

Between Guidance and Salvation: Reconsidering the White Savior Narrative in Freedom Writers and the Class

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Keywords: White Savior Narrative; Educational Cinema; Narrative Transportation; Student Agency; Critical Race Theory

Abstract: Educational films often frame teachers as transformative agents, particularly when working with marginalized students. This essay critically examines the "white savior" trope in two contrasting films: the American *Freedom Writers* and the French *The Class* (*Entre les murs*). Rather than offering a binary judgment, this analysis argues that both films occupy an ambivalent position. They simultaneously challenge the trope by highlighting student agency and teacher fallibility, while reinforcing it through narrative structure, character centralization, and emotional framing. Drawing on Hughey's analysis of white savior cinema and Green and Brock's theory of narrative transportation, this essay explores how these films resist and reproduce racial hierarchies. The analysis reveals that even as cinematic representations evolve toward more collaborative portrayals, they risk normalizing the notion that educational transformation depends on exceptional white individuals, thereby obscuring structural inequalities.

1. Introduction

Educational films often occupy a special place in popular culture because they combine emotional storytelling with moral purpose. They frequently depict teachers as agents of transformation, especially when working with students from marginalized or minority backgrounds. These narratives suggest that education is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but also a means of healing trauma, overcoming social barriers, and reshaping identities. One of the most well-known examples of this genre is *Freedom Writers*, which portrays Erin Gruwell, a white female teacher who inspires a racially diverse group of students to confront violence, discrimination, and academic disengagement through writing and mutual understanding. The film has been widely praised for its uplifting message and its emphasis on empathy and perseverance. However, it has also been criticized for reproducing the "white savior" trope, a narrative pattern in which white protagonists are framed as heroic figures who rescue non-white characters from hardship.

A contrasting perspective is offered by the French film *The Class*, which presents a more restrained and realistic portrayal of classroom life. Its protagonist, François Marin, is also a white teacher working with students from immigrant and minority backgrounds. Yet unlike *Freedom Writers*, this film avoids dramatic emotional arcs and instead focuses on everyday interactions, misunderstandings, and conflicts within the classroom. Marin is not portrayed as a heroic figure but as a flawed educator

navigating institutional constraints and cultural complexity.

By comparing these two films, this essay critically examines whether Erin Gruwell and François Marin can genuinely be considered "white saviors." Rather than offering a simple binary judgment, this paper argues that both films occupy an ambivalent position. On one hand, they undermine traditional white savior narratives by highlighting student agency, reciprocal learning, and teacher limitations. On the other hand, they reinforce aspects of the trope through narrative structure, character centralization, and emotional framing. Drawing on Hughey's analysis of white savior cinema and Green and Brock's theory of narrative transportation, this essay explores how these films simultaneously resist and reproduce racial hierarchies, and how audiences may unconsciously absorb these messages through emotional immersion.

2. Literature Review

The concept of the "white savior" in film has been extensively theorized within critical race and media studies. A foundational text in this field is Matthew W. Hughey's *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*^[1]. Hughey defines the genre as one in which a white protagonist rescues people of color from their circumstances, often affirming the white character's moral superiority in the process. He argues that these narratives are not merely benign entertainment but serve to reinforce racial hierarchies by framing white intervention as the primary catalyst for social change. In his earlier work, Hughey introduced the concept of "cinesthetic racism" to describe how films can appear progressive while simultaneously reaffirming racial stereotypes and power structures through emotional and aesthetic techniques^[2].

Complementing this, Green and Brock's theory of narrative transportation provides a psychological framework for understanding audience reception^[3]. They posit that when individuals become deeply immersed in a story—experiencing narrative transportation—they are less likely to engage in critical counter-arguing. This process allows audiences to absorb story-consistent ideas without conscious reflection. When applied to white savior films, this theory suggests that viewers may uncritically accept problematic racial dynamics because their emotional investment is aligned with the white protagonist.

While much of the existing literature focuses on overtly heroic white savior narratives, this essay contributes to the field by examining the ambivalent cases of *Freedom Writers* and *The Class*. These films represent a more nuanced evolution of the trope, where the white protagonists are portrayed as vulnerable and collaborative, yet still occupy a central, authoritative narrative position. By integrating Hughey's and Green and Brock's frameworks, this analysis aims to reveal how these films subtly navigate the tension between progressive messaging and the reproduction of racial hierarchy.

Although *Freedom Writers* centers on Erin Gruwell, the film does not fully conform to the classic white savior formula. One of its most significant departures from this model lies in how Erin's relationship with her students is constructed. Rather than presenting herself as morally superior or culturally dominant, Erin approaches her students with openness, humility, and a willingness to learn from them. From the beginning, she struggles to establish authority in the classroom. The students openly challenge her, ignore her lessons, and resist participation. This initial failure is crucial, as it disrupts the immediate emergence of a heroic savior figure.

Instead of arriving as a ready-made solution to the students' problems, Erin must gradually earn their trust. This portrayal aligns with Hughey's argument that narratives exposing the limitations and vulnerabilities of white protagonists can weaken messianic representations^[2]. Erin is not depicted as omnipotent; she is inexperienced, frustrated, and uncertain. Her growth as a teacher occurs alongside the students' development, suggesting a process of mutual learning rather than unilateral rescue.

A pivotal element of the film is Erin's introduction of journal writing. She encourages students to

record their daily experiences, emotions, and memories. Importantly, this activity is framed not as a strict academic assignment but as an opportunity for personal expression. This shift toward student-centered storytelling is central to understanding how the film challenges the white savior narrative. Through their journals, students reclaim control over their own stories. They are no longer silent subjects of institutional neglect but active narrators of their lived realities. Hughey emphasizes that when marginalized characters are granted narrative autonomy, it disrupts the logic of external salvation.^[1] In *Freedom Writers*, transformation emerges from the students' willingness to confront their pasts and connect with one another, not solely from Erin's guidance. The students themselves drive the emotional breakthroughs, with Erin functioning more as a facilitator than a savior.

A similar dynamic can be observed in *The Class*. François Marin engages students in open discussions about language, identity, and literature. Rather than delivering moral lessons, he invites debate and accepts disagreement. Students frequently challenge his authority, question the relevance of the curriculum, and express frustration with institutional expectations. The classroom becomes a space of negotiation rather than domination.

The film's documentary-style realism further undermines heroic framing. There is no dramatic climax or inspirational montage. Instead, everyday conflicts unfold organically, revealing the complexity of teacher-student relationships. Marin is shown making mistakes, misinterpreting student behavior, and struggling to manage classroom tensions. Importantly, *The Class* presents students as multidimensional individuals with distinct personalities, ambitions, and frustrations. They are not portrayed as a homogenous group awaiting salvation. Hughey argues that such diverse representations restore subjectivity to minority characters, resisting their reduction to objects of white benevolence.^[1] Both films therefore complicate the traditional white savior narrative by emphasizing reciprocal relationships and student participation.

Despite the ways in which both films complicate the white savior trope, they also reproduce many of its defining features. One of the most immediate elements is the racial identity of the protagonists themselves. Erin Gruwell in *Freedom Writers* and François Marin in *The Class* are both white educators placed at the narrative center of stories about minority students. Regardless of the filmmakers' intentions, this framing reinforces the idea that meaningful educational change originates from white authority figures.

In *Freedom Writers*, this dynamic is particularly evident through the emphasis placed on Erin's personal sacrifices. The film repeatedly highlights her willingness to invest her own money in classroom materials, work multiple jobs, and devote nearly all of her time to her students. Her marriage deteriorates as a result of her professional commitment, and she ultimately chooses her students over her personal life. These narrative choices construct Erin as a morally elevated figure whose selflessness distinguishes her from others around her. Hughey notes that white savior films often frame protagonists through narratives of individual heroism and moral redemption.^[1] While the students' struggles are acknowledged, Erin's internal conflict receives disproportionate attention, reinforcing her status as the story's primary agent of change.

At the same time, the film simplifies structural inequality. Issues such as racism, gang violence, and institutional neglect are introduced early on but gradually fade into the background as Erin's influence grows. Rather than depicting students actively confronting these systemic forces, the narrative suggests that personal encouragement and classroom connection are sufficient to overcome them. This creates an impression that deep-rooted social problems can be resolved through individual compassion alone, contributing to what Hughey describes as "cinesthetic racism."^[2]

Although *The Class* adopts a more restrained tone, it also reproduces aspects of the white savior narrative in subtler ways. François Marin does not perform dramatic acts of sacrifice, nor is he portrayed as a heroic figure. However, he remains the central mediator of classroom life. His authority is embedded within institutional structures, and his perspective frames the audience's understanding

of events. These interactions reveal an implicit hierarchy: Marin controls grading, discipline, and access to academic legitimacy. Even when students challenge him, ultimate authority rests with him. This dynamic reflects Hughey's observation that white savior narratives sometimes operate through subtler forms of dominance, in which white characters occupy central positions of interpretation and control.^[2]

Another significant aspect of both films is the absence of minority educators or community leaders in meaningful roles. The responsibility for guiding students is placed almost entirely on white teachers. This reinforces the implicit assumption that marginalized communities require external intervention to achieve progress. By failing to depict alternative sources of mentorship or leadership, the films limit the imagined possibilities of empowerment from within these communities.

Green and Brock's concept of narrative transportation provides an important theoretical framework for understanding why audiences often fail to recognize white savior dynamics in films such as *Freedom Writers* and *The Class*.^[3] Narrative transportation refers to the psychological process through which viewers become absorbed in a story world, emotionally and cognitively disengaging from their immediate reality.

In *Freedom Writers*, narrative transportation is carefully constructed through cinematic techniques such as emotional music, close-up shots of students' faces, and a linear redemption arc. The audience is guided to identify primarily with Erin Gruwell's emotional journey. This emotional alignment has significant consequences. Rather than critically examining the racialized power dynamics between teacher and students, viewers become invested in Erin's personal success. The students' growth is framed as a reward for Erin's perseverance, reinforcing the idea that positive outcomes stem from her dedication. As Green and Brock argue, transportation reduces counter-arguing and increases acceptance of narrative messages, allowing problematic assumptions to pass unnoticed beneath the surface of emotional engagement.^[3]

The effect is compounded by the film's emphasis on inspirational closure. Graduation scenes, public recognition, and moments of gratitude provide affective resolution, encouraging audiences to leave with a sense of optimism and moral satisfaction. These emotionally charged endings discourage deeper reflection on unresolved structural inequalities, transforming systemic injustice into a background element overshadowed by individual redemption.

Although *The Class* employs a more subdued aesthetic, it similarly relies on transportation through realism. Its handheld camera work, naturalistic dialogue, and non-professional actors create a sense of authenticity that draws viewers into the classroom environment. Audiences become immersed in everyday interactions, disciplinary conflicts, and moments of misunderstanding. This immersion encourages empathy for Marin as he navigates professional challenges, even when his authority is questioned. Here, narrative transportation operates through identification with institutional struggle, framing him as a relatable figure caught within a complex system. As a result, audiences may sympathize with his frustrations while overlooking how his structural power shapes student experiences.

Crucially, narrative transportation also limits the visibility of alternative viewpoints. Because both films organize their emotional trajectories around white teachers, audiences are less likely to imagine what these stories would look like if told primarily from students' perspectives or from within marginalized communities themselves. The transportive experience naturalizes the teacher-centered framework, making it feel inevitable rather than constructed. Green and Brock emphasize that transported audiences show increased belief in story-consistent ideas, allowing white savior logic to persist in subtle and normalized forms.^[3]

3. Conclusion

Beyond their immediate narratives, *Freedom Writers* and *The Class* also invite broader reflection on how educational success is culturally imagined and represented. These films do not merely tell individual stories; they participate in shaping collective beliefs about teaching, authority, and social mobility. By centering white educators as emotional anchors, they implicitly reinforce the idea that transformation emerges through exceptional individuals rather than through sustained structural change or community-based agency.

This representational pattern has important implications for how audiences understand inequality. When progress is framed primarily through interpersonal relationships, systemic barriers risk being perceived as secondary or even irrelevant. The emphasis on personal perseverance and emotional connection, while powerful, may inadvertently obscure the roles of policy, institutional funding, and social stratification in shaping educational outcomes. As a result, responsibility for change is shifted onto individual teachers rather than distributed across broader social systems.

At the same time, these films reveal the complexity of contemporary white savior narratives. Unlike earlier cinematic portrayals, Erin Gruwell and François Marin are not depicted as flawless heroes. Their vulnerability, uncertainty, and emotional labor suggest an evolving representation of whiteness in educational contexts—one that seeks to appear collaborative rather than authoritative. Yet this evolution does not eliminate hierarchy; instead, it reframes it in more subtle and emotionally palatable forms.

Recognizing this tension allows for a more nuanced engagement with educational cinema. Viewers need not reject these films outright, nor ignore their genuine contributions to discussions of empathy and pedagogy. Rather, critical awareness enables audiences to appreciate their emotional resonance while questioning the structural assumptions embedded within their storytelling. Such reflection is essential if media representations are to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward more equitable portrayals of agency, resilience, and collective empowerment. Ultimately, examining *Freedom Writers* and *The Class* through the lens of the white savior narrative highlights how deeply cultural meanings are woven into seemingly inspirational stories. By remaining attentive to whose voices are foregrounded and whose experiences are mediated, audiences and educators alike can foster more critical conversations about race, education, and the true sources of social change.

References

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