frontiersman to vigilante and military man, explains the mythic prominence of certain heroic features that remain with us today.

Moving into the 20th century, Slotkin turns his attention to the film industry as the dominant form of cultural expression in order to explain the further rise, fall, and “recrudescence” of frontier mythology. The Western, Slotkin asserts, was the most prominent genre in the first half-century of Hollywood production with plots that privileged the historical experiences of very few U.S. families and taught viewers to interpret conflict along racial lines. The pervasiveness of the Frontier mythology was so extensive by mid-century, evidenced by the Kennedy administration’s use of its logic to both start the space program and attempt to end poverty, that Slotkin insists the myth of the Frontier lead the nation into the Vietnam War. In his analysis, the failure of that war - particularly the revelation of the My-lai massacre - destroyed the legitimacy of frontier mythology and its correlated ideology of liberal progressivism. However, Hollywood producers and their clientele of the general public could not easily give up the standards of their industry or their national identity as defenders of freedom and righteousness; as Slotkin demonstrates, many elements common to frontier myth
were displaced onto other genres and represented through other symbolic referents. Scenes shifted from the open plains of the 19th century to the city streets and jungles of the 20th; but the demise of frontier mythology did not last long. Slotkin’s analysis of U.S. history interprets the Reagan era as a classic case of postmodern nostalgia because a past that never really existed was remembered through a president who was never really a cowboy but could utilize the language of myth to reactivate the frontier logic of boom economics (this time in real estate and banking) and savage war (Grenada, Nicaragua, etc...). Slotkin’s analysis of the role of frontier mythology in the political and cultural developments of the 20th century demonstrates the intimate relationship between entertainment and political action while also suggesting the fecundity of utilizing myth.

The basic formula of the myth of the frontier developed along with a set of symbols that have persisted in modified forms throughout the centuries. Captives are rescued; hunters fulfill their initiatory quests. Multi-racial regiments show courage and compassion in their last stands. Special Forces and gunfighters resist tyranny. Antagonists are portrayed as racial or religious others compared to the protagonist. While the mid-century revisioning of history from a post-colonial perspective undermined the logic of frontier mythology and knocked the western from its Hollywood pedestal the fundamental formulas of such narratives remained. Cowboys and Indians could no longer serve as metaphors for good and evil but the scenarios did not die altogether. The symbol sets changed after the Vietnam War but what was symbolized remained the same. The hero is Caucasian, mediating between bureaucratic modernity and barbarism. The heroine continues to be victimized, representing threats to civilization. She is passionate, the hero rather cold. The enemy still bears the sign of racial difference but that difference has opened up to the broader world. In a mythic revisioning, the violence continues to regenerate no matter the particularities of the plot.
Ritual of the Nation

Slotkin’s thesis on regeneration through violence and the initiation narratives of frontier mythology indicates that warfare is the ritual of the nation. Although he does not expend much effort to define what he means by ritual, Slotkin’s use of the term suggests a sacredness motivating war with an expected transformation as its result. Conceiving of war as a ritual of regeneration, Slotkin implies a dialectical process between structure and anti-structure in which violence is a liminal condition out of which the nation emerges into an elevated status. The perennial recurrence of war and social violence enacted with a stated benevolence suggests that what is transformed through the ritual of war is not only the nation but the community of its opposition; liberation is not just for the Self, the Other must be liberated as well. In this section I define ritual, paying particular attention to the scholarship of Victor Turner, consider the meaning behind Slotkin’s assertion that warfare is the repeated ritual of the nation, and overview the nation’s history of violent intervention with attendant claims to liberation. Situating warfare within the mythic traditions of U.S. culture leads the way to an understanding of U.S. intervention as one phase of the social dialectic structured upon domination.

Ritual, like any other academic term, has a long and varied history; and as a third generation Turnerian, I define ritual as a dialectical process between structure and anti-structure. Victor Turner’s processual conception of ritual derived from the work of Arnold Van Gennep on diverse rites of passage through which an individual experiences a separation from the normalcy of the social world, endures a period of liminality that does not conform to quotidian structures, and then is reintegrated with a revitalized status. For Turner, the most significant part of the ritual process is the liminal period because the anti-structure that it enacts both reinforces its opposite and provides an opportunity for communitas in contradiction to the olio of stratified society. Liminality is therefore that period “betwixt and between” when the participants weather an interval of immediacy and uncertainty, to then emerge back into the established nomos reshaped and regenerated. The communitas experienced in the interstice of
the ritual process is both the source of regeneration for the participants and an occasion for mythic thought and action.14 The dialectical performance of ritual as the fluctuation between anti-structure (communitas) and structure is the very foundation for the maintenance and transformation of society as well as the elemental progression of plot.15

When Richard Slotkin concludes that the preeminence of frontier mythology has resulted in savage war being the national ritual that achieves regeneration through violence, he draws upon a knowledge of the ancient ritual patterns from which frontier mythology emerged and diverged.16 Slotkin acknowledges the myth/ritual heritage of both Europeans and American Indians in which the hunt is a liminal period, the anti-structure, aimed at achieving a union between either humanity (hunter) and nature (his prey), or humanity and god. The violence of the hunt, in both ancient European and more modern American Indian traditions brings about a kind of communitas between hunter and hunted. However, in the Euro-American context, where the earliest immigrants disdained the “blood rituals” of the Catholic communion, feared the forests for their unfamiliarity, and loathed the thought of cultural syncretism with the communities who called those forests home, Slotkin notes that with the captivity narratives the significance of the ritual hunt shifted; he states that, “the ethic implicit in the captivity myth demands that the wilderness be destroyed so that it can be made safe for the white woman and the civilization she represents.”17 In the early North-American situation, and extending into the present, the ancient myth/ritual of a fusion between humanity and the natural or divine world was rejected in favor of a marriage with civilization, a union that required the decimation of the wilderness. The immigrants’ anxiety over their place in the newly encountered world and their fear of cultural syncretism, Slotkin asserts, “converts the marriage-hunt into an act of murder, violation, repudiation, or exorcism. It converts the initiation into a fall.”18 The ritual liminality of the hunt, in which killing is a necessary step toward communion through the consumption that binds the human hunter to the natural and divine world was transformed in the Euro-American mythology, which sought not a syncretism but a domination. This mythic ritual of enacting
destructive violence in order to preserve and expand civilization has been a prominent scenario of both fiction and politics throughout U.S. history. Warfare as the ritual of the nation engenders a communitas of violence, a rite of passage through which the U.S. emerges not into a structure of unity but into one of domination.¹⁹

When Slotkin calls the hunter’s violence his, “act of love,” he refers to the transformation within our mythic heritage away from the ritual of unity with nature and toward a defense of civilization in which individual freedom and free markets reign. Throughout the national community’s history, a love of liberty has been the reason for performing the liminality of war in efforts to regenerate both culture and economy. Nationals enacted the violence of the Revolutionary War to rescue the colonial population from British political and economic dominance. The Mexican-American War was fought in order to expand the geography of Euro-American civilization and gain control over the natural resources of Northern Mexico. The Civil War, while sanctioned to end the oppression of slavery, was also engaged in as an effort to defend the industrial labor force of the North from economic degradation. Following the Civil War came the - largely ignored within mainstream history - period of the Filibusters who invaded Central and South American territories with stated aims of liberation but actual intentions of re-instituting a slave economy. The last of the Indian Wars finished clearing the continent for Euro-American settlement and finalized the segregation of the Indian population. With the Spanish-American War, citizens claimed to be liberating Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Filipinos from the tyranny of the Spanish crown while also gaining strategic ports in the ever-expanding global trade. The U.S. entered World War I in order to defend both its commercial ships in the northern Atlantic and its southwestern territories that Germany had offered to help Mexico regain. With World War II, soldiers fought off the atrocities of European fascism and kick-started their economy to end the great depression. Then began the Cold War; the U.S. as self-described defenders of the free world did everything in its power to keep the newly decolonizing nations from choosing an economic model of socialism or communism. One year
after the Cold War ended the U.S. began the first of its recent war efforts in the Middle East: first to liberate Kuwait from Iraq, then in Afghanistan to hunt for Osama bin Laden and to offer democracy to that nation’s oppressed peoples, and again in Iraq where we would be greeted as liberators, execute their dictator and establish a democratic government.

Given our historic tendencies to engage in warfare for economic purposes, it has not gone unnoticed that each recent battle arena (including Libya) is blessed – or cursed, depending on your perspective – with the crude oil for which the current style of U.S. civilization has a rapacious need. Justifying war out of a love of liberty and a humanitarian desire to see the world achieve a state of freedom and democracy suggests a certain altruism. Yet the frontier mythology of savage war and boom economics that is our national heritage, with its focus on scenarios of captivity, has resulted in a ritual tradition where violence, as an act of love aimed at rescuing and spreading our own brand of civilization, comes at a high cost to the communities of opposition.

Indeed, the nation regenerates itself through rituals of violence. The military interventions that mark our collective history are the anti-structure to a civilization erected and sustained according to a structure of economic and cultural expansion. The proliferation of violence throughout U.S. history enacts a liminality, engenders a communitas, through which our civilizational values are defended and expanded. In U.S. mythology, the hero as hunter and military man enacts violence out of a desire for the dominance of his own civilization, achieved through the destruction of both others and ecologies. Our ritual hunt, which may achieve a communitas within the national corpus, rejects any union with either our mythic prey or our environment. Savage war, as the ritual of the nation, weds us to our own conception of civilization, and is but one phase in an endlessly repeating dialectic that maintains the structure of U.S. global dominance.
Regeneration Through Consumption

Understanding savage warfare as the anti-structure of U.S. society demands a recognition of the structure that violence regenerates. Turner explains that in order for any society to function there must be a dialectical play between the communitas of liminality and the structures of daily life. In Slotkin’s articulation of frontier mythology, he names the dialectical twin to savage war as boom economics. Although Slotkin recognizes the relationship between savage war and economics to be the two fundamental elements of U.S. culture’s regeneration, his focus on literature and the political history of the liminality of war gives little attention to the economic structure that violence regenerates. Slotkin’s inability to fully address the economic structures that benefit from violence stems from two interrelated reasons: the effacement of consumption from cultural productions focused on the spectacle of violence and the correlated analytic attention to patterns of violence. The intense concentration upon the spectacle of violence within the cultural productions that Slotkin analyzes is linked to the effacement of the patterns of consumption that violence makes possible. Society may achieve regeneration through violence but violence is not what regenerates. As in the ancient rituals of the hunter – or in basic biology – consumption is what rejuvenates the body. In a modest amendment to Slotkin’s exhaustive work, I assert that the body politic achieves regeneration through consumption, which violence makes possible in the U.S. myto-political paradigm.

According to Slotkin, implicit within Frontier mythology is an ethic of economic expansion and patterns of consumption that are disguised within narratives of capture and rescue. Throughout U.S. history the enactment of violence has served as a means of economic and cultural expansion aimed at consumption and justified through myth. From the beginning of European immigration to the Americas until the present day, the ardor for economic gains – largely in the form of acquiring resources and controlling trade routes – has compelled a politics of violence and allowed for an ever-increasing consumerism. The desire to consume, first in the form of land and agrarian expansion, and then in the form of industrial products and the natural
resources required for their production, found justification within frontier mythology under an Enlightenment ethic of economic development. Violence as the ritual of the nation, as the anti-structure of social organization, regenerates because it supports the economic structure of capitalist expansion and extraction aimed at an escalating consumerism.

The Capitalist impulse to control markets, expropriate resources and produce consumer goods is largely effaced within the cultural products of literature and other media, which favor the spectacle of violence over the banality of consumerism. The captive-hunter myth prominent in both entertainment and politics ignores the relation between the hunt and the material gain that is its result. Writing of Davy Crockett as both myth and man, Slotkin states, “the hunter myth sanctifies the activities of a Crockett as ends in themselves, independent of their function as part of the progressive extension of civilization and progress…it is not the pelt money or even the manufacture fur hats that prove the hunter’s worth, but the killing of the animal. Such a hunter is not concerned with producing…” Nor is the hunter concerned with consuming. The economic reasons underlying the practice of violence are discounted, if not merely downplayed in both entertainment and politics. In the former, the narratives of media as dramatic play hold an ancient relation to ritual and accordingly present liminality rather than structure.\(^{23}\) Moreover, in politics, to invoke the desire for material gain as the cause for war, to speak of expanding the market (structure) of U.S. capitalism as reasons for violence around the world would present the U.S. as an imperialistic nation and contradict its self-identification of liberator. Rather, the captive-hunter myth is invoked while the gains to U.S. capitalism are effaced from the narrative. The spectacle of violence overshadows the consumerism that violence enables.

An imperialistic form of consumer capitalism is the structure of U.S. society that the liminality, or anti-structure, of violence regenerates. While citizens tend not to think of the U.S. as an imperial state; if we define imperialism as, “the policy and practice of forming and maintaining an empire in seeking to control raw materials and world markets by the conquest of
other countries, the establishment of colonies, etc...seeking to dominate the political affairs of underdeveloped areas,” then the U.S. from its first colonies up to its current state of world-wide military bases and constitutions written for other countries has always been an imperial endeavor aimed at expropriating the resources of others to feed its ever-expanding populations and markets. I use the word feed intentionally because the consumption of resources, first in the conquest of the continent and then in the domination of world markets, has invariably been the source for U.S. civilizational growth. Consumption enables regeneration: the absorption into the body of that which sustains and nourishes, the devouring of other lives and livelihoods, the depletion of resources and the destruction of the environment. The patterns of consumption upon which U.S. civilization is built regenerate the body politic and demand an imperialistic practice of violence in order to maintain its capitalist economic structure.

If violence regenerates the nation, as Slotkin insists, it is only because violence opens up the opportunity for increased consumption. Despite those early Protestant immigrants’ disdain for the blood rituals by which the spirit of God or life enters the participant to rejuvenate his/her body and spirit, their cultural descendents have not escaped the consumption by which such violent rituals regenerate. The structure of U.S. society, for which war is the anti-structure, is our expanding economic system of consumer capitalism. Yet, in myth, the crass reality of expanding the culture of consumption through the implementation of violence is disregarded in favor of the heroic narratives of capture and rescue. The spectacle of violence, incessantly repeated as if it were the necessary path toward liberation, effaces the consumerism that violence supports and disguises the imperialist adventures as altruism. The dialectic through which U.S. civilization feeds and grows has as its base an economy of increasing consumption made possible through violence.
Conclusion

Myth is part historical memory, allowing the communities to interpret the present in terms of past experiences. While the history of the U.S. frontier is not a past that belongs in a biological way to most citizens, the mythology of the frontier is our collective inheritance. From frontier mythology, we derive an ethical compulsion to rescue those in need, we expect the hero to enact violence as the means of rescue, and we insist upon the perpetual advancement and expansion of our own brand of civilization. Postcolonialism, as an intellectual and political movement of the 20th century forced a transformation within our national mythology away from the perpetual replaying of the Indian Wars that stain the nation’s past; but it could not displace savage warfare as the national ritual for regeneration. War remains the anti-structure of society and serves to regenerate a structure of imperialistic consumer capitalism. The spectacle of violence effaces the consumption that violence makes possible. Liberation, represented as the rescuing of a captive, is our “strongest mythic imperative” and the rationale given for performing violence in both the plots of entertainment and the political realm of foreign policy.
Chapter 4

Violent Intervention – *Tears of the Sun*

Violence and warfare, as the ritual of the nation, is performed within a mythic paradigm in which the U.S. acts as a rescuer to a person or community held captive by an agent of evil oppression. The liberation of a captive, either existential or metaphorical, is a primary action in the performance of national identity. While such performances are enacted on the global stage of politics, they also make up a significant body of popular entertainment. Movies ceaselessly repeat the scenarios of capture and rescue and provide an invaluable set of data with which to analyze national myth because they present the ideals and identities prominent within the national community. As expressions of mythic thought, films provide an opportunity for interrogating the binaries by which we construct our understanding of the social world and the resolutions to conflict that we find both plausible and acceptable. In this section, I apply the analytic strategies of Claude Lévi-Strauss to one such film of capture/rescue, *Tears of the Sun* (2003). Attending to the gross constituent units of this film, we can recognize two binaries significant within U.S. sentience: terror–security and segregation–integration. Investigating how these binaries are explored and resolved within *Tears of the Sun* reveals a disturbing pattern underlying the development and maintenance of U.S. culture and its economic structure of global capitalism. Through a Lévi-Straussian analysis of *Tears of the Sun*, supplemented by the ethnographic work of Anna Tsing on global capitalism and the neo-liberal economic theories of W. W. Rostow, this section demonstrates that performances of violent intervention support the social structure of global capital by creating frontiers of terror and enforcing the segregation of the global community.
An Example From the Genre

While the myth of liberation that is the focus of my work broadly consists of all its variants I chose *Tears of the Sun* for analysis because of the two narrative elements that distinguish the film from others in its genre: rescuing others and defending democracy. Filmed shortly after 9/11, *Tears of the Sun’s* cinematic release coincided with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and was described by its producer, Arnold Rifkin, as “a metaphor for what’s happening today in the world.” Set in Nigeria, the narrative follows the historic pattern of capture/rescue; yet, it adds the rescue and liberation of unaffiliated peoples, the indigenous Africans, to the tradition of rescuing a white female. Secondly, the film includes a representative of democracy whom the hero chooses to rescue in addition to the representative of civilization. Focusing on violent intervention as the standard method of rescue, this section overviews the broad genre of contemporary representations of the captivity myth, discusses *Tears of the Sun’s* protagonist, Bruce Willis, as one of the genre’s mythic heroes, and summarizes the plot of the film.

The genre of capture and rescue is so profuse within U.S. culture that when friends and acquaintances would ask me about my dissertation project they would offer their own suggestions for films that fit into the pattern I was analyzing. “Oh, you mean like *Commando*. I just watched that last Saturday while I lay on the couch.” Indeed, I had a chance encounter with this 1985 Schwarzenegger film in a hotel room as I traveled across the country. In *Commando*, the daughter of a U.S. military operative must be rescued from a vengeful Latin-American warlord. Or I would hear, “Ah, you’ve got to watch *Delta Force* (1985),” in which a team of military specialists rescues a plane and its passengers from a group of Lebanese terrorists. The *Rambo* saga is iconic within the genre. In the second film (1985), Rambo frees POWs from Vietnam, then (1988) rescues his former commander from a Russian prison in Afghanistan, and (2008) goes on to save U.S. missionaries from the terrorizing Burmese military. The recent spat of comic books turned into movies is no exception. Particularly prominent are the *Spider-man* films (2002, 2004, 2007) that present the perennial capture and rescue of Peter Parker’s life-
long love, Mary Jane Watson. Such pervasiveness in media includes the creation of farce such as *Tropic Thunder* (2008), which tells the tale of a war-movie production gone horribly wrong in Southeast Asia when a local drug lord captures one of the actors, and *Team America: World Police* (2004). Across centuries of narrative, the scenarios of capture and rescue remain prominent in the construction of U.S. myth, continually adapting to changing social circumstances but always presenting the defense of civilization and generally disparaging a racial and/or religious other.

Within the genre of capture/rescue, certain actors have found their niche, including Bruce Willis. Perhaps best known as the hero of the *Die Hard* movies, Bruce Willis performs time and again the role of mediator, battling threats and bringing salvation through violent intervention. In each of the four *Die Hard* films, Willis plays the role of a cop, John McClane, who alternately liberates: a group of hostages at a corporate Christmas party (1988), an airport terminal full of travelers (1990), the whole of New York City from a series of bomb threats (1995), and the United States from a cyber attack (2007). With each film, the stakes are progressively higher. Take for example *Armageddon* (1998) in which Willis plays the role of a deep-sea-oil-driller-turned-astronaut who must save the whole planet from a fast approaching asteroid. Appearing on *The Daily Show* to promote his movie *Red*, Willis spoke of his career as an action star, “who doesn’t like shooting weapons...on camera. I look good in the dark, dirty, a little blood on me, and a weapon in my hand.” Willis as film hero mediates between terror and security, implementing the force of violence to achieve his ends of rescuing civilization.

In the 2003 film, *Tears of the Sun*, directed by Antoine Fuqua, Willis maintains his standard role of hunter hero, enacting another manifestation of the U.S. myth of liberation. A Lieutenant in the U.S. armed forces, Willis’ character (A. K. Waters) is assigned a special mission. A military coup in Nigeria has destabilized the security of the nation. Armed rebels are terrorizing the population. Lt. Waters flies to a remote Christian mission where a European-American doctor has been treating the impoverished residents. His mission is to extract the
doctor and staff, leaving the “indigenous personnel” to face the approaching terror alone. Yet, the female doctor, U.S. by marriage, European by birth, challenges the discompassionate military plan, thereby altering the course of the mission. The mission residents who can, flee, being guided by the U.S. troops who have parachuted into the area. The film progresses into the forest wilderness of tropical Africa, where their efforts to reach the national border are punctuated by anxious close calls and violent encounters. At one point, the lieutenant forces the doctor to evacuate by helicopter, abandoning the Africans in the wilderness. The doctor’s grief pierces the Lt. with guilt, and when they fly over the mission and witness the aftermath of a massacre, he rejects the callous orders to abandon the indigenous and returns to the wandering Africans, resuming his leadership role. In the final fight of the film, the terror is obliterated in a massive show of military firepower just as the people reach the secured border of Cameroon. The security achieved is two-fold, and this mythic showing reveals much about the preferred structure of global society. For while the Lt. and Dr. are airlifted out of the troubled area, they look down on the “indigenous” Africans who sing in praise of their rescue from behind the razor-wire fence of a desolate refugee camp. The Lt. did indeed accomplish his mission to rescue the doctor, symbol of civilization and progress, while abandoning the indigenous to a life of segregation and poverty.

The displaying of *Tears of the Sun* in theaters coincided with the start of the Iraq War and presented a narrative in which the U.S. acts as rescuer to a brutalized and terrorized Other while also saving the local representative of Democracy. As Willis phrased it, “I don’t think you can tell enough of these stories.”² Fuqua declared the film to be about, “man’s inhumanity to man [and] good men doing something about evil.” So while the U.S. military began an intervention in Iraq against the “axis of evil,” Fuqua sought to “bring awareness to the problems of Africa, the suffering of the people [because] there are some profound evil things happening there that we need to seriously look at...sometimes the strong have to protect the weak.”³ But the producer did not think the film should look too closely, and stated that, “It’s not our
[filmmakers’] responsibility to explain the behavior of people. Our responsibility is to perhaps depict it in a way where there’s a truth to it and not necessarily to answer why.” With this film representing what Willis called, “the harsh reality of what tribal warfare looks like,” we are not supposed to ask why people are waging war. It should be enough that Lt. A.K. Waters (Bruce Willis) mediates between the most urgent binary of US society at the start of the 21st century: battling terror and achieving security.4

Mediating Between Terror and Security

As a performance in which other peoples are liberated and democracy is saved, Tears of the Sun offers a point of analysis through which we can investigate the most significant social binary in this new century of U.S. myth: terror vs. security. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, myths are meant to address the urgent or persistent contradictions of a given society while offering socially sanctioned paths toward resolution or mediation.5 Lévi-Strauss notes the reflexive relationship between the structure of myth and that of larger society. With his structuralist theory, he offers a methodology through which scholars can analyze the complexity of both mythic plots and the societies from which they come. Believing that myth is a kind of language and following Saussurean linguistics, Lévi-Strauss asserts that the meaning of myth can be discerned by exploring the relation of its parts, termed gross constituent units.6 His methodology charts the diachronic and synchronic organization of narratives in order to reveal the underlying binary tensions that the myth is meant to address.7 In this section I present an overall analysis of the gross constituent units that comprise the myth/film Tears of the Sun, focus on the relation between the binaries of terror-security and segregation-integration, and discuss this myth’s relation to the historically predominant binary of civilization-savagery. Analyzing Tears of the Sun according to the methodologies of Claude Lévi-Strauss highlights the predominant social binary of terror-security within U.S. culture and reveals that the film
presents a structural myth of Western civilization in which security depends upon the segregation of the global community.

Five gross constituent units support the film’s resolution of the over-arching social contradiction of terror-security and reveal specific thought patterns within national culture. As Lévi-Strauss asserts, the meanings of myths are comprised through the relations of their parts and so we must attend to the ways in which progression through each theme is tied to the performance of another gross constituent unit (GCU). Within the GCU of “the authority of technological-patriarchy,” Lt. Water’s success over the less technologically advanced African rebels asserts the cultural belief that salvation comes with technological superiority. However, that technology is tied to a bureaucratic and patriarchal institution, toward which the Lt. performs ambivalently by following orders, defying orders and finally reconnecting with his superiors. Mediation away from the callous bureaucratic order to “drop the excess cargo” depends upon two other GCUs: “the compassionate feminine” and “the witnessing of violence”; for only when the Lt. bears witness to the pillaged mission and the suffering of the female characters does he reject his superior’s order and commit to rescuing the terrorized Africans. After forcefully removing the Euro-American doctor from the group of refugees, the rescue team’s helicopter flies over the mission, now in flames, with bodies strewn around the grounds. During the doctor’s anguished cries, the military men look at each other and Lt. Waters orders the helicopter to turn around. Moreover, his transition from callous extractor to compassionate guide is linked to the GCU of “relations with the divine,” which progresses from a declaration of God’s absence toward an assertion of divinity’s eternal presence. Each gross constituent unit presents a culturally specific theme (feminine compassion, technological prowess, righteous violence) and suggests, through the actions of the hero, acceptable mediations within social binaries or preferred patterns of personal growth.

To elaborate on the synchronic category of segregation-integration, the narrative follows the changing plan of escape and the Lt’s intentions. The film begins with an attempt at
segregation when the Lt. follows his orders to extract the “non-indigenous personnel” from the volatile region and abandon the Africans to their doomed mission residence. His reconsideration, affected through a combination of compassion and guilt, brings about an integration made most evident by the Lt.’s transfer of some authority to his African-American subordinate. In an example of democracy overriding bureaucratic authority, the military team decides to reject their superiors’ orders and lead the refugees to safety. The second in command says to the Lt., “Those Africans are my people too. For all the years that we were told to stand down and to stand by...you’re doing the right thing.” To which the Lt. replies, “For our sins.” Yet such integration is not sustained, for the film ends with the assent of the U.S. nationals and the segregation of Africans behind the chain-linked, razor wire topped fence of a refugee camp. The security achieved depends upon segregation, a segregation enforced through terror.

Being based on principles of cinematic suspense, action films are bound to present the social binary of terror-security; in Tears of the Sun this binary draws upon the heritage of the civilization-savagery divide and related deep-seated representations of Africans. A reviewer notes two prominent stereotypes in his criticism, writing that the film, “…divides Africans into snarling villains and wide-eyed, childlike innocents.” The terror that the characters in Tears of the Sun face, and flee, is incomprehensibly malicious; the refugees, incompetent in their passivity. When the former mission residents led by the Navy Seals come upon a village being attacked by rebels, the Seals intervene to halt the bloodshed while the refugees hide in the bush. In one of the homes, the soldiers find a crying baby and its mutilated mother. One of the refugees explains, “this is what they do... they cut off the breasts of nursing mothers so that they’ll never again feed their own babies...This is what they do.” Implementing the unenlightening power of tautology, the scene, indeed the entire film, presents the African conflict as a case study in ethnic hatred and barbaric violence. Whereas the violence enacted by the U.S. force is defensive and righteous, the rebels’ aggression is savagely cruel and the rescued Africans play no role but follower in their own liberation. While the film avoids the
anachronistic discourse of savagery-civilization, the imagery and plot re-present the colonial era myth of “the white man’s burden.”

*Tears of the Sun* offers an allegory for the global social order according to the national myth in which the U.S. acts as both liberation and guide to the simultaneously naïve and vicious Other. Yet, the liberation that the U.S. is able to provide is paradoxically related to the domination of segregation. Dr. Lena Kendricks sits on the deck of a helicopter, comforting her rescuer. The helicopter ascends and the Dr., symbol of civilization, looks down upon the African refugees. Exiled and fenced in, they dance and sing in praise and thanks for their rescue from inside the security of desolate and impoverished camp. Having escaped the terror and destroyed it with the firepower of an airstrike, *Tears of the Sun* offers two very different kinds of security: the assent of Euro-America and the segregation/abandonment of indigenous Africa. Such a strategy has been part of Western culture from the start of its global expansion. The two-tiered system of security manifested in the film, *Tears of the Sun*, makes a clear reference to the socio-political reality of the global order in that the liberation of some is tried to the segregation of many and that such segregation is implemented through the force of terror.

**Terror and Economic Segregation**

The force that stalks the mission residents, the terror from which they flee is presented as merely evil while their violence is attributed to religious or ethnic prejudice; such essentializing is common, particularly in regards to Africa, and ignores the economic foundations for conflict around the world. The routine effacement of economic reasoning within our cultural representations of how the world works is connected to the devaluing and displacement of the processes of production in the neo-liberal economic structure of U.S. society. In the U.S. capitalist system, the liberation purported to come with an economy of high-consumption is dependent upon a vast network of resource extraction and outsourced labor; an arrangement of economic and social domination. In this section, I challenge W. W. Rostow’s
theory of modernization in order to assert that global capital does not engender a teleological path of economic development but segregate the world into cotemporaneous and unequal economic sectors. I refer to the ethnographic work of Anna Tsing as an example of the terrorization and displacement of local communities that is intrinsic to global capital and the creation of Rostow’s second stage of development. The violent intervention performed within *Tears of the Sun* unwittingly represents this process of terrorization and segregation performed toward neo-liberal modernization; by representing the U.S. as rescuer the film implements the myth of liberation, which obscures consumer culture’s role as dominator in the global economy.

In order to defend the assertion that the security of the global order is dependent upon segregation I refer to the work of W.W. Rostow, who articulates the persistent model of neo-liberal economics. In *The Five Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto*, Rostow outlines the path for economic progression that the western world offered to, or imposed upon, the decolonized territories as an alternative to communism. As an advisor to both Kennedy and Johnson, Rostow’s plan for development has had a lasting impact on global politics and economics. Through his stages of growth, traditional societies would move into modernity.

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<td>Transitional</td>
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Yet, what Rostow offers as a pattern of historical development became a method through which capital investors could portion the world into economic sectors. Although Rostow presents his
theory of modernization as a model for everyone to attain the blessings of consumerism his logic is flawed in that the types of production he separates into teleological and hierarchical categories are not sequential but cotemporaneous. In the global economy, metropolitan elites mass-consume smart phones (Stage 5), developed by Silicon Valley residents employed in technological industries (Stage 4), produced by Chinese manufacturing laborers (Stage 3), utilizing minerals extracted from a Congolese war zone (Stage 2). Rostow erroneously believes that all people’s can attain the age of high mass consumption because he fails to acknowledge that an economy of consumer goods and services is dependent upon the production compartmentalized within his other outlined stages. Although Rostow intends to describe five stages of economic development as historical progression, he actually articulates the hierarchical organization of global capitalism that creates and maintains the segregation of the global population into various sectors of production and consumption.

The segregation of the global economy following the neo-liberal strategies described by Rostow is implemented through global capital’s creation of frontiers, often developed through the force of terror. Ethnographer Anna Tsing describes this process of the creation of frontiers in her book, Friction, on the destruction of the Indonesian rainforests of Kalimantan. For Tsing, the frontier is a “traveling theory,” an “imaginative project” that creates confusion between public and private, instills a sense of lawlessness and results in the erasure of the rights of local residents if not their displacement from their traditional lands. The resources required for global capital, for the production of consumer products, are made through such violent upheavals in the creation of what Tsing calls “sacrifice zones.” In the case of Indonesia, in an effort to extract gold, lumber and birds nests, the Kalimantan forest was turned into one such “sacrifice zone.” Mountainsides were cleared, village fields were burned, and biodiversity plummeted to be replaced by logging roads, rubber plantations and hyper-masculine migrants. Tsing writes poignantly of the despair that such transformations into the neo-liberal plan for development wrought on the Dayaks of Indonesia. The case study presented by Anna Tsing
demonstrates the terrorization of the local communities and their segregation into Rostow’s second stage of development as strategies typical within the order of global capital.

Like Tsing’s ethnography of the Dayaks entrance into the global economy, the film *Tears of the Sun* expresses what happens when global capital creates Rostow’s pre-take off stage, focused on the extraction of natural resources and raw materials. In the very beginning of the film, as the scene of political discord is set, a newscaster mentions the vast oil reserves of the southeast section of Nigeria. This fictional news commentary is the film’s only mention of resource extraction as a cause for violence; rather the film favors the abstraction of evil over the concrete realities of global capital. While my Nigerian friends abhorred this movie for the way it portrayed their nation the film did get one thing right. Southeast Nigeria is blessed, or cursed, with oil; the indigenous populations have for decades suffered under the politics of extraction.21 The film disregards this reality in favor of ethnic and religious hatred as the cause for violence, effectively effacing the binary of production-consumption from the reality of its relation to terror and segregation. The abandonment of the indigenous Africans displayed in *Tears of the Sun* is an allegory for global capitalism’s rejection of indigenous societies (as evidenced by the unquestioned need for modernization) and the segregation of the world’s populations into varying sectors of economic production.

Indeed, capitalism creates frontiers to fulfill its needs for production. These frontiers are not that different from those of Frederick Jackson Turner and the continental expansion of the U.S.; for the frontiers of opportunity and “spectacular accumulation” for the capital investor have always been the homes of someone else, transformed through violence, transformed through terror. While Rostow presents his capitalist model of development and modernization as a path toward the supposed blessings of modern consumerism, his outline proves to be a program for the terrorization of certain populations, segregated into divergent economies. The dominance of the Western world, as represented by Lt. A.K. Waters’ and Dr. Kendricks’ helicopter assent, is unequivocally linked to the segregation and abandonment of the world’s
indigenous and poor, as represented by the mission’s African residents’ displacement, caged behind chain link and razor wire.

**Conclusion**

Films as myths offer tremendous insight into the way the communities of their construction view the world. *Tears of the Sun* presents a world-view in which the U.S. acts as rescuer to the threatened or terrorized communities of the world. However, a structuralist analysis of this film reveals that liberation is not intended for all, but depends upon the abandonment or segregation of others. Drawing upon the heritage of the savagery-civilization binary, *Tears of the Sun* effaces the role of economics and resource extraction from the contemporary social binary of terror-security. A critique of W. W. Rostow’s theory of modernization describes the segregated structure of global capital; reference to the ethnography of Anna Tsing supports the assertion that such segregation is often achieved through the creation of frontiers and the terrorization of local communities. Violent intervention bolsters the system of global capital by creating frontiers of terror and enforcing the economic segregation of the global community.
Chapter 5

Economic Intervention – Idol Gives Back

In the dialectic of U.S. society, the anti-structure of violent intervention has as its counterpart a structure of economic intervention. As with violent intervention, when we practice economic intervention we claim the altruism of compassion regarding the suffering of others and assume a benevolent stance with our aid while simultaneously ignoring the reasons behind such suffering as well as our own implication in the tragedies we seek to alleviate. Economic intervention, whether of an individual or social sort, tends to focus on the effects of suffering rather than the causes, often confusing the two.¹ Charitable endeavors often act as an alibi for the structural violence that makes charity a necessity.² To clarify, charity is not an alibi for the citizen donors who are largely unaware of their tangential role in perpetuating suffering and inequality. Rather, such economic interventions are alibis for corporate capital and the culture of consumption it coaxes the U.S. populace into. In this section I provide a thick description of one charity drive, American Idol’s Idol Gives Back (2008) in order to analyze its presentation of the binary of poverty and prosperity, and to assert that the altruism expressed through economic intervention is an alibi for the culture of consumption and the global structure of poverty it breeds.

Performing Compassion

Pop/rock icon and charitable ambassador, Bono, is in an unspecified location in Africa. He has met an angel named Usabia. She volunteers her time taking care of orphans living with HIV. Together they walk down a hillside shaded by broadleaf trees to a small rectangular home with a slanted roof. There they find fourteen year-old Sophia sitting on the floor doing her schoolwork. Having taken a seat on a bench below an open window, Bono tells Sophia to look into the camera, “that’s America,” and he asks her what she would like to tell the viewing
audience. Her subtitled Kiswahili reads, “I’d like you to continue watching this, and to watch me. And I’d like you to help me as well.” The shot cuts to her lap where her hands rest on her notebook and pen while cradling a box of medicine. Usabia wipes a tear from Sophia’s face and we are told that the child is just one of sixty patients whom she cares for. Moving from a close-up of Usabia’s face, a street scene flashes briefly before the image quickly transitions back to Usabia, now walking through a cemetery crowded with tombstones and crosses. U2’s song Walk On plays in the background echoing this woman’s fortitude for she herself has lost three children to AIDS. She tries to speak of the unspeakable but knows that she cannot. Bono stands with his arm around her shoulders in front of a wall with a red AIDS ribbon painted on it and he encourages, “everybody at home, this is your chance to be a part of this incredible lady...fighting for the life of her community.” He thanks her and they kiss each other on the temple and cheek, respective to height. The image then abruptly switches to the transformed American Idol logo and we are reminded that all of this is brought to us by Coke©.

After a commercial break and the relief from sorrow that upbeat performances can provide, supplemented by the antics of currently fashionable comedians, Bono returns to the screen to transition us from Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania to somewhere in South Africa where singer Annie Lennox will introduce us to more sorrow. Sitting close together, four brothers answer questions about their family. They have no father, their mother is dead, no grandparents either. The images of their faces fade and reappear, revealing the quick editing between their answers. When asked if they have an auntie the look of pain on the eldest boy’s face is palpable as he turns his head away and down, providing no response. These brothers are alone in this world. Sebo, the eldest, is fifteen and we are given a close-up of him just before the view shifts to show him tenderly wiping clean the face of his youngest sibling. A voice-over gives him an English accent and explains to viewers, “we sometimes don’t have the means to survive and one of the little ones gets sick and needs medical care. I can’t get them to the hospital.” The image fades out. Riding in a van, Annie narrates that they are taking the boys to a clinic to be tested for
HIV. With the two youngest sitting on Sebo and Annie’s laps, her voice dreads the possibility of a positive result as she wonders how Sebo will manage to care for the others. Inside the clinic, the little ones cry. Annie reminds us that they could face losing each other and we watch Sebo’s morose face. “Any one of them could be infected with the AIDS virus,” mourns Annie. Blood is squeezed from a pipette onto a plate. A plastic rectangle with just a sliver of a window incomprehensibly reveals the results. They are all negative. They are all smiling. But for Annie, “it’s impossible to take in. They’re just children. They should be carefree.”

The camera takes us back to the yard outside their round house with whitewashed walls and a thatched roof where Annie plays ball with the two middle boys. Her voice shares with us the thought that haunts her. As the boys happily climb on their large bed she thinks of their mother and what it must have been like to know that she was dying, leaving her children to take care of themselves. We watch her hug the oldest boy. “Across Africa, children are living like this.” She kisses the second eldest on the head. “Their parents could still be with them if they’d only been diagnosed and given the treatment they need.” Fighting off tears she tells them bye-bye. No more than 50 feet from their door, she pauses. Overcome with emotion she struggles with her limbs and her words, “you know, the oldest boy is so dignified.” She holds her hand over her heart. “He said how he has to hold his feelings in so much because it’s such an impossible situation...” Wiping the tears from her eyes she cannot continue, “Okay, let’s go. It’s really hard.” As the segment ends her voice reminds us that people do not have to die from AIDS and encourages donations just as she appears seated at a grand piano in a Los Angeles theater and performs the song Many Rivers.

Personal stories of tragedy continue throughout the episode. Forrest Whitaker visits a clinic in Angola and stands over an infant being treated for malaria. A mosquito net could have prevented this and that costs just $10. But for the child’s mother that is an impossible sum to save. He also visits with another family in Angola. Their mother is dead; their father blinded by a leftover land mine. The eldest son spends his days in the streets begging as the family’s sole
means of support. Whitaker surveys the empty house and when he asks where they sleep the three children demonstrate by laying a piece of cardboard down and cuddling with each other on the floor.

Back in the United States, Judges Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul visit a California community where the children “don’t even have parks to play in or public swimming pools.” They also lack access to medical care. Poverty is linked to obesity. “The money you’re donating tonight will change lives forever.” “Even one dollar can save a life.” “American’s have an unprecedented opportunity to make poverty history.” “Any donation you make will make a real difference.” Judge Simon Cowell travels to New York and meets a family “crowded into 2 rooms.” The son is in a wheelchair; the daughter has rheumatoid arthritis, the mother, lupus. “You can do your part by simply picking up the phone and donating as much as you can.”

Singing daughter and father, Miley and Billy Ray Cyrus, return to the latter’s home state of Kentucky to meet the Hensons who live in what Miley calls, “very difficult conditions.” The camera, having positioned itself in the doorways of the Henson’s home, shows peeling paint and broken cabinet doors. The accompanying music asserts that “there ain’t no reason things are this way…I can’t explain why it is this way, we do it everyday.”

Three different celebrities appear in New Orleans and point to the continued suffering following Hurricane Katrina’s devastation three years prior. “With your help more kids can begin to rebuild a future.” “$1 can make a world of difference.” Host Ryan Seacrest thanks the sponsors News Corp© and Exxon-Mobil© for their generous support.

Representing Poverty and Charity

‘Idol Gives Back’ offered several narratives with which to construct an analysis of national mythology as it explains poverty and dictates a culturally appropriate response. With its call to “save a life tonight, save the world tomorrow,” ‘Idol Gives Back’ presented stories in which human suffering can be alleviated through the economic intervention of the private
citizen matched with corporate donations. This charity drive televised images of poverty as a result of individualized deficiencies, which were contrasted by the wealth standardized within the culture industry. The imagery signified poverty largely through the portrayal of black and brown subjects while asserting the compassion of the national public and the show’s corporate sponsors. Utilizing the analytic methods of Harold Scheub, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes this section explores the mythic understanding of poverty within U.S. culture and the responsibility of the populace to intervene.

Attending to the parallel and expansible image sets presented through ‘Idol Gives Back’ we discover the meaning of poverty as a deficiency of the benefits of modern consumerism while the alleviation of these inadequacies is afforded through the generosity and compassion of the U.S. populace. Harold Scheub, a scholar of African myth, described narrative myth as being composed through the repetition of parallel and expansible image sets. The former are thematic structures that reveal the problem while simultaneously connecting the audience emotionally to the narrative. In each segment of ‘Idol Gives Back’, we were shown images that exhibited a thematic lack in the lives put on display. Housing that lacked space, electricity, or furniture. Families that lacked parents, parents that lacked jobs, incomes that lacked disposability, bodies that lacked healthcare. The expansible image sets are the plot structures that move from conflict to resolution: a hug here, a kiss there, the reading of a story, the participation in a game, the distribution of mosquito nets, trips to clinics for HIV testing, boxes of medicine, children’s books and playground equipment. Scheub tells us that, “form and content are inseparable, the members of the audience absorbing the ideals of the society through these complexes of images.” Within the imagery of ‘Idol Gives Back’, the audience was conditioned to understand impoverishment as dispossession (particularly attributed to black and brown subjects), while also being prepared to express their compassion for the suffering of others through the material generosity of economic intervention.
A Lévi-Straussian analysis of ‘Idol Give Back’ reveals the underlying binaries of poverty-privilege and despair-compassion, where financial charity acts as mediator yet resolution is not achieved. Typically, a narrative myth will follow the basic outline of a rite of passage beginning with a separation, followed by a period of liminality, and ending in a reintegration. ‘Idol Gives Back’ however, forgoes a final transformation in order to plea for the donations of viewers. The simplified narratives involved only two phases. First, the protagonist faced a daunting challenge that he/she is either a) born into or b) arose later in life. Significantly, the conditions of the challenge faced were brought on entirely by negative forces external to the protagonist such as disease or disaster; therefore assuring their innocence and worthiness of intervention. Then, the positive external forces of compassionate people intervene and aid in coping with such difficulties. Indicatively, resolution is not actually achieved, but only suggested as a possibility. A young girl in New Orleans may be able to escape the cycle of poverty and violence with the help of an after-school program but the impoverishment of her overall community is not addressed. The Angolan child may avoid malaria with a bed net, yet the mother remains unable to afford its replacement should it become torn. Economic intervention, while mediating between the displayed binaries of global society offers no resolution to inequality. Without such resolution it becomes clear that the economic intervention is not able, or intended, to “save the world tomorrow.”

Implementing the tools of semiology, Roland Barthes’ complex technique for analyzing myth exposes the racialized understandings of poverty presumed within national culture as well as the assertion of U.S. generosity and compassion. Within Barthes theory of myth, the process of signification is tools implemented by the ruling class for the maintenance of the status quo, effected by making historically generated paradigms appear as natural conditions. Drawing upon Saussurean linguistics, Barthes theorized that with myth, a form (the signifier) is emptied of its history, and placed upon it instead is a concept (the signified). These two processes
together result in a signification that reinforces the status quo of social myth. In the case of ‘*Idol Gives Back*’, we see a dual order semiotic construction:

(Signifier)  (Signified)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black/Brown bodies</th>
<th>Poverty</th>
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<tr>
<td>Donations</td>
<td>Compassion</td>
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<td>U.S. Generosity</td>
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(Signification)

Though signifiers were not limited to Africans, African-Americans and Latinos (Southern whites were also included through the Cyrus family’s trip to Tennessee), ‘*Idol Gives Back*’ overwhelmingly presented poverty in a racialized manner standard within broader national culture while simultaneously asserting the generosity and compassion of the overall U.S. populace. As Barthes wrote, “the principle function of myth is to transform history into nature.” Stripped out of the narrative presented on ‘*Idol Gives Back*’ was any historical understanding of the centuries of oppression and exploitation that pushed some populations into poverty while privileging other populations. The audience was afforded no insight into how black and brown (and to a far lesser extent, Southern or rural white) bodies came to signify the blighted ‘Other.’ Most assuredly, *Idol Gives Back* made no reference to the historic correlation between impoverishment and the audience’s economic ability to intervene against it. Rather, global inequality was presented as natural. “There ain’t no reason things are this way...I can’t explain why we live this way / we do it every day.”

Three techniques of myth analysis regarding *American Idol’s* charity drive, ‘*Idol Gives Back*’, revealed the mythic understanding of poverty within national culture as well as the culturally sanctioned responses to this social problem. With Harold Scheub’s parallel and
expansible image sets, we recognized poverty as an individualized lack, while compassion was presented as the motivation for objectively fulfilling the needs of the impoverished. Yet, the economic mediation of charity between poverty and prosperity precludes any final resolution. Conducting a Lévi-Straussian structural analysis we acknowledged that the despair is balanced with compassion but only insofar as to address the effects while distinctly ignoring the causes of suffering. Moreover, ‘Idol Gives Back’ presented highly racialized images of poverty, which according to the theory of semiology normalizes the racist signification of poverty that pervades U.S. culture by dismissing the related histories of oppression and inequality. The call to “save a life tonight, save the world tomorrow” that was repeated by Ryan Seacrest may have arisen from the altruistic and compassionate impulses behind the myth of liberation; yet the charity drives’ reliance on mythic understandings of poverty thwarted any possibility of aiding in its eradication.

*Consumerism’s Alibi*

If the total signification of ‘Idol Gives Back’ was the assertion of U.S. generosity in the face of global poverty then the charity drive was even more so an alibi for the overall consumer culture of which *American Idol* is a crown jewel. The night’s performance offered an unusual juxtaposition of cardboard beds and glittering threads, of broken homes and diamond encrusted microphones. The binary of poverty and prosperity was displayed in all of its spectacular opposition; mediated by the flow of finances from one polar extremity to the other. These periodic mediations through which the prosperous intervene, if only momentarily, against the impoverishment of the 2/3 world declare an atonement while disguising the relations according to which the prosperity of post-modern consumer culture is attained by some through the correlated dispossession of others. Charity, and other forms of economic intervention (World Bank, IMF) act as alibis, in the Barthesian sense, for the global social order of exploitative consumer capitalism. In this section, I point to the gross consumption of U.S. culture as glorified
in commercial media by contrasting the heavenly hope of a young Hurricane Katrina survivor with the vision of “heaven” presented on *American Idol*. Then, by attending to the show’s corporate sponsors I describe how consumer culture is in large part responsible for the suffering that the show’s charity drive was meant to alleviate. Economic intervention, in the service of the myth of liberation, functions to maintain global inequality by disguising exploitation while declaring compassion.

*‘Idol Gives Back’* ended with Brad Pitt in New Orleans talking with people about their desire to return home and rebuild their communities in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the equally disastrous governmental response. One young boy, when asked what it would be like to have his home again, enthusiastically responded, “That would be heaven!” A few weeks later, *American Idol’s* weekly Ford® commercial displayed a very different idea of heaven. In a pre-produced music video, the three remaining idol contestants walked into a fortune-teller’s tent. Pulling back the red brocade fabric, the lyrics began, “I’ve been locked up way too long in this crazy world.” Inside the tent a mechanical fortune-teller, top-hatted and ghostly white, held a small vintage television between his hands. “*How far is heaven?*” On the screen, we watched each of the idols’ futures. Mansions of opulence and luxury, designer clothes and recording awards... “*how far is heaven?*” A grand piano, stone garden statues, a tiled swimming pool... “*I’ll just keep praying lord, and keep on living.*” A circular drive filled with shiny new cars... “*how far is heaven?*” While a little boy in New Orleans longed for his community’s return to their modest homes, each week *American Idol* broadcast contestants striving for celebrity, wealth and the excesses of consumerism.

The glut of consumerism propounded by *American Idol* and other forms of commercial media may exceed the financial ability of most residents but over-consumption is in fact standard within U.S. culture. With less than five percent of the global population, the U.S. consumes more than 25% of global fossil fuels. We have more private cars than licensed drivers. Our homes have increased in size by nearly 40% over the last 30 years despite a
decrease in family size. To support our living habits, the average resident requires 15 times as much land as the average Mozambican. A majority of residents pay more a year in finance charges on their credit cards than the average per capita income in at least 35 countries. The high level of consumption that Rostow venerated and that continues to structure the contemporary U.S. way of life is made possible through the economic policies and corporate practices that disposes the majority of the world's population.

Recognizing the role of international capital in privileging the U.S. consumer at the expense of other populations makes the corporate and celebrity sponsorship of ‘Idol Gives Back’ painfully ironic while clarifying the idea that such economic interventions are in fact alibis for over consumption. Exxon-Mobil helped send Forrest Whitaker to Angola where he met a family devastated by an exploding landmine - a residual from a conflict over oil, much of which was shipped to the U.S. to fuel our Fords. Coca-cola was a sponsor of the series as a whole and a well-known violator of human and environmental rights. Actress Jennifer Connelly lamented the severe lack of clean drinking water throughout the world but made no mention of Coke’s history of polluting the waterways surrounding its bottling plants. Mariah Carey and Snoop Dog sang through diamond-studded microphones in an effort to raise funds for AIDS medication. One can only assume their ignorance of the relationship between migratory labor such as found in South Africa’s diamond mines and the rapid spread of HIV. The patterns of consumption that comprise so much of U.S. culture, particularly as propagated by commercial media, are driving forces behind the impoverishment and suffering of the world majority. Our charity provides an alibi for our complicity in the suffering we seek to alleviate without having to alter our patterns of consumption.

Buried within ‘Idol Gives Back’ were the social relations and economic structures that pair the exploited with their exploiters. The consumer products of commercial breaks bind the average resident to the impoverished factory worker in what Chandra Mohanty called the 2/3 world. Mohanty’s labeling of global populations as 1/3 and 2/3 world is intended as a
replacement for the previous categorical divides such as North/South or 1st world/3rd world. Such a fractioning of the world’s population does not falsely rely on national boundaries or modernist hierarchies. Rather it reflects a more democratic principle by pointing out the exploitation of the majority of the world’s inhabitants by the minority. The sparkling accessories of celebrities and the citizens who celebrate them tie us all to the miner and his family desperate to survive the plague of HIV. Our reliance on cars is made possible by those sacrificed to land mines planted in a battle, in part, over oil revenues. To be sure, when all that we as consumers and concerned citizens are confronted with is a seemingly endless cycle of suffering, how are we to believe in the prospects of hopeful change, of salvation, of liberation from torment? These “complexes of images” do indeed present a global social order plagued not only by disease and natural disaster but by an inherent and inexplicable, call it mythical, inequality that separates “us” from “them.” The binaries of the structure are reasserted as the dialectical relationship between the 1/3 & 2/3 world is naturalized. The myth holds and offers up as mediator an ideology of charitable intervention to provide an alibi for a culture of exploitative consumption.

Conclusion

Economic intervention against the suffering of impoverishment through charitable endeavors (and through political policy) functions as an alibi, in the Barthesian sense, for the exploitation of the world’s majority by the minority entrenched in consumer culture. I provided a thick description of the charity drive Idol Gives Back in order to apply the analytic methodologies of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Harold Scheub, and Roland Barthes to the presentation of poverty and the performance of compassion. I thereby demonstrated that poverty is understood as an individual rather than a social condition; and the economic intervention by private individuals (rather than the public state) serves to address the symptoms without effecting the causes. Moreover, poverty is racialized and normalized by an absence of historical consciousness regarding the legacy of systemic oppression and inequality. This ahistorical
understanding of impoverishment naturalizes a socially constructed binary of poverty – prosperity and disguises the role of global consumer culture in creating poverty. When the 1/3 world demonstrates its compassion by sharing a bit of its prosperity with the 2/3 world it enacts a mythic alibi for the exploitation that makes such prosperity possible. Economic intervention, like its twin violent intervention, proves to be a ruse for further domination.
Conclusion

Myths of Intervention

Overviewing the nation’s myth heritage and the heroic violence that both maintains and expands U.S. civilization, I demonstrated that such rituals of violence regenerate because they abet the imperialism of this capitalist economy. A Protestant ethic may have stripped consumption out of the nation’s rituals, but consumerism, broadly defined, remains the structure regenerated through the liminality of war. Investigating one mythic representation of violent intervention on film demonstrated that mediation of the social binary of terror-security is the contemporary hero’s primary task, as well as a predominant rhetoric of political discourse. Yet, analysis of violent intervention revealed that resolution between terror and security is achieved through the segregation of the majority of the world’s population into subjugated sectors of the global economy. Analyzing economic interventions into the poverty-prosperity binary demonstrated the racialized patterns of signification and evinced that the performance of generosity functions as consumerism’s alibi for the gross inequality of global capital. The myth of liberation in its current media manifestation disavows the historical patterns of domination in order to naturalize U.S. consumer culture and present it as liberty. Consumerism is a recurring theme in the myth of liberation as performed in commercial and political culture. The consumerism that I argued is the structure supported by the anti-structure of war infiltrates the nation’s political system. Democracy, which validates the myth of liberation and promises equality and representation, is increasingly commoditized in the nation’s consumer culture. The scenarios of democracy, explored in the next part, point to this commodification’s contradiction to the nation’s democratic ideal in which privilege supersedes equality and representation excludes the majority.
Chapter 3 – The Strongest of Mythic Imperatives

1 Children's cartoons may not always use violence as a rescue strategy but violence is not uncommon, even G rated cartoon such as Disney’s *Cars 2* display violence.


4 Ibid., 94-115.

5 According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the heroes role is always to act as mediator between two social or physical binaries. Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth."


9 Myth is not only a kind of historical memory and a symbolic system for interpreting the social world; as will be demonstrated in the chapter “On Semiospace” with reference to the theories of Lee Drummond, myth is also a force of collective consciousness and social action.

10 The Vietnam War coincided with decolonization movements around the world as well as the American Indian Movement, Feminist and Queer movements, and the Civil Rights movement at home which all challenged the ruling presumption of European and U.S. benevolent superiority that had characterized the era of imperialism.


13 Further attention will be given to Turner’s theorization of ritual, liminality and communitas in Part 3: Scenarios of Democracy.


15 Performance theorist Richard Schechner described a dynamic braiding between ritual and theater. Schechner.


17 Ibid., 554.

18 Ibid., 559.

19 Who could doubt the communitas of the military establishment? Turner describes neophytes as “being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life.” Turner, 95.

20 Ibid., 129.


23 Ibid., 556.

24 Schechner.

25 *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, s.v. "Imperialist."
Chapter 4 – Violent Intervention – *Tears of the Sun*


2 Ibid.

3 President G. W. Bush first used this term in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002 to refer to Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

4 The attacks of September 11, 2001 ushered in an era of terror within the national consciousness; citizens were suddenly aware of an ever-present danger. Through the Bush administration’s “War on Terror” and the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security; the political rhetoric of U.S. society offered a label for the dominant binary of our contemporary myth: terror vs. security.

5 Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth."

6 Ibid.

7 Diachronic refers to the charted rows of a Lévi-Straussian analysis in which a plot is read across rows and down. Synchronic refers to the columns of the chart in which the plot is organized according to repeating themes, or gross constituent units.

8 GCU chart for *Tears of the Sun*
Notice that when the Lt. turns away from the hierarchical authority of the military system he implements a more democratic form of decision-making. Here we see a struggle between a conception of traditional authority as callous and the righteousness of democratic egalitarianism when it achieves consensus.

9 Notice that when the Lt. turns away from the hierarchical authority of the military system he implements a more democratic form of decision-making. Here we see a struggle between a conception of traditional authority as callous and the righteousness of democratic egalitarianism when it achieves consensus.

10 See the gross constituent unit in the chart above, “God’s favor.”


13 The enslavement of Africans facilitated the freedoms and economic development of Europe and America. The forced migration of Native Americans into the isolation of the reservation system made possible the expansion of Euro-American culture and populations. Jim Crow segregation allowed for the terrorizing of African-Americans while privileging Euro-Americans
economically and politically. The historical development of Western civilization has been built upon the terrorization and segregation of other peoples.


15 Because Rostow based his model largely on the historical development of Britain, while ignoring as capital growth factors the exploitation of slavery and colonialism, he failed to realize that within his model, the development of one society is dependent upon the repression of another.


17 World-systems theory understands the global social organization in terms of center and periphery, in which metropolitan areas are supported by the extraction of resources from rural locales; or imperial states are privileged by the exploitation of resources within their seized colonies. Advancement and modernization at the center is dependent upon the extraction of resources and labor from the periphery. I. Wallerstein, "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis.,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 16, (1974).


19 Ibid., 31-32.

20 Ibid., 42.


Chapter 5 – Economic Intervention – Idol Gives Back


4 Ibid., 222.

5 Rodney.

6 While the verses of Brett Dennon’s song, “Ain’t No Reason” suggest an awareness of the relationship between U.S. consumer culture and gross global inequality, only the chorus was repeated on Idol Gives Back; ‘though editing excluded the second line which dismisses the possibility of saving the world tomorrow.

   “There ain’t no reason things are this way / It’s how they’ve always been and they intend to stay / I can’t explain why we live this way / we do it every day.

   http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/3530822107858632031/


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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passenger_vehicles_in_the_United_States (accessed June 30, 
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10 Margot Adler. "Behind the Ever-Expanding American Dream House." National Public Radio, 
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11 "Footprint for Nations", Global Footprint Network: Advancing the Science of Sustainability 
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12 "The State of Consumption Today", Worldwatch Institute 
April 9, 2000 [accessed 
14 See Vandana Shiva, Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace (Cambridge, MA: 
South End Press, 2005).
15 Mohanty.