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Media, Culture and Identity

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Race, Gender and Representation in *The Help*

*The Help* was a blockbuster hit grossing over $169 million in the U.S. for which Octavia Spencer earned the Oscar for best supporting actress in 2011. However, since the film’s release, one of the starring actresses has raised concerns with its representation of black voices. Viola Davis, who plays Aibileen, has come to regret the film because “at the end of the day that it wasn’t the voices of the maids that were heard” (Desta). With this in mind, I focused my videographic criticism on depicting how *The Help* both exposes and condemns the racial and gender norms of the 1960’s while creating a problematic representation of the African American title characters by showing their story as secondary to the self-actualization of the white main character. Through the dialogue surrounding “colored help bathrooms” and Skeeter’s atypical love life the movie presents a condemnation of archaic racial and gender stereotypes. However, the story’s focus on Skeeter’s transformation rather than the voices of the maids creates a film in which the minority characters are not given their due representation.

In my video, I decided to use quotes from the race, gender, and representation readings boldly in the middle of the screen while the movie’s audio is off. I wanted the quotes stand alone to emphasize the point I am trying to make about that scene or few scenes of the movie. I overlaid different songs that played throughout the duration of the video that were from the movie and I felt went with the theme of the argument I made.

First, my video focuses on how *The Help* depicts race and racial issues of the time period. Set in the 1960’s Mississippi, the movie shows Aibileen and Minny as very strong and courageous in their fight against the current social norms. The most poignant of these racial constraints is the colored bathroom agenda that Hilly Holbrook, a classic 1960’s mother and wife character, pushes throughout the movie. Minny defiantly opposes this in the scene where she slams the toilet as Hilly screams for her to leave the bathroom. Aibileen and Minny thwart the “faithful servant” (Croteau 199) trope by speaking out against unfair racialized treatment which constrain them “within a given set of living arrangements” (Gray 162) through their participation in the book Skeeter writes. By sharing their stories of what it is like to be a maid for white families in the 1960’s, Aibileen and Minny are shown as dynamic and brave characters. They risk being shot “in front of the children” (*The Help)* by angry white mobs or the KKK and choose to participate even though the book’s publication could put them in danger. Minny, although apprehensive toward Skeeter, warns her that “this ain’t no game we playin’” (*The Help*) because it could mean life and death for her. Minny’s skepticism and the way she interacts with Skeeter, telling her “I need to see you square on at all times” (*The Help*), shows the ideological mistrust of white people especially during this time period. Although their job is to be ‘the help’ for white people Aibileen and Minny are much more than the typical servant characters.

Next, I analyze the ways in which Skeeter’s character defies typical gender norms in spite of the pressure imposed on her by her friends and mother. Skeeter does not participate in the “stable template of femininity” (Gill 77) which includes a husband and children, although many of her friends do. Skeeter’s mother impresses her traditional family and gender values on Skeeter by reminding her that her “eggs are dying” (*The Help)* while Skeeter is trying to share her excitement over her new job. Skeeter is the only one of her friends to have a job and dreams of a career. Even some of her bridge club friends support her abnormal lifestyle choices. This can be seen when Hilly kicks the blond woman who supposes that Skeeter’s new job is her “last stop ‘till marriage” (*The Help*). In this scene, Hilly, who is the most stereotypical depiction of a 1960’s mother and wife, shows her support for Skeeter and her irregular life choices. In the end, even Skeeter’s mother recognizes that her daughter’s dreams are more important than the immediacy of her finding a husband and states that she’s “never been more proud” (*The Help)* of Skeeter.

However, in spite of these progressive depictions of race and gender in *The Help*,its overall story is one of the self-actualization of Skeeter, the white main character. In the end, her mother is proud of her, she gets a new job in New York City as a real writer, and Aibileen tells her to “go find [her] life” (*The Help*). Although the movie is titled “The Help”, the actual stories and voices of those who can explain what it is like for them to raise white children in white homes in the 1960’s come secondary to the voice and transformation of the while character. This representation leaves “the working class and women of color underrepresented, even invisible” (Weber 111). This quote came from our intersectionality keyword reading and it explains how stories and films like *The Help* reinforce the hierarchical white hegemony and strict notions of what it means to be represented as black and working-class. This film upholds the notion that “others” can and should be used as instrumental characters secondary to the white actors/actresses. To make this point I decided to insert the scene where Skeeter is driving alone at the very end of the video to show how the movie centered around her and her transformation.

When I was 14, I read Kathryn Stockett’s book *The Help* in less than a week. When the movie came out, I pre-ordered it on iTunes. I loved both and regarded them highly within my top favorite books and movies. Before this class, I had never considered the implications and complexities of how media representations can perpetuate harmful ideologies that have existed within the white American consciousness for centuries. The tradition of creating films with white-savior and white self-actualization themes caters to white audiences and use the black actors and actresses as narrative devices rather than fully formed characters. Now that I have thoroughly contemplated the ideologies that circulate within *The Help* and understand the social implications of this media, I realize the chains of meaning they can create and perpetuate within identities and cultures.

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