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A Screening of *The Help*

Lecture by Stephen Tuck

The History of Civil Rights: A Comparative Look

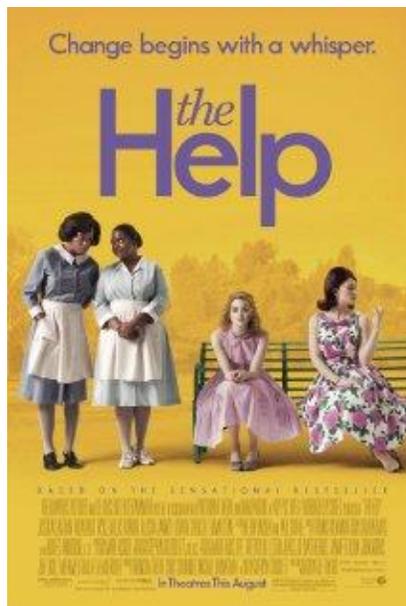
During the month of April, the Center for Race and Ethnicity sponsored two very different events that explored elements of the history of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's. The first was a screening and discussion of the Hollywood blockbuster film *The Help*. The second was a lecture by noted Oxford historian Stephen Tuck titled "The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union: History and the Subversive Special Relationship," which examined connections between the US and British movements for racial equality.

A SCREENING OF THE HELP

Released in 2011, *The Help* was a box office smash, which also received critical acclaim for its portrayal of a young white woman, Skeeter, in 1960s Mississippi who flouts the gendered social conventions of that era to tell the life stories of Abilene, Minnie and several other black domestics. But the film has also been the subject of critical scrutiny, as it brings to surface particular tensions around the political economy of racial representations in mainstream filmmaking in the United States. On the one hand, the success of the film translates to greater visibility and (rightly won) accolades for the film's otherwise underrepresented Black actresses. On the other, it reinforces the prevailing logic that Black

women are only marketable for the mainstream when they portray some sort of subservient or abused figure. The film's release and subsequent embrace by audiences, also reinvigorates a long-standing discussion of what happens when contemporary popular culture inaccurately represents U.S. history, particularly when those depictions center on power relations around race, gender, sexuality and class. These issues warrant broader discussion in a scholarly context.

The Center for Race and Ethnicity arranged a screening and panel discussion of *The Help* at Rutgers on April 16, 2012, which brought out undergraduate and graduate students as



well as faculty. In her introduction, Professor Brittney Cooper, a Ford Foundation Post Doctoral Fellow at the Center for Race and Ethnicity, discussed her personal response to the film. As a Black woman from the South, whose grandmother worked as a domestic in a white household, Cooper said she experienced deep ambivalence while watching the film. What is at stake, she proposed, is the question of whose story is told, who gets to tell those stories, and for what purposes those stories are then used. *The Help* is a Hollywood movie which frames the story of black women's resistance to segregation around a fictional white heroine.



Dr. Brittney Cooper, Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Race and Ethnicity

Fellow panelists Andy Urban, ACLS new faculty fellow in American Studies and History, and Shatema Threadcraft Presidential Post Doctoral Fellow in Political Science joined Cooper after the screening to elaborate on this idea, and its ramifications. Both Professor Urban and Professor Threadcraft pointed out that the movie is rife with historical inaccuracies particularly in its depiction of Black domestics as unorganized and depoliticized, despite the fact that domestics had been

organizing and struggling against oppression for close to a hundred years by the 1960's. In the film's retelling, Threadcraft argued, "you get the myth of the docile domestic work force in the South, when they were actually radical."



Dr. Andy Urban, ACLS New Faculty Fellow, American Studies/History

Likewise, Urban also stressed that the film replicates a common misrepresentation in popular culture of the civil rights movement in the 1960s as the starting point of Black organized struggle against oppression. This simplifies the historical record and creates problematic portrayals of agency that speak directly to the question of who tells the stories of oppressed and marginalized people. The film suggests that without Skeeter, the stories of these women would have remained hidden, and that they may never have told the truth of what it meant to work within the homes of white people in the hostile climate of segregation had it not been for her intervention. Not so, points out Urban, who explained that

domestics did publish their stories in progressive publications in places like Chicago. "Black writers and journalists found ways to get their story out, and they did not need Skeeter to help them."



Dr. Shatema Threadcraft, Presidential Post Doctoral Fellow, Political Science

The discussion also took on the present day meanings of *The Help*. How do we interpret this film in today's climate of ongoing racial violence, asked Cooper. She reminded us of a present-day hate crime in Mississippi, the brutal beating and murder of James Craig Anderson by Deryl Dedmon, while a group of his friends participated and/or stood by. Clearly, the vernacular of racism is alive and well in the United States, but films like *The Help* tend to reassure us that those forms of racial violence are part of a romanticized past. The film portrays the racism of that era as having little or no relationship to the present day, contributing to the notion that we have progressed past a time when those things are possible. In a supposedly post-racial America, Cooper asked, "where did he [Dedmon], a child of the '90's, get these ideas that we say are of a bygone era?"

The panel suggested that the film sanitizes the Jim Crow era, and therefore avoids a necessary conversation about its ongoing legacy. The primary way in which the film does this is by focusing on racism as an individual phenomenon rather than a structural one. In the film, racism becomes a tool of a specific group of white women who act as “mean girls.” By contrast, the young white educated Skeeter transcends racism. She is compassionate, non-racist and looking for ways to break out of the circumscribed gender role she is expected to fulfill as a young wealthy white woman in the South. Skeeter longs for a career as a writer, while her friends dutifully marry and have children, creating tension amongst them. In the film, prejudice plays out through these interpersonal relationships, conveying to its audience the notion that racism can be overcome and former racists redeemed, by one girl putting the “mean girls” in their place. “We should not refute our ability as individuals to ‘do,’ but the film removes individual action from the larger narrative of ongoing structures,” Urban asserted. For example “what happens to Skeeter once she begins her middle class life? Does she hire a domestic worker?”

One audience member pointed out that the film further obfuscates the social construction of racism when it fails to address the question of how Skeeter grew up in an environment in which overt racism was common and yet, managed to emerge unscathed. Cooper concurred, describing Skeeter’s anti-racist position (for which there is no context) as a perfect and pure

performance that is often not even achievable for people today who work consciously towards gender, racial and class equality. She does not stumble once in the film and exhibit any racist inclinations despite having grown up in the Jim Crow South.

But, can there also be benefits to a narrative like this? Another audience member suggested that there is potential benefit in a narrative that focuses on women and the goings-on of the everyday, in the home. The film, she argued, depicts the specific ways in which racial violence is gendered, and how it played out in the domestic sphere. The film portrays the ways in which white women wielded power differently than white men and this can be helpful for highlighting overlooked tools of racial oppression.

Besides Skeeter, the other main white female character who the audience develops empathy for is Celia Foot, who also provoked discussion. Foot is an outsider, a poor country girl who married into this social circle and is cruelly ostracized. Her presence indicates the class divisions that existed among white Southerners. In the film, Foot is also depicted as lacking any racism, or any real awareness of racial hierarchies. The film suggests that her class position, and her rejection by the “mean girls,” make Foot a natural ally of Black domestics like Minnie who eventually finds

permanent, happy employment with her. Foot’s working class egalitarianism is a reversal of many popular representations of racism in the South, Urban stated, where “typically the worst of this racism tends to be placed most on the working class.” Is the film then suggesting that socioeconomic status could be a point of solidarity between working class blacks and whites in this period? And if so, is that an accurate representation of the landscape of bigotry black women faced at this moment?

The marketing of the film, and a majority of its content, focuses on the female characters, but men do appear in the film. The way men are portrayed reflects significantly on the audience’s experience of the female characters, as well as the overall representation of race and gender relations. Both Cooper and Threadcraft expressed their disappointment that the Black husbands of these domestics are simultaneously invisible (they are never “seen,” only heard), and portrayed as abusers. “Black men come off as being more dangerous than white men,” in a film that is ostensibly about the insidiousness of racism, Threadcraft stated. “In the end you still see black men pathologized in this moment.” Another byproduct of this she points out, is that “patriarchy and sexism come off as being worse than racism.”

On the other hand, Cooper points out, the white husbands in whose houses these Black domestics work are depicted as hen pecked and harmless, or at worst, as uncaring and indifferent. In one scene, Minnie is happened upon by Mr. Foot, the white husband of her

employer, who she had not met prior because his wife hoped to take credit for Minnie's domestic work herself. Minnie reacts by attempting to run, and, unable to get away, prepares to fend off the physical confrontation she clearly expects to have. In the film, Minnie's response is depicted as a comic overreaction, intimating to the audience that this threat she perceives does not actually exist. This scene is another example of the film's historical white washing, because we know that Black female domestics were subject to all manner of sexual harassment and assault at the hands of their white male employers, and had little recourse in those situations. Threadcraft pointed out that such dangers were only gestured to in an arrest scene featuring "grabby police officers."

The most loving relationship depicted in the film is that of the black domestic and the white female child, who she cares for, and essentially raises. There are multiple declarations made, by Skeeter, and by the toddler Abilene cares for, that these black domestics are their "real mothers," not the white women who gave birth to them. Threadcraft took issue with the ways in which these relationships seemed to dominate the emotional landscape of the film, portraying domestic workers as "heartbroken, because they could not take care of these white children." This theme is given additional emphasis in the film's final scene when Abilene is fired, and forced to turn and walk away from the young white girl she has been caring for while the child screams for her. But the film pays little attention to the relationships the

domestics had with their own children, noted Cooper, who shared the confusion she experienced as a child when the white children who her grandmother cared for visited her childhood home. These children treated her grandmother as a familiar, calling her "black mama," when her grandmother had her own children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. The film does not fully capture the complexity of the position occupied by Black domestics who became close to the children they were caring for, and yet whose work taking care of them meant they were away from their own families. On the one hand, they may have resented their employers, and yet, Cooper stated, "I also know [my grandmother] took pride in being able to do her job well."

The question of how to show appreciation for the women who work as domestics and ascribe value to their work while also critiquing the systems of inequality that define their experiences, came up repeatedly in our discussion. This discussion takes on another critical dimension when we also consider the positive reactions the black actresses have received, critical and from audiences, as a result of their portrayals of black domestics in this film. How do we value the work of under-represented black female actresses, root for them to win

"Black men come off as being more dangerous than white men, in a film that is ostensibly about the insidiousness of racism"

--Shatema Threadcraft

awards and gain access to a wider spectrum of opportunities as artists, and support a film that stars several black women, while also making the necessary point that this story is a reformulation of Hollywood's limitations when it comes to imagining the roles black women can play? Historically, Black actresses have received recognition for depicting domestic workers, those who work in service, or women who are severely abused and/or damaged. Octavia Spencer won the Oscar this past year for her role as Minnie in *The Help*, and Viola Davis was nominated as Best Actress for playing Abilene.

Cooper expressed the sentiment that while she rooted for these women to win awards, she was disappointed that once again black women only seem to win recognition for a narrow scope of roles. Prior to Spencer, only four black women have won acting Oscars; three for Best Supporting Actress (Hattie McDaniel for *Gone With the Wind* in 1939, Whoopi Goldberg for *Ghost* in 1990, and Jennifer Hudson for *Dream Girls* in 2007), and one for Best Actress (Hallie Berry for *Monster's Ball* in 2001). This record suggests that there is a strict delineation in the range of roles available to black women that may bring critical and commercial success. And, when a movie

like *The Help* receives such extensive praise, it suggests that this is not going to change in the near future.

In discussing the responsibility of black female actresses to make this critique publicly Professor Mia Bay, History professor and Director of the CRE pointed out that studios ask actors to make public appearances to promote their films. These studios are not receptive to actresses who diverged from the script to make a socially-conscious critique of a film they were paid to participate in making. Threadcraft concurred, arguing that critique is not necessarily the purview of the artist. “I don’t think we should be asking Viola [Davis], that’s not her job.” The work of critique and contextualization, she averred, ought to be done by communities like ours.

The overarching question in this discussion appeared to be, does this narrative do harm or good? While this particular group of scholars may find a good deal to take issue with in the film’s depictions of race, gender, class and history in the United States, Cooper reminded the audience that there are many persons of color, and domestics, who see the movie in a positive light. She noted that Domestic Worker Action Network leader Barbara Young presented a positive account of the film’s portrayal of domestic work on MSNBC’s Melissa Harris Perry Show. Moreover, Young also noted that her organization was using the film as a tool to raise awareness for domestic worker’s rights, saying that the organization planned to engage audiences to support the

struggle for domestic workers’ rights via their empathy for the film’s beloved characters.

“We want to see the interior lives of black women, but if it doesn’t change structural conditions, then we must ask what toll are we asking of black women? What are the limits of discourse?”

--Brittney Cooper

All this signals the potential for the film to have a positive impact. However, there was some debate about the value of a film like this and its potential to raise awareness amongst present day audiences who have no knowledge of this era to learn about the conditions in which domestics work, and gain at least a superficial understanding of the inequality that pervaded these times. The psychic toll of seeing these types of narratives on black audiences is an unacceptable price to pay for Cooper: “In the movie the women are doing emotional labor, and now we ask black people to come see movies like these to help white people ‘learn,’” and engage in yet another form of affective labor.”

Professor Urban questioned the potential for this film to make significant change when its entire focus is on the therapeutic

resolution of racial conflict, rather than a direct critique of the political economy of the segregated South. The film shows black domestics resenting white meanness, but it does not show them articulating larger aims or goals. They never suggest better wages or working conditions, outside of getting to use the bathroom, and “that critique falls away to another narrative that says that all you have to do is be nice to your worker, instead of critiquing the larger structure of the economy.” Cooper added, “We want to see the interior lives of black women, but if it doesn’t change structural conditions, then we must ask what toll are we asking of black women? What are the limits of discourse?”

The limits of the discourse are many when ultimately, as Cooper pointed out, this is less a film about these Black women and more the coming of age story of a young white woman, finding her own voice and learning to stand up for herself. “The film is not about us.”

LECTURE BY STEPHEN TUCK

On April 12, the Center for Race and Ethnicity, in conjunction with the Rutgers Department of History, hosted Stephen Tuck, University Lecturer in American History at the University of Oxford, for a public lecture titled “The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union: Racial Protest and the Subversive Special Relationship.” In this lecture, Dr. Tuck used Malcolm X’s 1964



Professor Stephen Tuck, University Lecturer in American History, Oxford.

debate speech as a site for investigating the ways that ideas, knowledge, and activist practices moved trans-nationally between the US and the UK throughout the era of the American Civil Rights Movement and social unrest in the UK that culminated in the 1968 New Left protests.

In his work, Dr. Tuck has investigated how it came to be that Malcolm X was invited to speak at the Oxford Union, a student organization more generally associated with the replication of the British economic and political elite than with progressive politics, or as Tuck referred to it “the training ground of the British aristocracy.” But Oxford also had student leaders such as Eric Anthony Abrahams and Tariq Ali, both of whom were nationals of Commonwealth countries (Jamaica and Pakistan respectively), who contended that tactics and theories of political resistance abroad could be re-organized and applied to anti-racist activism in the UK. Tuck argued that the most immediate anti-racist political activity was organized against the *de*

facto segregation in upper-classmen housing in the town of Oxford, but that those students who organized against this segregation situated themselves as in a similar kind of struggle as those pushing the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.



Malcolm X in Oxford with Eric Anthony Abrahams (right) and others (image from Black Britain: A Photographic History, by Paul Gilroy, Sagi Books, 2007)

The speech itself is an understudied event in Civil Rights history, representing a clash between conservative forces who considered Malcolm X dangerous and those who sought to transform British society, as well as a particular moment in Malcolm X’s individual development as a political figure. Perhaps more importantly, though, is an understanding of the broader significance of the speech as a marker of a particular moment in the development of international civil rights activism.

Tuck argued that across this era there was a two-way (though admittedly mostly US to UK) transmission of knowledge and

sentiment between the American Civil Rights Movements and similarly oriented political movements in the United Kingdom; “Malcolm X’s visit marked the beginning of broader, more widespread connection between US and British civil rights.” Tuck emphasized this transmission of knowledge and practice by pointing to specific tactics that were employed on both sides of the pond, such as bus boycotts and pub sit (drink)-ins. However, British activists were not simply adopting American techniques uncritically; instead, they were “selective in their importing of American tactics and repackaged them” to meet their own needs and contexts. Further, in agreeing to speak at the Oxford Union, Malcolm X himself also had the explicit goal of connecting with the next generation of Asian and African activists. Tuck argued that in understanding these “local stories that we can understand how transnationalism works in practice.”

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