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In Perspective: Confronting our racial history with 'The Help'

By Desiree Cooper
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I am a post-civil rights black woman whose Southern roots have been nearly erased by world travel and an adulthood spent raising a family in Michigan. I am supposed to be offended by the movie "The Help" for its simplification of the injustices of the Jim Crow South. But I am not.

In fact, I'd argue that the scenes that seem to give us the most trouble — the depiction of the genuine feelings that the maids and nannies developed for the women they worked for and the children they raised — may be the most authentic.

I was forced to face this troubling possibility in my own family. My mother and father were raised in a one-horse town near Richmond, Virginia. My father has often spoken of the humiliating, soul-breaking racism they endured, the dusty work of "chopping cotton" and the indignity of not being allowed to have jobs handling money. The women in my mother's family were all laundresses and maids. The highest dreams they had for their daughters were for them to become teachers.

Flash forward to the 1990s. By then I was a mother myself, raising a family in Detroit. We'd make the pilgrimage south to Virginia every year to visit my folks. On one of those trips, Mom and I went to an antique shop in Norfolk, Virginia. After living in Detroit for decades, I sensed that the white woman at the cash register wasn't exactly warm to two black women coming into her shop. Suddenly, there was a squeal, like the sound of teenagers greeting each other at the mall.

"Bobby," the white woman gushed.

"Nancy!" Mom exclaimed, hugging the woman. "My mother-in-law worked for your family for years!"

I was embarrassed, angry and ashamed. I wanted to drag my mother out of there for shining up to the family that had essentially enslaved my father's family. What was she thinking?

But then the women, wiping away tears, starting going through family memories, exchanging updates, telling who had died, who had had children, where they now lived. I realized with horror that I was watching a family reunion. Black women were brought into the intimate recesses of white family life. Indeed, they were sometimes the linchpin of the white family. It is inescapable that genuine, deep and lasting bonds were bound to develop. Dare I use the words "love" and "affection"?

This is dangerous territory for African-Americans to concede. If we allow that whites and blacks forged friendships and affections and even fell in love with each other in the midst of slavery and segregation, can we still villainize whites as our oppressors? This is the aspect of "The Help" that seems to make us the most uncomfortable.

Yet until we allow whites to explore their role in apartheid, until we allow a discourse about the difference between their realities and ours, we will never move closer to a collective understanding of our histories. "The Help" is definitely imperfect. But I'm open to the dialogue it can spur and to a deeper understanding of the complicated interracial relationships that we have yet to explore.

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