



This PDF is a continuation to a blog post [“Media & Black Adolescents Series: An Unjust Law is No Law At All.”](#) Read about the movie “The Great Debaters” and more about civil disobedience on the original blog post leading to this continuation.

References to History and Media Research

There were many places in the film that relate to academic writings on the relationship between race and media, specifically Ronald L. Jackson’s *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (2006). In the film, Mr. Tulson taught the team about Willy Lynch, who designed methods to torture and harm black people. He discussed that the goal was to keep the slave physically strong, but psychologically weak and dependent on the master. This concept was echoed in writings and historical discussion about slavery and its persisting ramifications. Jackson writes “Rarely acknowledged for their intellect, slaves were purposefully dejected and dehumanized in an effort to preserve control over their minds, bodies, and “spirits” (Jackson, 2006, p.15). In the next section entitled “emancipated bodies, shackled minds” the reading echoed Mr. Tulson’s statement that there were many ways in which whites were able to continue to degrade Black people long after the end of slavery (Jackson, 2006, p.20).

Common Media Stereotypes

The film does not utilize the stock characters that have been presented in other writings like Jackson (2006). Due in part to the fact they are based on real people, the characters are well rounded and developed, and stand up for the ensembles as they fight against injustice. Their presentations are not stereotyped and there is a diversity of viewpoints presented. The one possible exception to this is Mr. Farmer, who could be considered a very loose variation of the “Uncle Tom” character in the first half of the film. Jackson (2006) describes Uncle Tom first as a “monotypic as an accommodating, loyal, and faithful servant, who wanted nothing more than to exhibit Christian brotherly love and mercy toward others” (p. 31). This does in some ways accurately describe Mr. Farmer. He is a professor of theology who advocates that education is the only way out and that we must teach children to “do what we have to do in order to do what they want to do.” In this way, he could be seen as more passive for his time, not standing up to whites, but still advocating for young people defeating their difficulties. He does not fit the definition of Uncle Tom as “culturally unconscious” or someone who “does not identify with the black community” (Jackson, 2006, p. 32). However, he does seem to align at times with the more nuanced descriptions of the character as a more passive, christian-like martyr who stands up

against dehumanization. In one scene, Mr. Farmer is confronted by a pig farmer when he accidentally kills one of his hogs. His son James seems frustrated at his passive response to the white men, as he willingly signs over his entire monthly paycheck to the men, and allows them to belittle him. Though, at the time he was in danger as the white men had both guns and the color of their skin as weapons. However, later in the film, Mr. Farmer stands up for himself and his community as he advocates for the release of Mr. Tulson from jail claiming “an unjust law is no law at all”. In this moment, he completely sheds any association with a passive, white-pleasing, “Uncle Tom” stereotype. From this point on, the film presents a diverse set of characters who do not conform to the stereotypes often presented through African American characters.

Racial Socialization

The film also relates to aspects of racial socialization. A process described by Howard C. Stevenson as “communicating messages and behaviors to children to bolster their sense of identity given the possibility and reality that their life experiences may include racially hostile encounters (Stevenson, 1995, p.51).” Mr. Farmer does engage in some racial socialization process with James as he advocates that children will need to overcome the difficulties they face. However, he also largely shields James from the world, hoping to keep his focus on school. This is demonstrated in two scenes in the film. The first occurs during an altercation with a pig farmer when Mr. Farmer pushes James back to the car, refusing to let him see or hear the argument. The second comes when he confronts Mr. Tulson for exposing James to his more “radical” political beliefs and actions. In this way, Mr. Tulson does not originally engage in proactive racial socialization, defined as “acknowledging inequitable treatment of African-Americans and providing youth with pragmatic examples and instructions about how to manage racial encounters” (Stevenson, 1995). Through their relationship, the film is able to present one possible type of racial socialization between a Black parent and child.

Takeaways

In conclusion, this film set in 1930 is still very relevant today. It’s characters are well developed and mostly distinguish themselves from the archetypes presented in Jackson (2006) with the exception of James Farmer Sr. in the first half of the film. The film also demonstrates aspects of the familial racial socialization process. Lastly, the overarching theme of the morality of civil disobedience can easily be applied to today’s world.

For parents or educators who may choose to use this movie as a teaching/learning tool, here are some possible **discussion questions**:

- This film has a mainly Black cast, do you think that contributes to the less stereotyped depictions of the characters?
- Why do you think the filmmakers chose to make this film (set in 1930) in 2007? What aspects of the film are still relevant today?

References

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