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Casey R. Kelly

Butler University, [crkelly@butler.edu](mailto:crkelly@butler.edu)

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## **Feminine Purity and Masculine Revenge-Seeking In *Taken* (2008)**

**Casey Ryan Kelly**

### **Abstract**

The 2008 film *Taken* depicts the murderous rampage of an ex-CIA agent seeking to recover his teenage daughter from foreign sex traffickers. I argue that *Taken* articulates a demand for a white male protector to serve as both guardian and avenger of white women's "purity" against the purportedly violent and sexual impulses of third world men. A neocolonial narrative retold through film, *Taken* infers that the protection of white feminine purity legitimates both male conquest abroad and overbearing protection of young women at home. I contend that popular films such as *Taken* are a part of the broader cultural system of representing social reality that elicit popular adherence to common-sense myths of white masculinity, feminine purity, and Orientalism.

**Keywords:** *Taken*. Whiteness, revenge-seeking, purity myth, masculinity

In the 2008 film *Taken*, retired CIA agent Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson) uses his espionage and counterterrorism training to rescue his teenage daughter Kim (Maggie Grace) from a French-Albanian crime syndicate that abducts, drugs, and sells young white women into forced prostitution. Rather than wait for the police, Bryan takes matters into his own hands. He travels to Paris and brutally assaults, tortures, and murders nearly everyone associated with his daughter's abduction. All totaled, Bryan kills thirty-five people throughout the course of the film. Ultimately, he is able to save Kim and exact revenge on her captors. At the film's climax, Bryan executes the wealthy Arab sheik who purchased Kim, preventing him from consummating a final act of sexual violation. After a long estrangement, Bryan's display of heroism brings the two closer and compensates for his absence during her childhood. *Taken* was one of the most popular action-adventures of 2008, grossing over US\$145 million (Internet Movie Database 2012). Though critical of producer Luc Besson's fondness for spectacular violence, many reviewers noted that *Taken* was a guilty pleasure. Lemire (2009) provides perhaps the best summation when she writes, "it's all sordid and unseemly but if you can get past that, *Taken* is also unexpectedly fun in a guilty-pleasure sort of way." LaSalle (2009, e3) admitted that "the placement of an archetypal American character, the avenging action hero, wreaking havoc through the Paris streets has some dark appeal." Some critics expressed mild hesitation about the film's xenophobic undertones, but admitted that they were attracted to the film's preposterous narrative.

Beyond satiating guilty desires, what makes the protagonist redeemable is heroic defense of his daughter's purity against a dark and sexually-marauding enemy. In this regard, *Taken* is an old story retold. The motifs of revenge and innocence expressed in the film bear resemblance to the structure of other troubling narratives that have served as historic rationalizations for white masculine violence against racial Others, including stories of Puritan women taken captive by "savages" on the colonial frontier (Engels and Goodale 2009; Hall 1981; Ono 2009), the prescription of lynching to defend white women's virtue against the American South's mythic black rapist (Bederman 1995; Davis 1983), and the repressive panic over *white slavery* in which young women were purportedly abducted by foreign vice trusts and sold into prostitution (Connelly 1980; Donovan 2006; Grittner 1990, Soderlund 2002). During these panics, the violation of white women's purity by dark and foreign elements provided an occasion for purification, redemption, and restoration of moral order through masculine violence. Watts (2005, 191) argues that the "Great White protector" is a long-standing myth in Western culture, often utilized as a pretense for preserving white masculine supremacy over women and people of color. He notes:

White masculinity is charged with the moral obligation to confront and conquer dark threats to white purity and innocence. White spirit requires sublimation as dark forces encroach upon it. In particular, white women need protection and control because sexual relations invite "impurities" in the form of dark desires. Thus, white women are conceived paradoxically as "virgin/whores," as both innocent and fallen (Dyer 1997, 28). (Watts 2005, 191)

Similarly, this essay suggests that the ongoing salience of these tropes in the film *Taken* points to how archaic demands for patriarchy and whiteness still pervade our cinematic landscape. According to Ono (2009), contemporary film and television are saturated with what he calls neocolonial narratives that revise, update, and refashion historical justifications for racism, colonialism, and white male supremacy in new contexts. And so, the "dark appeal" of *Taken* can

be explained in part by its reliance on familiar discourses, imagery, and axioms legitimating the ongoing need for the great white male protector.

In this essay, I argue that *Taken* articulates a cultural demand for a white male protector to serve as both guardian and avenger of white women's purity against the violent and sexual impulses of racial "Others." In the film, the threat of "dark" masculinity from the East summons forth a white hero (Bryan), to slay the enemies of civilization and protect the sexual purity of white women. As a consequence of this cinematic retelling, *Taken* implies that the protection of white feminine purity legitimates both white masculine revenge-seeking and overbearing protection of young women. While on its surface *Taken* is the story of a father willing to do anything to rescue his daughter, the narrative shares a likeness in structure with the discourses of historic sex panics in which violence and repression were seen as essential to protect white women against dark-skinned predators. The film uses an icon of feminine virtue to excuse the use of force against uncivilized men and invites popular audiences to sympathize with extreme acts of cruelty. In particular, the film's representation of sex trafficking as a superlative evil and omnipresent danger awaiting young women who leave the safety of home and country establishes the need for strong male protection against uncivilized, foreign, and racialized enemies. While *Taken* is a fictive text, I suggest that popular films are a part of the broader cultural system of representing social reality and therefore play an important role in eliciting popular adherence to common-sense myths concerning masculinity, femininity, and whiteness. Throughout the essay, I argue that *Taken* endorses repressive and misinformed approaches to protecting young girls from sexual exploitation by drawing parallels between the film's narrative, discourses celebrating young women's purity, white male heroism, and racialized fears of sexual contamination.

### **The White Protector and the Action–Adventure Ideology**

Long-standing cultural myths are updated and amplified when they enter the medium of film, as cinematic representations have the power to give substance and form to everyday discourses. Ryan and Kellner (1988, 13) conceive of popular films as discursively "transcoding" social life and history onto the big screen, and therefore transferring cultural struggles "from one discursive field to another" (13). As such, films can be interpreted as "the site of a contest of representations over what social reality will be perceived as being and indeed will be" (13). Films are not reflections of an external reality, but are part of a cultural system of representing social reality that elicits popular adherence to common-sense ideals. *Taken* is not significant as a single text, rather as one illustrative of a variety of circulating myths and anxieties over the perceived frailty of whiteness and masculinity. In other words, *Taken* is a text in which broader discourses valorizing white masculine protection and feminine purity are discursively codified as reasonable commitments to taken-for-granted belief structures.

Here I draw from the Gramscian notion of hegemony to situate *Taken* as an ideological text that elicits consent from mass audiences to white masculinity and supremacy. Working from Antonio Gramsci, Cloud (1996, 118) explains that power relations in capitalist societies are not maintained by economic and military force alone, but also through the production of ideologies: discourses, concepts, and images that "become the taken-for-granted common sense of the society." In other words, hegemony is attained through the diffusion of the preferred ideas and interests of the

powerful into the fabric of mainstream society (Artz and Murphy 2000). Though they are fictive texts, films play an important role in cultivating hegemonic ideals on issues of race and gender by equipping popular audiences with dominant cultural logics, inviting them to identify with and inhabit idealized subject positions, and attesting to the common-sense of the images and narrative produced on screen (Hoerl 2008; Nichols 1981). Vera and Gordon (2003, 15) use the term “sincere fictions” to elaborate how hegemonic whiteness and masculinity operate not as the overt message of Hollywood films, but as taken-for-granted assumptions that take on the appearance of being innate, unchanging, and necessary structures of social existence. This concept of film elaborates on Hall's (1981) earlier contention that racist ideologies in the media function “inferentially,” drawing from a history of unquestioned racist assumptions that naturalize the existing social order. Zavarzadeh (1991, 8) adds that as popularly consumed texts, films help naturalize “the limits of ideology” and

by appealing to the commonsensical “obviousness” it has produced, the film instructs audiences on how to make sense of the global reality of the culture—how to fit together the details of reality to compose a coherent model of relations and coherence through which an all-encompassing picture of the real emerges.

No matter how preposterous, a film's internal coherence and consistency with some aspect of what feels intuitively real, resonate, plausible, natural, or otherwise obvious warrants popular assent to hegemonic ideals.

An analysis of *Taken* therefore offers entrance into circulating ideologies of whiteness and masculinity. As Dyer (1997) demonstrates in his study of white popular culture, the blockbuster US action film typically venerates and reaffirms hegemonic, if not spiritual conceptions of masculine whiteness. Throughout the genre, the threat of “dark” masculinity to white femininity summons forth what both Dyer (1997) and Watts (2005) refer to as the mythic white hero, whose masculinity is tested and forged discursively through trial and triumph over racial Others. I argue that cinematic revenge narratives draw from the mythos of white heroism to legitimize violence as the exclusive terrain of the white male, unquestioningly necessary for the proper functioning of law and order. As Nakayama and Krizek (1995, 293) explain, the power of whiteness is that it renders white identities and practices “the norm by which Others are marked.” Dubrofsky (2011, 30) adds that strategic whiteness “maintains whiteness as the norm and makes whiteness implicitly desirable and, in fact the only option.” This essay adds to scholarly work on both whiteness and masculinity by mapping the ways in which cinematic revenge narratives normalize white male violence as both desirable and necessary for the survival of civilization. In revenge narratives, “saving women” often provides the ultimate test of masculinity, as her rescue symbolizes the restoration of moral order. *Taken* is an exemplary text to showcase the ways in which revenge-seeking in popular culture is implicitly racialized and gendered.

More than any other genre, the popular American action film puts mythic white masculinity on display as a heroic response to the direct threat of dark masculinity.

Consider early American cinema such as D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) in which the Ku Klux Klan heroic triumphs over the sexually-aggressive black male of the Reconstruction South, or John Ford's genre-defining Western *Stage coach* (1939) in which the archetypal Western hero (John Wayne) single-handedly defends a caravan of white settlers against a horde of blood-

thirsty Indians. *Taken* can be situated in a series of similar contemporary films that demonstrate a cultural commitment to mythic white masculinity and feminine purity. For instance, the action-adventure blockbuster frequently summons white men to adventure and conquest in foreign lands (*Conan the Barbarian*, *Dune*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Rambo II*, *Star Wars*, *The Expendables*, *The Lord of the Rings*), valorizes white masculine triumph over foreign or alien enemies (*Big Trouble in Little China*, *Blackhawk Down*, *Commando*, *Predator*, *Stargate*), lionizes lone male vigilantes (*Death Wish*, *Die Hard*, *Dirty Harry*, *Falling Down*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Rambo*, *Robocop*) and creates an exigence for white men to protect white women against dark masculinity (*Flash Gordon*, *Romancing the Stone*, *The Limey*, *The Professional*). Each section of the analysis elaborates on a series of ideological commitments to white masculinity and femininity expressed in the film and connects them to the social contexts from which they draw and contribute.

### **White Women and the Purity of Protection**

In *Taken*, female characters are either passive objects in need of protection or fallen women who haplessly invite violence and pain onto themselves and others. Women are either “good girls” deserved of male protection or “bad women” whose pursuit of autonomy invites violence and sexual aggression. Kim is the film's “good girl”: chaste, innocent, passive, and in need of male protection. At seventeen, she possesses the physical maturity and cognition of an adult but lacks the agency to make her own choices. Her innocence is accentuated by her poor decisions, childish mannerism, behavior, and dress, but most of all by the film's focus on her virginity. For instance, Kim's travel companion Amanda tells her that she intends to sleep with a young man they meet on their trip to Paris. Kim, who admits her virginity, clearly disapproves. Amanda has a much more casual attitude and comments, “you got to lose it [virginity] sometime, it might as well be in Paris.” The contrast between the two amplifies Kim's innocence and naiveté. By following Amanda to Paris, Kim forsakes the protection of her father and renders herself vulnerable to the world's cruelty. As the film's jezebel, Amanda places Kim in harm's way. Later in the movie, Amanda pays for her transgressions with her life at the hands of sex trafficking thugs.

*Taken* constructs ideal femininity—or the type of womanhood worthy of male protection—around an antiquated notion of “true womanhood” that renders white women the repository for civilization's moral virtue. Derived from a Victorian construction of femininity, discourses of “true womanhood” emphasized the natural submissiveness, passivity, domesticity, and moral prudence of women (Campbell 1989; Welter 1966). Being the “fairer sex,” women were viewed as the protectors of society's moral fabric, particularly in the home. As a metonymy for the values of Euro-American civilization, the subject of true womanhood was also implicitly white. Therefore, she was always embattled by the savage and lustful impulses of uncivilized men. Given the stake invested in “true womanhood,” gender transgressions often involved severe censure, ranging from the “unsexing” of women who sought autonomy to the loss of male protection from sexual violence. In fact, it was believed that without male protection, sexual victimization was virtually guaranteed (Buescher and Ono 1996). Paradoxically, “saving women” provided an ideal test of white masculine power, granting men the opportunity to both save the icon of civilization while triumphing over its external enemies.

These types of feminine attributes are amplified in the first half of the film by Bryan's sentimental effort to recover his lost relationship with Kim, an endeavor designed to delay her transition to adulthood and reassert his paternal authority. For Bryan, Kim is still the child he left behind for his career in intelligence. Lenore (Bryan's ex-wife) and Stuart (Lenore's new husband) are comfortable with Kim "growing up" and they encourage her to experience the world. After his retirement, Bryan moves to Los Angeles to rekindle his relationship with his estranged daughter. The film begins with Bryan preparing for Kim's seventeenth birthday. He purchases a karaoke machine and wraps it in childish paper. These establishing shots lay the foundation for the fundamental clash between Bryan and her mother Lenore, which is ultimately a moral conflict over Kim's burgeoning womanhood. While Kim is excited to see Bryan and is pleased by the gift, Lenore is visibly irritated. Kim embraces Bryan and whispers: "I still want to be a singer, just don't tell mom." This exchange illustrates that though Kim will enter adulthood, she retains some child-like innocence. But, the moment is disrupted when Stuart presents Kim with a pet horse. Stuart quips "she's not a little girl anymore," to which Bryan laments "I guess not." Overall, the film cultivates discomfort with Lenore and Stuart's desire to quicken Kim's entry into womanhood.

Bryan's efforts to shield Kim from the dangers of the outside world are threatened by Lenore. While Bryan relates to Kim exclusively through her childhood, Lenore pushes her headlong into adulthood. Bryan and Lenore's struggle over Kim's burgeoning womanhood develops in a series of exchanges over Bryan's future role in her life and her desire to travel to Europe. On the one hand, Bryan nurtures and protects her child-like qualities. In part, Kim is willing to indulge Bryan's sentimental feelings; however, she also desires to experience the world. Not surprisingly, Bryan is shocked at Kim's request to travel to Paris with Amanda. He asserts his paternal authority in response: "I am not comfortable with this, I know the world sweetie ... I don't think a 17 year old should be traveling alone." On the other hand, Lenore displays mistaken faith in Kim's maturity and independence. She thwarts Bryan's renewed efforts to play a role in Kim's upbringing and dismisses his concerns for Kim's safety as paranoid and overbearing. Her glib attitude toward Kim's adulthood makes Lenore appear to be reckless about her own parenting responsibilities. Exchanges between Bryan and Lenore over issues related to parenting confirm that though Lenore may have been able to raise Kim in his absence, only Bryan knows how to keep Kim safe. Here, the film makes an interesting statement about proper parenting and motherhood. Even though Bryan was an absent father and husband, Lenore is the one portrayed as the uncaring, hapless parent who is not properly concerned with Kim's safety. Lenore's reticence about Bryan's return to Kim's life is depicted as neither concern nor protection. Instead, Lenore is constructed as an unfit mother, an emasculating shrew who challenges Bryan's authority at every turn. Bryan and Lenore's struggle over Kim implies that both women's protection and autonomy come at a price.

As Young (2003, 224) notes, "central to the logic of masculinist protection is the subordinate relation of those in the protected position. In return for male protection, the woman concedes critical distance and decision-making autonomy." In assuming the role of protector, Bryan shields women from the harms of the outside world, but at the cost of their submission and adoration. Whereas "good girls" accept the need for protection, "bad women" who move without the guidance of men invite aggression from the cruel outside world. The film's depiction of Lenore and Kim mimics the logic of "protection rackets," an analogy Peterson (1977) employs to explain

women's relationship to men in terms of gang-style extortion: women who seek autonomy from their husbands or fathers forgo their protection. *Taken* affirms the necessity of protection rackets by punishing female characters who move without the support and validation of Bryan; but, women who stay true to the expectations of their gender are rewarded with protection and salvation.

### **Sexual Liberation and Its Victims**

In Bryan's search for Kim after her abduction, the film spotlights sex trafficking as a contemporary threat facing women who leave the protection of home. Like Kim, the victims of sex trafficking are depicted as young, innocent, and passive victims of male lust. *Taken* depicts legal and tolerated prostitution as partially responsible for the rise of the illicit sex trade, and thus as responsible for Kim's abduction. Here, I argue that film presents a regressive view of sexual liberation, one in which toleration for sexual promiscuity (women's impurity) invites perverse and extreme acts of male sexual cruelty. Put differently, sexual coercion and forced prostitution are attributed to the erosion of traditional gender roles, brought on by the impurity of women and the moral weakness of men. As a result, the film not only reifies patriarchal norms but also tacitly rejects the notion that women exercise any agency within the sex industry. As a consequence, the film cultivates a strong sentiment toward neo-traditional gender roles and overbearing protection of young women.

First, the setting of Paris enables the film to connect casual attitudes toward sexuality with violence and exploitation. In popular and literary culture, Paris is historically associated with the Bohemian lifestyles and social attitudes of artists, writers, actors, musicians, and vagabonds; an epicenter of unconventional thought, anti-orthodoxy, and free love. The Bohemian backdrop for such cruelty suggests that Kim and Amanda lack protection because they have entered a foreign culture that is permissive of moral deviance, free love, and prostitution. In part, the weakness of French men is to blame: their tolerance for immorality, their effeminacy and inability to repress their dark sexual desires create an atmosphere in which women's exploitation hides in plain sight. *Taken's* depiction of the global sex industry suggests to audiences that its violent and criminal aspects are fueled by sexual liberation gone awry.

The prevalence of sex trafficking in Paris is portrayed as a problem of moral permissiveness. After Kim's abduction, the film focuses on Bryan's efforts to infiltrate a foreign human trafficking ring that kidnaps American girls to be sold for sex around the world. Using his CIA contacts, Bryan ascertains that the group focuses on exploiting innocent American tourists. The film places special emphasis on the purportedly new and innocent victims of prostitution. The global sex industry is represented as no longer being populated with fallen women who flaunt traditional morality, but instead the very figure of true womanhood. The trafficking of young girls represents the logical limits of prostitution. A culture that entertains dark desires and permits the degradation of women through prostitution will itself cannibalize even its most prized symbols of purity. Indeed, this depiction calls for the eradication of prostitution to save the innocent from being swept up in its wake.

The image of the young, innocent victim of prostitution also legitimizes extreme and moralizing responses to contemporary sexual exploitation. For instance, Doezema (2000, 24) explains that



this image of the naïve girl abducted or coerced by evil traffickers “bears as little resemblance to women migrating for work in the sex industry as did her historical counterpart, the ‘white slave’.” Empirical data demonstrate that most of the world's traffic in women is elective, flows from East to West, and exists within the garment, restaurant, and service industries (Doezema 1998; Sharma 2005). Moreover, there is virtually no documentation of a systemic trade in abducted Western women in Eastern Europe or the Middle East. Of course, films should not be critiqued merely for their lack of verisimilitude; however, *Taken's* framing of prostitution as a modern slave trade, composed of innocent white women, accentuates the importance of traditional sexual morality and male strength for women's protection.

With its emphasis on abducted girls, the film tacitly endorses an abolitionist view of the global sex industry; a perspective that all sex work is exploitation. Abolitionists oppose legal prostitution, contending that it creates a welcoming environment for violence against women (Weitzer 2007). In accordance with an abolitionist analysis, Bryan begins his search for Kim by infiltrating the world of tolerated prostitution in Paris. Indeed, Paris and its law enforcement personnel are portrayed as having little concern for or control over the exploitation of women. Scenes of the city show ubiquitous advertisements with scantily-clothed models and women walking the street in sexually-suggestive clothing. The combination of these depictions constructs a welcoming attitude toward all forms of sexual exploitation, an environment in which illicit trafficking could plausibly exist.

The film also uses the setting of France to contrast rugged American masculinity with European effeminacy. While Bryan is framed as the benchmark of manhood, European men are weak, infirm, sexually immoral, or sexually aggressive. For example, Bryan uncovers a vast trafficking ring connected to legal prostitution, high-class socialites, and corrupt public officials. He meets with his long-time contact in French intelligence Jean-Claude, who informs him that all aspects of the Parisian sex trade are controlled primarily by immigrants. Despite his awareness of the problem, it is curious that Jean-Claude does not offer any special police attention. He seems more concerned with keeping his job when he reminds Bryan to “remember who he's talking to.” The film presents French law enforcement as arrogant yet impotent. As the narrative continues, the film reveals that Jean-Claude actually receives large bribes to protect illicit trafficking in Paris. This representation of French society as weak and immoral is plausible because it builds off existing cultural imagery.

As Fahey (2007) notes, it is not uncommon for French men to be represented as elitist, emasculated, impotent, and morally corrupt. For instance, films such as *National Lampoon's European Vacation*, *French Kiss*, *Forget Paris*, and *EuroTrip* exemplify how French men are typically categorized as sexual dilantants, arrogant waiters, drunkards, and criminals. In *The Pink Panther* (1963) Peter Seller's portrayal of Inspector Clouseau elaborates on popular perceptions that French men also suffer from conceit and bumbling weakness. In *Talladega Nights*, Sacha Baron Cohen portrays a sexually-charged gay race car driver who confirms for audiences that French men are hyper-effeminate, homosexual, and sexually-aggressive. Overall, American films reflect a generally very low opinion of the French. In fact, a 2009 Pew Research study confirms that American attitudes toward France were the worst of America's European allies.

Of course, anti-French attitudes in the US have been amplified by France's opposition to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In addition to withholding state visits and cooperation with France on substantive policy issues, Republican lawmakers symbolically censured France by changing the word “French fries” to “freedom fries” in the House of Representatives cafeteria (*CBS News*2010). In an environment in which the French are so despised, French immorality and weakness provides a fitting foil to rugged American masculinity. Bryan finds that it is the French tolerance for immorality that disguises an illicit sex trade. Posing as an inquisitive client, Bryan discovers a brothel disguised as a public construction site with make-shift rooms and dirty mattresses, housing dozens of kidnapped women. Construction workers ignore or perhaps even join the long line of suspicious John's waiting outside for their turn.

By situating spectacular acts of exploitation within a mundane setting, the film blurs distinctions between conditions of voluntary and forced prostitution. First, this scene infers that tolerated or legal prostitution attracts unwelcome outsiders who will take advantage of tolerance to exploit women. In short, the legal and illicit portions of the sex industry are intimately connected: where prostitution is tolerated publicly, sex slavery will flourish secretly. Second, this scene implies that once sexual exploitation becomes common-place, its most extreme forms will flourish in everyday settings. The ring leaders operate openly in front of workers who either barely take notice or perhaps participate as collaborators or customers. The audience is left with the impression that the workers find nothing wrong with the operation. The depiction is of a society so thoroughly corrupted by deviant sexual morality that it cannot tell the difference between prostitution and slavery. Finally, this scene emphasizes the severe cruelty of the perpetrators and the innocence of the victims. The scene's arrangement implies that the traffickers convert women into dehumanized commercial products. The coercive, dirty, and unwelcoming environment encourages audiences to disassociate prostitution from sexual pleasure or autonomy. Since the male customers waiting in line do not seem particularly excited or aroused, the audience can infer that their motives are indistinct from the proprietors.

### **Justice for the Perpetrators**

The film also uses French weakness and sexual immorality to frame Bryan's vigilante law enforcement campaign as a necessary endeavor. In other words, Bryan's revenge-seeking is compensation for the weak masculinity of French and non-Western men. The potential violation of the film's reverent object of purity even excuses the most extreme acts of cruelty. I argue that the film's framing of revenge as white heroism invites the audience to witness, rationalize, and even vicariously experience the act of violent retribution. The film cultivates a desire for vengeance, to see the crimes perpetrated upon young girls to be revisited on their kidnappers. Even excessive rage is portrayed as merely balancing the scales of justice. As Buescher and Ono (1996, 132) observe, such narratives “construct the audience as *a sympathizer with acts of vengeance.*”

The film also reinforces whiteness by normalizing white masculine violence as protective and necessary to the proper function of global law and order.

First, the film constructs extreme violence as a routine and necessary part of Western law enforcement. Above all, the film's sympathetic embrace of torture exemplifies the logical limits of

the white male revenge narrative. For example, when Bryan finally captures the man responsible for Kim's kidnapping (Marko), he conducts a lengthy and violent interrogation. In a dark and filthy basement, Bryan stabs two metal rods into Marko's legs and attaches two jumper cables connected to a light switch. At first, Marko spits in Bryan's face and refuses to answer any questions. In response, Bryan calmly flips the light switch, followed by the flickering sound of humming electric current and the sight of Marko writhing in pain. Bryan's cavalier attitude and remarkable composure during this brutal electrocution renders torture common-place among the tactics of Western law enforcement operations, particularly when innocent girls' lives are at stake. Marko's eventual capitulation also confirms that torture produces results and may be necessary to protect innocents against society's most sinister criminals.

More importantly, the film represents retribution and sadism as acceptable expressions of white masculine rage. Conversely, torture is a befitting end for uncivilized men who exploit women. As Arnault (2003, 175) contends, women are frequently cited as the justification to commit extreme acts of violence against third world men. For bystanders, the abject cruelty of foreign violence against women can “predispose us to become infected with the desire for excessive retribution.” In other words, only excessive violence can adequately compensate for women's suffering and communicate the appropriate amount of moral condemnation to its non-Western male perpetrators. In this way, the film lends support to the idea that violence and conquest in the name of saving women is the natural impulse of the white male hero. For Cloud (2005) the danger of such a discourse is that it contorts Western feminism into an all-encompassing rationalization for military interventions in the global south (e.g., the Taliban's oppression of women is used to justify America's ongoing war in Afghanistan). Therefore, Bryan's desire for excessive retribution seems to be only the natural impulse of the enlightened Western male.

This point is emphasized by Bryan's detachment from Marko's suffering. Bryan's calm demeanor as Marko writhes in agony communicates that he does not feel ambivalence about inflicting pain on guilty parties. With Kim's life in the balance and Marko's guilt a foregone conclusion, audiences are asked to suspend any moral prohibitions that they may have against cruelty and view Marko's torture as practically and morally necessary to the attainment of justice. Thus, when Marko gives him the information he needs, the interrogation phase concludes and the judgment and sentencing phase begins. Begging for his life, Marko pleads that he has given Bryan all the information he knows. Bryan proclaims “I believe you ... but it's not going to save you.” In passing sentence, Bryan executes Marko by flipping the light switch and walking away. Bryan's act of vengeance is portrayed as just and necessary to restoring law and order. In this case, justice for sex crimes victims means vengeance against their perpetrators. To be sure, justice could be portrayed as the due process of law, rehabilitation through the legal system, assistance to survivors of sexual exploitation, or preventative measures that empower women to avoid entering the sex trade. Instead, the film conflates white male violence against non-Western men with justice and women's liberation.

### **Emancipating the Harem**

Turning to the film's depiction of international trafficking illustrates how the filmmakers link the abduction of young white women with the craven sexual appetites of dark-skinned men. The

“purest” of girls are saved for a high-end auction market for wealthy international clients. Near the film's climax, the audience learns that Kim, among several other girls, is destined for the harem of a wealthy Arab man. This depiction of sex trafficking relies on Western imagery of the mythical Eastern harem, an exotic collection of female concubines who serve the fantastical sexual desires of men. Trafficking is portrayed as stocking these harems of the Eastern world with young white women, where they will be made to serve the exotic sexual whims of the Orient. This depiction accesses Orientalist tropes of Eastern mystery and backwardness. In Edward Said's (1978, 3) words, Orientalism is a solipsistic representational system of making the East present to Western eyes “by making statements about, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it.” The harem has a unique history in Orientalist discourse as a kind of brothel containing sensual young women whose sole purpose was to pleasure powerful men. The harem is a projection of Western male sexual fantasies onto the East, an imaging of the Orient as a place of sexual adventurism and conquest (Ahmed 1982; Alloula 1986; Dubrofsky 2006, 2011). Rather than use the harem as a projection of Western sexual desire, *Taken* uses the harem to construct the East as a sexual threat. Instead of infiltrating the harem to gain exclusive access to exotic pleasure, Bryan seeks entry to emancipate the harem from sexual oppression and punish its Oriental perpetrators.

By making a connection between trafficking and the harem, the film posits that Arab men place an astronomically high value on virginal white women. These connections can be seen in the film's construction of a slave auction market for wealthy Arab clients. The market is an underground auction block, where clients bid on young girls from the luxury of lavish private rooms with two-way mirrors, complete with champagne service. The facility is presented as a modern day high-tech slave auction where a female announcer describes the “merchandise” to men in business attire who casually press buttons to bid hundreds of thousands of dollars for girls. All the girls on display are white and, by virtue of their language, dress, and physical features, audiences can infer that the buyers are Arab. The man who purchases Kim also buys two other women, suggesting that they are part of a white harem. The scene emphasizes that young white women are valuable to Arab men because they are embodiments of purity. When Kim appears on the auction block scantily-clad in a bikini, the female announcer boasts, “we saved the best for last ... certified pure.” In this scene, Kim's chastity and innocence becomes the object of sex fetishization for Arab men. Portraits of her disturbingly eroticized body purport to show Kim through the scopic pleasure of a racial Other. This scene relies on the myth that Arab men are sexually-domineering, degrading toward women, and fetishize virgins. These stereotypes persist in large part as a result of Arabs' portrayal by the US film industry. In a survey of 900 US films, Sheehan (2001) finds that Arab men are persistently identified as sexually-threatening, criminal, and violent toward women.

A case-in-point, the particular scene discussed above bares remarkable likeness to one in the spy thriller *Never Say Never Again* when a young white girl is taken prisoner by Muslim terrorists, stripped nude, and sold on an auction block to an Arab sheik. Across a series of other films, Arab men abduct or purchase white slaves, including *The Jewel of the Nile* and *Sahara* in which a sheik-like figure sexually torments the female lead. A number of other films reinforce the general perception that Arab men are domineering and threatening to women. Chief among these are Disney's *Aladdin*, which is riddled with violent and threatening caricatures, as well as Elvis

Presley's light-hearted Orientalism in *Harum Scarum*, and the violence and exoticism of *The Thief of Baghdad*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *True Lies*. Similarly, *Taken* relies on this familiar but negative imagery to accentuate the danger and evil that Bryan faces.

In sum, the contrast of white women's purity against the hyper-sexuality of Arab men emphasizes the supposedly fundamental difference between Western culture and the Orient. The harem imagery confers legitimacy on the notion that the demand for trafficked women is driven by the deviant and uncontrollable sexual impulses of third world men. In this final scene, harem imagery is employed to amplify the evil of the purveyors, the innocence of their victims, and the righteousness of Bryan's revenge. The harem structure of the film's climax is accentuated by the filmmakers construction of the mis-en-scene. As Alloula (1986) and Dubrofsky (2011, 38) contend, visual settings most powerfully signify the qualities of the harem, often characterized by “sumptuous, boudoir-like furniture; the array of sitting rooms with stuffed couches, throw rugs, and oversized pillows; and wall hangings in rich dark colors.” Kim's final destination is precisely such a space: a lavish yacht with grand staircase, dark-colored tapestries, labyrinth-style hallways, white walls, gold trim, and oversized furniture. After the auction concludes, the three newly-purchased girls are shuttled onto the boat wearing white veils and see-through night gowns. Unlike the drugged girls in Parisian brothels, these girls resemble the tantalizing girls of the harem made to fit the unique tastes of powerful men. The guards exchange lines in Arabic and brandish their guns in anticipation of Bryan's rescue attempt. A sheik-like figure lounges on a round bed dressed in a sultan's robe embroidered with stylized Arabian patterns. The surrounding décor is composed of minimalist white walls and furniture, accented with gold trim, assorted vases, and antiquities. Here, the scene's physical composition helps audiences visualize the harem: a heavily guarded palace where powerful men's sexual desires are fulfilled.

The harem's obliteration, along with the death of its sheik, marks the triumph of civilization over barbarism. By destroying the demand for trafficked girls, Bryan restores the moral order and re-establishes his role as paternal protector. During the film's climax, Bryan conquers the ship's guards with lethal force and finds the sheik holding a curved-blade to Kim's throat. Bryan shoots the sheik in the forehead with a single shot. As the two embrace, the shot pulls away to show the boat in ruins, strewn with the debris from Bryan's destruction. Their embrace in the scene of the harem's destruction signifies the unfortunate but necessary cost of Kim's salvation. The restoration of order is more appropriately signified by the quick cut to a well-lit and vibrant Los Angeles airport where Kim and Bryan walk together down the tarmac. Despite the countless toll of his destruction, Bryan is able to return home with Kim. Lenore thanks Bryan for rescuing Kim and whilst in tears, embraces him affectionately. Lenore appears humbled and more appreciative of Bryan's protective role. She is confronted by the difficult truth that protection comes at the expense of autonomy.

### **A Return to Purity and Whiteness**

An analysis of *Taken* illustrates how blockbuster Hollywood films structure adherence to popular myths and ideological assumptions about race and gender hierarchies. While the film offers a preposterous narrative, it gives presence to taken-for-granted assumptions about the proper social roles of white men and women. I have argued that *Taken* reasserts a demand for a white male

protector to serve as both guardian and avenger of white women's purity against the violent and sexual impulses of racial Others. An old story retold, *Taken* draws from a reservoir of historic justifications for white male supremacy and conquest to legitimate the protagonist's use of violence and revenge in defense of white women's honor. This essay contributes to studies on whiteness and masculinity in popular culture by exploring how the continuing valorization of male revenge-seeking against the rape threat of racial Others normalizes white male violence as protective and just. Thus, the film's audience is invited to compromise their own predispositions toward violence and trust in the actions of the male protector on screen. This analysis also elaborates on how an obsession with women's purity might again be utilized as a justification for repression and violence.

This analysis also has implications beyond the film. A critical examination of *Taken* evinces the renewed salience of troubling popular discourses about the virtues of women's purity. The film contributes to a cultural atmosphere that reduces the value of young women to their chastity and crafts social policy around preserving girl's innocence at the cost of their agency. Valenti (2009) explains that the past thirty years has seen the growth of an American virginity movement in which virtuous womanhood is again being defined by wholesomeness, abstinence, and sexual purity. For instance, from 1981 to 2007, more than US\$1.5 billion in federal grants was committed to abstinence-only education (Patterson 2008). During this period, organizations advocating virginity and sexual purity have proliferated, including True Love Waits, Independent Women's Forum, Concerned Women for America, National Abstinence Clearinghouse, National Abstinence Education Association, and the Family Research Council. The National Abstinence Clearinghouse even received US\$2.7 million in federal grants to develop abstinence-only curricula and get teenagers to sign purity pledges (Patterson 2008). Attesting to the impact of these organizations, Hollander (2008, 128) explains that “in 2001 24% of a national sample of sexually inexperienced 12–17-year-olds reported having made a virginity pledge.”

Overwhelmingly, modern virginity advocates discuss sexual purity as a young white woman's imperative and their father's preoccupation. The parenting section of Amazon.com contains dozens of popular titles ranging from Mally's, *Before You Meet Your Prince Charming: A Guide to Radiant Purity* (2006) to Gresh's *Six Ways to Keep the “Little” in Your Girl: Guiding Your Daughters from her Tweens to Her Teens* (2010) and *And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity* (2004). Consider as well the popularity of “purity balls,” father–daughter dances where young girls make public pledges to their fathers to remain chaste. Nearly four thousand balls take place every year, however not one of them emphasizes the virtues of virginity for young men (Fahs 2010; Gillis 2007). Moreover, women's purity has been valorized in American popular culture by celebrity spokespersons such as Miley Cyrus, Brittany Spears, and Bristol Palin, all of who publicly pledged to remain “pure” until marriage. And, the widespread popularity and profitability of the book and film franchise *Twilight*, a vampire allegory that places a premium on young women controlling their sexual impulses as to remain ostensibly human, also attests to purity's welcome reception, grossing US\$1.79 billion (Boorstein 2011). A more ghastly and perhaps pathological dimension to purity culture can be seen in the medical marketing of “rehymenisation” or elective “vaginal rejuvenation” procedures as a part of the movement for women to reclaim their lost virginity (Bernau 2007).

Similarly, *Taken* confirms the legitimacy of purity as a social ideal for young women and, conversely, overbearing protection as a political ideal for chivalrous men. The lesson for young women is that they should delay their transition to adulthood as long as possible and sacrifice their autonomy for protection. “Good girls” assent to socially-acceptable gender roles and move only within the guidance of male protectors. “Bad girls” invite sexual victimization when they forsake their prescribed social roles and usurp male power. This essay's analysis shows how revenge narratives instruct audiences about the appropriateness of traditional gender roles. In short, a stable society is one in which white men are protectors, the white women they seek to defend embody society's virtue, and foreign or dark-skinned men represent the omnipresent threat posed to civilization by dark desires that must be kept at bay through the moral and physical strength of the great protector.

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