"Honey, you been dozing off during history?" "Yes, always": Hairspray (2007) as a Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement

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“Honey, you been dozing off during history?” “Yes, always”¹:

_Hairspray_ (2007) as a Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement

In 2007, Adam Shankman once again brought to life the story of Tracy Turnblad, a teen growing up in 1962 Baltimore with dreams of dancing on the segregated _Corny Collins Show_. Although this rendition was based on the 2002 musical production of Tracy’s story, when the 2007 movie came out, reviewers could not help but compare Shankman’s work to John Walters’ original 1988 film. The reviews shared the common sentiment that the new movie was “cleaned up”² and “less kitsch than the original”³ due to its “squeaky clean approach to racism and integration.”⁴ Although this version may be less violent and the racism less overt, Shankman’s _Hairspray_ relies on stereotypes from the white perspective both in the depiction of African American characters and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. By perpetuating this white narrative of the Civil Rights movement, _Hairspray_’s portrayal of this key moment in history not only devalues African Americans as agents of change, but attempts to validate stereotypes and misrepresents black identity as purely cosmetic.

I. CONSTRUCTING BLACKNESS

Every detail in the construction of the characters, from costuming to makeup to choreography, creates the juxtaposition of the seductive black temptress against the innocent

white female. However, it is not just the female African Americans who are depicted in this manner, as the African American men often induce fear in these pure white women. This contrast brings to mind what Danielle L. McGuire refers to as the “age-old fear of interracial sex and black-on-white rape.”5 This trope was historically used as justification for white violence against African-Americans, out of the fear that black males would corrupt their white females. As Melissa V. Harris-Perry articulates, “The idea that black women were hypersexual beings created space for white moral superiority by justifying the brutality of Southern white men.”6 Hairspray perpetuates this framework and applies it to culture; in this case, music and dance. It is in this juxtaposition of cultures where we see historical stereotypes begin to emerge.

This fear of black culture penetrating white chastity can most easily be seen in the “New Girl in Town” sequence, in which three white females and three black females perform sections of the same song back-to-back. As far as appearances, the three white females are conservatively dressed, with very little skin showing. Furthermore, the dresses are long, loose, and do not fit tightly on their bodies. The women are wearing very little make-up, as if not to be provocative, and the style is overwhelmingly childish with flowery patterns. They truly embody what Harris-Perry calls “the Victorian ideal of true womanhood [which] required strict adherence to a code of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—virtues believed to be inherent in feminine nature.”7 This depiction of the white females in the work is complimented by their music and dancing. The Corny Collins Show, of which the white dancers are a part, contains childish dances such as the “stricken chicken” and “twist on

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5 Danielle L. McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 211.
7 Ibid.
the twist.” All of the dancers have very little contact with each other, and all “dirty” moves are forbidden. As Velma sates, “On my show you’ll never find a thrusting hip or bump and grind.” All of these decisions help construct the stereotypical image of the innocent white female, who not only lacks sexual appeal, but could easily be corrupted.

The construction of the “New Girl in Town” sequence allows us to directly see the contrast between both cultures, embodied through their music, style, and dancing. The Jezebel stereotype is present in the depiction of most African American female characters, who are portrayed as overly sexualized and promiscuous. When we are shown Negro Day for the first time, we are introduced to an African-American female singing trio, the Dynamites. These women very much embody this stereotype as their clothing is tight, short, revealing, and the three ladies wear heavy makeup, especially compared to other characters. Furthermore, as seen by the rest of dancers on Negro Day, their dancing is much more suggestive and involves bodily contact between men and women. As the station manager, and Amber’s mother Velma says, “We can’t have our dancers thrusting like savages!” As opposed to the white innocence, as Amber describes it, the African-American characters reside in “a hot-bed of moral turpentine” which depends on stereotypes and the exaggeration of their sexuality.

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8 *Hairspray*, 18:09.
9 Ibid., 34:37.
10 Ibid., 32:52.
11 Ibid., 54:94.
The Jezebel stereotype is not the only one present in our female African-American characters, as Motormouth Maybelle is depicted as the stereotypical Mammy. In one prominent scene, Maybelle is hosting a platter party in her record store. During this scene, she sings a song entitled, “Big, Blonde, and Beautiful,” in which she is simultaneously embracing and exploiting herself. On the one hand, she is defending blackness with sentiments such as, “They say that white has might and thin is in/Well, that's just bull/'Cause ladies, big is back and as for black, It's beautiful.” But, on the other hand, she is exploiting her robust physical stature while black women dance around her with platters of food attempting to serve the white Edna. She sings, “I offer big love with no apology/How can I deny the world the most of me/I am not afraid to throw my weight around/pound by pound by pound.” Additionally, Maybelle may be embracing blackness, but she is not natural, as she has fake blonde and styled hair as opposed to the natural look embodied by the Black Panther movement at the time. So our most prominent African American woman in the whole movie is constructed with decades-old stereotypes, and is hardly representative of women at the time, as she was a prominent public figure on TV.

Aside from stereotypes, in *Hairspray*, skin color is treated as a cosmetic issue. This is most apparent in the fact that the prejudice experienced from being overweight is perceived as the same as being African American. For instance, Tracy defines being different as anyone “who’s black or Chinese or maybe who needs to lose a few pounds.” This is done in an effort to give Tracy the shared experience of feeling out-casted and judged based on looks, similar to

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12 *Hairspray*, 58:27
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 1:07:25.
the black characters’ experience. Interesting enough, Common Sense Media describes Hairspray with this one line: “The movie's major theme is seeing beyond people's looks or skin color.”\footnote{“Hairspray (2007),” Common Sense Media.} Additionally, A.O. Scott of the New York Times comments “That Hairspray cheerfully conflates racial prejudice with fat-phobia is the measure of its guileless, deliberately simplified politics.”\footnote{A.O. Scott, “Teenagers in Love and a Mom in Drag in the ’60’s,” New York Times, July 19, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/19/movies/19hair.html?_r=0} But it is these “simplified” politics which disregard the historical traditions of the institution of racism. Instead, the African American’s color is presented as not culturally or identity based, but merely a facet of their appearance.

With these two cultural spheres established, throughout the movie we are given multiple interactions between black men and white women that can be characterized by the stereotypical fear from Reconstruction and beyond. In one example, Tracy is in detention for the first time watching Seaweed do his original dance move. He calls it “Peyton Place After Midnight,” and as if the title was not suggestive enough, he tells Tracy that he uses that dance to “attract the opposite sex.”\footnote{Hairspray, 21:40} An unnamed black student walks up to her and asks, “What’ch you looking at?” Tracy suddenly tenses up, takes a step away from the man, and replies, “Nothing, not you!”\footnote{Ibid., 20:52.} Although the male student’s inquiry was non-aggressive, Tracy replied with much fear that seemed unnatural in that situation. A similar interaction is seen towards the end of the movie, where Amber is being checked out by a black male dancer from a distance. Her mother Velma, who is standing nearby, is disgusted and with shock yells at Amber to “stop it,” as though there was something immoral about the exchange. While it may be a subtle interaction, every minute detail in this exchange is perpetuating the notion that white females have reason to fear black males.

In addition to their appearances and dancing styles, the music performed by the African American characters is constructed as somehow inferior or a threat to white culture. Crossing the boundary between the two cultures is viewed as a taboo on both sides. At the school hop, the dance floor is physically divided between the black and white students, and this is symbolic of the tension underlying the whole movie. When Tracy first enters detention and speaks with Seaweed, she starts to copy his moves. As she is doing so, many of the black characters around her express shock that she is able to dance like him, as they shout “you can’t do that dance!”\textsuperscript{19} There are similar reactions of the side of the white characters, as when Tracy does Seaweed’s African American styled dance at the hop, Amber is disgusted.\textsuperscript{20} However, when these characters cross the lines between cultures, there is a sense of initiation into the other culture. Once Tracy completes the dance, Seaweed proclaims, “You got it goin on girl, you’re one of us!”\textsuperscript{21} And similarly, at the end of the movie after Amber has accepted defeat, she is being taught dance moves by a black male student. In \textit{Hairspray}, interracial dancing and the fusion of these two juxtaposed cultures is portrayed as the purpose of the movement, and the ultimate paradise our stereotypical characters are striving for.

\section*{II. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT}

In addition to the reliance on stereotypes in the construction of the two opposed cultures, \textit{Hairspray} perpetuates a superficial narrative of the Civil Rights movement, characterized by the passivity of African Americans, inevitability of equal rights, and individualism over the community.

One element of this narrative is the passivity of African Americans. In the movie, all of the African American characters are depicted as passively accepting their condition. When Tracy

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\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Hairspray}, 21:50. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 28:37. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 21:50
\end{flushleft}
questions why she and Seaweed cannot dance together at the hop, he replies, “Are you crazy? You gotta dance with your crowd and I gotta dance with mine…That’s just the way it is.”22 This statement simultaneously evokes the lack of protest to their segregation and highlights the very limited aims of the movement. At its core, *Hairspray’s* problem is the fight for the integration of TV and freedom of interracial dance. Even during the later protest march, all of their signs read “TV is Black and White,” “Let our children dance,” and “Do the checkerboard!”23 This plot may be amusing, but it presents the African Americans’ struggle as a singular problem that is solvable by allowing blacks and whites to dance together, which avoids the deep institutionalization of the problem. Nevertheless, all of these elements lead the viewer to believe that the African Americans would not have done anything about it, had Tracy not stepped in.

A part of this passivity is due to the fact that the characters have conceived a notion of an inevitable paradise in their future. This sentiment is especially demonstrated through Corny, as he says things such as “I read you like tomorrow’s headlines Tracy”24 and “isn’t this where it is all heading anyway? Now you can fight it or you can rock out to it!”25 Tracy shares this optimism, as she says to her mother, “People who are different, their time is coming!”26 Furthermore, the grand finale of the movie, “You Can’t Stop the Beat,” compares racial equality to inevitable forces such as avalanches, rivers, seasons, oceans, and even time. As all of the

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22 *Hairspray*, 28:37.
23 Ibid., 1:15:50.
24 Ibid., 32:00.
25 Ibid., 32:57.
26 *Hairspray*, 38:41.
characters proudly sing, "You cannot stop the paradise we’re dreaming of." This dreaming and passivity is exactly what frustrated Anne Moody, a real-life civil rights activist. She describes hearing Martin Luther King, Jr. give his iconic address, “I sat on the grass and listened to the speakers, to discover we had ‘dreamers’ instead of leaders leading us. Just about every one of them stood up there dreaming . . . we never had time to sleep, much less dream.” The sense of inevitability and passivity devalues all of the activism of women such as Moody, and effectively takes all agency away from generations of African Americans.

As if the passivity and dreaming were not enough to devalue the experience of African Americans, all protest that does occur in the film is driven by Tracy. In fact, she is the only character who is shown to realize that change requires activism. She says to her father, “I think I’ve been in a bubble or something, thinking that fairness was just going to happen. It’s not. I think people like me are gonna have to get up off their father’s laps and go out there and fight for it.” The main protest in the film is a civil rights march through Baltimore, which is proposed by Tracy upon hearing that Negro Day has been canceled. Concerning this scene, Hiram Lee writes that the viewer “gets the impression this [idea] had never occurred to Maybelle before. This is simply unbelievable, and it is not clear why this should be the case considering the protest in the original film was in fact Maybelle’s idea.” Once again, it is the subtle changes in this film from the original which reinforce the stereotypes and white-centrism, as well as the promotion of an individual over a community. While Hairspray’s African American characters wait passively for change to happen, Tracy became the figurehead of a movement that involved at least hundreds of people and impacted thousands.

27 Ibid., 39:15
28 Anne Moody, Coming of Age in Mississippi (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1968), 337.
29 Hairspray, 1:07:25.
30 Ibid., 1:01:14.
Even more than leading the protest, the African Americans seemingly rally around Tracy’s idea for her benefit! After hearing the proposition to march, Maybelle asks the crowd of African Americans in her record shop, “Should we give this fine woman all the ratings she deserves?” So instead of appreciating the idea for its symbolism or purpose, Maybelle thinks the march would be a good opportunity for Tracy. And later, during the march, we learn that the only reason TV stations covered it was because the famous white girl Tracy was standing front and center. The presence of a white female public face is similar to the portrayal of Harriet Jacobs’ biography, as her editor felt the necessity to insert an introduction validating Jacobs’ story. As editor Jennifer Fleischner notes, “Child, who as white, was required by the conventions of the genre to vouch for the authenticity, integrity, and literacy of the black author.”

Hairspray evokes a similar custom, as Tracy’s centrality reaffirms the notion that not only were African Americans passive bystanders who needed to be mobilized, but that it took a white woman to legitimize their movement.

In addition to the limited aims and inevitability of the movement, the only obstacles presented in the film are the two “racist” characters, Velma and Amber. Once Velma is fired and Amber is defeated in the Miss Teenage Hairspray Pageant, the white and black characters are free to integrate and break the tradition of never dancing on TV together. Corny proudly declares that “The Corny Collins Show is now and forever officially integrated” while the crowd forming

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32 Hairspray, 1:01:44.
outside cheers and the dancers on stage celebrate. Unrealistically, everyone else in *Hairspray*’s universe has no problem with the new commingling. Additionally, Seaweed’s little sister, Lil Inez, receives an overwhelming amount of votes and ends up winning Miss Teenage Hairspray! Her victory suggests that the public was on board for an integrated broadcast as well. It is interesting to note that the real event this movie is based on, an integrated broadcast of the *Buddy Deane Show* in 1963, did not play out nearly as peacefully. As Matthew Delmont notes, “After the surprise interracial broadcast, the television station received bomb and arson threats, hate mail, and complaints from parents of white teenagers,” and the show was even canceled! This movie puts forth an easily conquered villain, conveniently ends right after the integration to avoid addressing all repercussions, and ignores the deep institutionalization of racism, instilling in two individuals the prejudices of a nation.

Just as this movie fails to consider multiple narratives of the Civil Rights movement, there is also an internal inconsistency regarding the role of history in these characters’ lives. In the protest scene, Maybelle sings “I Know Where I’ve Been,” a song proclaiming the significance of their history on their present situation. Maybelle acknowledges that they are still engaged in “*a struggle we have yet to win.*” Her performance is very much aligned in the blues tradition, as Maybelle is speaking for community about shared experience and acknowledgement of a collective past. It is also one of the only scenes which depicts African Americans as a community, and not individuals. As Delmont

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34 *Hairspray*, 1:41:50.
36 *Hairspray*, 1:15:50.
describes, in this scene “The film also links the song with a protest march that gives the scene a visual component resembling historical images of civil rights marches.” In this scene alone, we see the importance of history in impacting the present, and the extent to which segregation was a larger issue than simply overcoming Amber and Velma.

Yet, these same characters also expound the notion that “yesterday is history and it’s never coming back.” Amidst the blissful interracial dancing at the end, our characters act as though their small victory overturns decades of oppression and prejudice. As Delmont writes:

Like Walters’s film and the stage show, *Hairspray’s* (2007) historical representations and utopian conclusion have the potential to mislead viewers about the level of racism in the early 1960’s, the rate of success for civil rights activists, and the integration of televised teenage dance programs like *American Bandstand*.

Similar to how race is treated as a cosmetic feature, our characters sudden shift from embracing and remembering their past to reversing its importance illustrates *Hairspray’s* quickness to simplify the complicated history of African Americans. The optimistic conclusion avoids uncertainty and all repercussions, and we feel as though we have reached the “promised land” our characters have been envisioning.

In a way, *Hairspray* only perpetuates the narrative of the Civil Rights movement as viewed from the white perspective. All character interactions are presented through the frame of black culture threatening white chastity. The movie relies on stereotypes in its construction of African American women, and generalizations in its portrayal of African American men. Furthermore, through wardrobe, stylistic decisions, dances, and music, the whites and blacks are contrasted through said frame. The call for rights itself is portrayed as driven by a white, female individual, while the blacks stand passively by waiting for their savior and inevitable paradise.

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40 *Hairspray*, 1:50:55.
The only obstacles in this world are two racist individuals, and once the problem is removed, no institutionalized racism remains. And blackness itself is treated as a cosmetic facet of one’s appearance, which ignores race as a culture, identity, and community. So while this film may lack the violence, crudeness, or overt racism of John Walters’ 1988 original, subtlety is not absence. Nevertheless, despite these realities, Producer Neil Meron still states, “There is a truth to Hairspray that really tells young people what it was like, and how far we may have come on certain issues.” But it is this truth that misrepresents the Civil Rights movement and the role African American played in it.

Works Cited


https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/hairspray-2007


41 Delmont, The Nicest Kids in Town, 212.


