

## Literature Review

In the landscape of American cinema, certain films transcend their role as mere entertainment and become cultural touchstones, sparking conversations about society, identity, and historical legacies. "The Help," directed by Tate Taylor and based on Kathryn Stockett's novel of the same name, is one such film. Released in 2011, it delves into the complex dynamics of race, class, and gender in 1960s Mississippi, offering a poignant portrayal of the lives of African American maids and their relationships with the white families they serve. As the narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, "The Help" navigates themes of power, privilege, and resistance with both sensitivity and candor. Through the eyes of its diverse ensemble cast, the film invites viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic injustice and the courage required to challenge it. This literature review aims to explore the scholarly discourse surrounding "The Help," analyzing its portrayal of the mammy stereotype, race relations, its depiction of gender roles, and its impact on popular culture. By examining a range of academic perspectives, we seek to deepen our understanding of the film's significance as both a cultural artifact and a catalyst for critical reflection.

In his work "Controlling Images and Black Women's Oppression" (2014), W.E.B. Du Bois provides a foundational framework for understanding the complexities of black women's experiences and their oppression. This groundbreaking article delves into the impact of controlling images on the lived realities of black women in America. Du Bois highlights how stereotypes have historically constrained the agency and image of black women, shaping societal attitudes and behaviors. Applying Du Bois's framework to the film "The Help," we gain deeper insights into its portrayal of black womanhood and its implications for racial and gender equality.

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The narrative confronts the audience with the harsh realities faced by black maids such as Aibileen and Minny, shedding light on the controlling images perpetuated by white employers and society. Set against the backdrop of segregation, the film exposes themes of racial injustice and the erasure of black women's agency, resonating with contemporary discourse on representation and empowerment. By interrogating "The Help" through Du Bois's lens, we deepen our understanding of its themes and messages. The film serves as a poignant exploration of race, class, gender, and power dynamics in society. Through the critical enhancement of Du Bois's cinematic representation of historical narratives, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural perceptions of black women's experiences.

"The Help" has been lauded for its performances and storytelling, yet it also sparks discourse on the portrayal of mammy culture and white protagonists. Through the application of Du Bois's framework, we can further analyze the film's depiction of these themes and their impact on societal norms. Overall, Du Bois's analysis enriches our interpretation of "The Help" and contributes to ongoing conversations about representation and equality.

The influence that mediated stereotypes have on the perceptions of race and gender remains a central theme of inquiry. In the article "Priming Mammies, Jezebels, and other controlling images: the exaltation of mediated stereotypes on perceptions of black women" published in 2005 contributes to discourse surrounding stereotypes of black women. The study focuses on an investigation into how media portrayals shape the views of black women, particularly through the lens of controlling images such as the mammy and jezebel stereotypes. This literature review will aim to examine the insights that Brown Givens and Monahan's research provides and its relevance to the portrayal of black women in the film "The Help". "The

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"The Help" provided a narrative exploring the themes addressed in Brown Givens and Monahan's research. The film depicts the lives of black maids during segregation and them working for white families which offers us insights on race, class, and power dynamics during this time period. By looking at characters like Aibileen, we can see a legacy to controlling images; she is constantly looking down and not speaking up for herself, and how these images of black women can become societal norms. The article shows the relevance to contemporary discussions surrounding media representations and racial stereotypes. The film focuses on themes like agency, resistance, and identity, having a clear understanding that mediated stereotypes impact audience perceptions deepens the importance of the film. The influence controlling images have on viewers can engage critically with the complexities of race and gender in both historical and contemporary contexts. In "Priming Mammies, Jezebels, and Other Controlling Images," Sonja M. Brown Givens and Jennifer L. Monahan provide valuable insights into the ways in which media stereotypes shape perceptions of African American women. By contextualizing their research within the narrative of "The Help," we gain a deeper understanding of the film's portrayal of race, gender, and power dynamics. Through critical engagement with Brown Givens and Monahan's study, scholars and viewers can navigate the complexities of representation and agency in both media and society at large.

The influence of media portrayals on individuals' self-perception and social comparisons, particularly regarding African American women, is a significant topic of interest. Gina Masullo Chen and her colleagues' article, "Male Mammies: A Social-Comparison Perspective on How Exaggeratedly Overweight Media Portrayals of Madea, Rasputia, and Big Momma Affect How Black Women Feel About Themselves" (2012), published in *Mass Communication & Society*, contributes valuable insights into this discourse. Their study explores the impact of

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exaggeratedly overweight media portrayals on black women's self-esteem, offering a lens through which to examine representations in films like "The Help" and the perpetuation of the mammy stereotype. Chen et al. focus on male actors dressing up as mammy-like characters, which negatively impacts how black women are viewed in society. In "The Help," characters like Aibileen and Minny exemplify this portrayal, being on the heavier side and relegated to roles associated with cooking and childcare. These representations perpetuate the dehumanization of black women as mere domestic workers, reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

The study underscores how media representations, such as those featuring exaggeratedly overweight characters like Madea, Rasputia, and Big Momma, contribute to negative self-perceptions among black women. Through a social-comparison perspective, the authors highlight how these portrayals influence individuals' views of themselves and others, exacerbating issues of body image and self-esteem. In the context of "The Help," understanding the impact of media stereotypes adds depth to the analysis of the film's portrayal of African American women navigating intersecting pressures of race, class, and gender. Chen et al.'s findings emphasize the importance of media literacy and critical engagement with representations of race and gender in popular culture.

Viewers of media like "The Help" are prompted to reflect on how such portrayals shape their perceptions and are encouraged to resist harmful narratives. By advocating for more diverse and authentic representations of African American women, audiences can challenge societal attitudes perpetuated by media stereotypes. In "Male Mammies: A Social-Comparison Perspective," Chen and her colleagues offer valuable insights into the impact of media portrayals on self-perception and social comparisons. Contextualizing their research within "The Help"

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deepens our understanding of the film's portrayal of African American women and underscores the need for critical engagement with media representations to combat harmful stereotypes.

The "Black Actresses in American Films: A History and Critical Analysis of the Mammy/Maid Character," examines black actresses in American cinema while specifically focusing on mammy and maid characters in these films. This article was published in 2014. Coleman's offers insights on the historical development and a critical analysis of the repetition of the same type of characters within film. This literature review aims to focus on Coleman's research and its understanding of the representation of black women in film, specifically the film "The Help."

"The Help" confronts complexities of race and gender during segregation. The narrative of the film has to do with black women who are maids that work with white families and their experiences of oppressions and stereotypes. Coleman's analysis of mammy and maid characters provides a lens through which to examine the historical context and cultural significance of these portrayals within the film by seeing these characters be loyal caregivers to children that aren't theirs by them being dark-skinned, older women, and most likely overweight, we see that all the maids have these characteristics within the film. While still looking into how the women who played these roles felt, we know that Viola Davis regretted doing this film only because she felt that the maids' stories weren't really told but nothing to do with the reinforcement of stereotypes of black women and really just how their agency was taken away by their stories being told by a white woman. The findings of Coleman's research underscore the importance of representation and empowerment within the film industry. By recognizing and critiquing the prevalence of stereotypical portrayals of African American women, scholars and filmmakers alike can work

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towards fostering more diverse and authentic narratives. Coleman's thesis serves as a call to action for greater inclusivity and equity in casting and storytelling, advocating for the recognition and celebration of the talent and agency of black actresses in American cinema.

In "Black Actresses in American Films: A History and Critical Analysis of the Mammy/Maid Character," Valerie Coleman offers a thorough examination of the representation of black actresses in American cinema, focusing specifically on the mammy/maid archetype. By contextualizing Coleman's research within the narrative of "The Help," we gain a deeper understanding of the film's portrayal of African American women and the broader implications for media representation and societal attitudes. Through critical engagement with Coleman's thesis, scholars and filmmakers can work towards fostering more inclusive and empowering narratives that reflect the diversity and complexity of African American experiences.

In analyzing the film "The Help" through the lenses of Patricia Hill Collins, Maria Kalaitzandonakes et al., Megan D. McFarlane, we gain insight into the intersections of race, gender, and class narrated within the film. Collins explores the stereotype of black women associated with the mammy stereotype, highlighting how it shapes the identity of black women in the film. Characters like Aibileen are primarily depicted in domestic roles, perpetuating the stereotype and undermining their individual identities.

Kalaitzandonakes' research on consumer responses to rebranding reveals insights into the societal norms surrounding racist logos and branding. The film "The Help" reinforces these stereotypes by portraying black women in traditional domestic roles, akin to branding such as Aunt Jemima, which failed to resonate with consumers after rebranding attempts. By perpetuating these images, the film contributes to the normalization of racial stereotypes.

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McFarlane's analysis acknowledges the representation and intersections of race, gender, and class within the film. However, it also critiques the film's narrative being primarily driven by a white protagonist, which detracts from the agency and experiences of black maids during segregation. While the film attempts to showcase intersectionality, it falls short in fully addressing the power dynamics inherent in the story it portrays.

Together, these sources provide a multifaceted understanding of how race, gender, and power intersect in media and society. They underscore the importance of critically analyzing representations, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for inclusivity and social justice in media narratives. Through scholarly inquiry and activism, there is potential to create more equitable and inclusive narratives that reflect the diversity and complexity of human experiences.

In the article "Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and Their Implications for Psychotherapy," West highlights how these historical images of Black women, such as the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire archetypes, have negative effects on Black women's mental health and the way they view themselves in society. West sheds light on how these historical images can affect Black women's lived experiences and mental health. While West states that the Mammy stereotype portrays Black women as nurturers and submissive, reinforcing the idea of servitude and lack of agency, West also informs us about the Sapphire stereotype. This stereotype views Black women as aggressive, angry, and portrays harmful stereotypes regarding Black femininity by presenting them in masculine ways. Furthermore, West explains how the concept of the Jezebel archetype makes Black women viewed as hypersexual and limits them to the image of being an object. While "The Help" mainly focused on the Mammy stereotype, West also discusses the impacts that these stereotypes have on the

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mental health of Black women and how these perceptions shape their lived experiences. The article underscores the need for therapists to recognize and challenge these stereotypes, creating a more inclusive and empowering therapeutic environment for Black women. Overall, West's work contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of race, gender, and mental health, emphasizing the significance of historical images in shaping contemporary societal attitudes and individual experiences. The film being set in such a historical time period specifically surrounding gender and race and the images being portrayed that black women are always apart of the working class and they are meant to take care of others children because throughout the film we hardly see them take care of their own. The article aims to make it known the mental effects that these stereotypical images of black women have on their mental health.

While we see a different perspective when looking In the article, "Interrogating the Representation of African American Female Identity in the Films *Waiting to Exhale* and *Set It Off*," Tina M. Harris this article challenges the black identity within film we constantly see were black identity specifically women are usually in an oppressive state such as "The Help" , "Hidden Figures" while in the movie Harris describe such as "Waiting To Exhale" it's a movie about friendship, sisterhood and agency each one of these women are able to tell their own story. While she sheds light on the need of this type of relationships in popular media and the representation these films add to black identity within the film industry. Harris analysis gives insights on the good films that represented black female identity within the film industry and expresses the importance for it and the importance of them being portrayed in film a certain way. Jacqueline Bobo's article "Resisting the Mammy: Black Women's Representations in the Hollywood Cinema of the 1930s" offers a historical perspective on the portrayal of African American women in



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cinema. Bobo article talks about the mammy archetype and how black women were portrayed in Hollywood film industry. The article "Resisting the Mammy: Black Women's Representations in the Hollywood Cinema of the 1930s" goes into details on how the mammy stereotype holds racist and oppressive ideologies, towards black women to be servants and one-dimensional roles. She states how complex these representations actually are and how they serve to reinforce white supremacy and maintain racial hierarchies in society. The examination of the mammy stereotype helps us understand racial representation within film, by going into to grave detail on the historical context of these stereotypes and a cultural understanding of them as well. Bobo make it clear how these stereotypes have been utilized to dehumanize and marginalized black women within popular media. By this article drawing attention to this mammy stereotype we can see a clear correlation between this article and "The Help" since we've be introduced to the mammy stereotype and the negative tropes associated with it. Bobo's work, helps the audience of "The Help" are forced to critically scrutinize the film's portrayal of black women and confront the damaging prejudices that continue to impact popular media. Bobo's critique is a compelling call to action for diversity and authenticity in film depictions, calling for the recognition and celebration of African American women's complex experiences.

Kyesha D. Jennings' work "The Portrayal of African American Women in Film: Reflective Stereotypes in Mainstream Film from 2001-2011" expands on Bobo's research of historical depictions of black women in film with a modern perspective. This article provides an analysis of black women in mainstream media during the first decade. She explains how mainstream media reinforce stereotypes of black women and how these societal perceptions of black women shape the way that black women are perceived identities and experience that they

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face. Jennings states the importance of how these stereotypical identities of black women can cause a certain narrative about black women and their identities. The article goes into detail on how black women are still facing the challenge of being seen and viewed as how they view themselves and not the way these narratives have been portrayed and created for them through media and have authentic representation of themselves in media.

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