



MANUFACTURED MAIDS, MAMMIES AND FALSIFIED HISTORY: NO WHITE HELP WANTED

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

With all due respect to our beloved, beleaguered, besieged and still-believing President, *cottonland* consciousness and practices are still with us, in life and literature, at sites of work and worship and at places of higher learning and lower pleasures, played out in scenes of racist and racialized understandings and interactions, even at the movies. Certainly, the movie *The Help* is a classic example of this with its manufactured maids, mammies and falsified history that once again turns Black oppression, perceived pathology and suffering into a central source of White entertainment and profit and parallel illusions of having saved us and redeemed themselves.

And make no easily achieved mistake, this is not simply a product of the sinister and slow-to-learn South, but is also a reflection of a pervasive conception of Black and White, and the unequal human worth and social status assumed and enforced for each. Clearly, this is a White American story with manufactured maids and mammies used for local and living color and nursing their soon-racialized infants and racial egos. It is the White woman who is the real racial heroine, as Hollywood and White sensibilities would only have it. Thus, even though it is Black women's stories, experiences, voices, ideas and writings that are the material out of which the central contents of the movie is made, they cannot write or present them themselves. They are classically dependent creatures with obvious racial disadvantages and derived relevance, needing a White hand and mind to lead them into the light of their own limited self-realization. Not to mention their men who are portrayed as irresponsibly absent and abusively present.

There is, in this template of cinematic racial remembrance and reality-construction, a toxic tonic of acute denial, self-delusion and

deformation of Black humanity and falsification of our history. The story takes place in the era of segregation, and yet it strives hard to hide the horror and savagery of segregation history. Segregation, by its very nature, is a violent process and practice—physical, psychic, political and economic. Thus, to pretend with the author and movie makers that the central focus should be on the issue of dual toilets and unkind and intemperate words and bad attitudes is to be complicit in the cover-up of the systemic violence that was a daily part of the lives of Black maids, i.e., rape, sexual harassment, assaults, and daily degradations of various forms. Also, we must not forget or put aside for cinematic-sake the larger context of violence against their families and Black people as a whole.

At the heart of segregation was its signature weapon of White terrorism, *lynching*, and to leave this barbaric practice out of any story of this period is self-deceptive at best and at worst, dishonest and dismissive of the horrific violence meted out to Black people with ruthless and relentless regularity. In spite of the cinematic techniques used to elicit laughter, tears, heart-tugs, hugs and contrived harmony, it is clear that this movie trivializes the tragedy, terror and suffering, as well as the resilience and resourcefulness of Black maids and Black people. Even the police beating of a Black woman is quickly taken off camera to reduce the depiction of the raw violence endemic to a racist segregated society. The history of the Civil Rights Movement is summed up in a broadcast announcement of Medgar Evers' assassination and martyrdom, given little more than honorable mention and definitely not placed in the context of White supremacy and violence as a racial, religious, economic and political way of life.

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Black resistance is reduced to passive quiet dignity of a sort; self-discipline under undeserved suffering and humiliation; various expressions of impotence, like eye-rolling, talking on the side-and-sly; and putting feces and other filth in the oppressor's and abuser's food. This is not the material out of which heroes and heroines are made, and is more the action of an alienated, abused and frustrated waitress than conscious witnesses and mid-wives of history, as many of the maids and other Black women were with Black men in the Black Freedom Movement, as well as those who struggled in their own way before it came.

There are obvious lessons communicated to a Black audience by this film. It seeks to reinforce established-order definitions of acceptable and possible resistance. It thus tends to cultivate

the craving for any small gesture of "help," or human caring from even oppressors or their limitedly "rebellious" off-spring. Thus, those affected, even unconsciously, dance to their own degradation or applaud their own humiliation in music, movies and books peddled as portraits of "real" Black life, i.e., deformed, deficient and patently pathological. Also the movie seeks to reinforce a falsification of Black history that is inaccurate, reductive, insensitive, dignity-denying and a violation of the memories of the suffering and life-and-death struggles of those who paved the path and opened the horizon of history and possibility before us.

Perhaps, nothing is more pernicious and pathetic in these movies and books of unwanted White help than attempts to push the liberal line of moral and social

equivalence of Black oppression and liberation struggle and White liberal discomfort with superficial aspects of our oppression and their efforts to ease, but not end, our oppression in a harmless non-systemic way.

Thus, the main White character is bothered by bathroom bigotry, not the codified brutality of the system as a whole, by the sick silliness of the segregationist bigot not the system's savagery, terrorism and daily violence of various kinds. And their solution is always a specious spiritual conversion requiring more from the oppressed than the oppressor. "If you love your enemy, you already have the victory," they have us saying. This means loving them, not their loving us, or any other "enemy" they might teach and tell us to hate.

In the end, the White men's violence is camouflaged and the White women's collaboration and lack of moral courage is excused with the bromide "sometimes courage skips a generation." Thus, they are generous without giving justice; personally humane, without an equitable sharing of wealth, power or status. The solution here is simple—no buying books or attending and applauding movies that insult us and make caricatures out of our lives; no collaboration in our own oppression in any form; demanding dignity-affirming roles and portrayals of our life and struggle and waging the hard, righteous and unrelenting struggle to end oppression and bring a new world and way of relating as humans into being.

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