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"The Help" Ignores History of Activism Among Deep South's Domestic Workers (2)

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By Peter Dreier, Truthout | Movie Review

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Film director Tate Taylor scored a late-summer box office smash with his adaptation of Kathryn Stockett's novel, "The Help." A surprise hit with movie critics, too, "The Help" is set during the racial battles of 1963. It focuses on the efforts of African-American maids to maintain their dignity despite the routine discrimination and vicious slights they confront while living in segregated Jackson, Mississippi.

Twenty-one years before "The Help," another film about African-American maids enduring similar indignities appeared. Richard Pearce's "The Long Walk Home," in contrast to "The Help," shows African-American maids as active participants in the civil rights struggle - and remains a much more uplifting and realistic movie about the plight and pluck of black domestic servants confronting racism. Perhaps, because of its honesty, "The Long Walk Home" flopped, and today you cannot even buy a new DVD copy of the film. Nevertheless, it is a celebration of the unsung heroes of the civil rights movement, the rank-and-file participants whose names don't show up in history books.

In "The Help," the maids' employers - middle-class white families whose husbands work and whose wives play bridge and organize Junior League charity events - pay the African-American women less than minimum wage, expect them to clean their homes, shop for their food, cook their meals and raise their children. The whites think nothing of using the N-word in front of the maids, generally treat them like dirt and show little concern that these women have children of their own who get less attention than the white kids they nurture from infancy to teenage-hood. The Junior League's queen bee even organizes a campaign to require black maids to use separate bathrooms. The maids put up with these terrible indignities because if they complain about the impossible work load - much less challenge their employers' racist comments - they will get fired.

In true Hollywood fashion, it takes a white woman, Skeeter (Emma Stone), to empower the maids in "The Help." Skeeter is a recent Ole Miss graduate who returns home to Jackson and embarks on a writing career by compiling a local oral history



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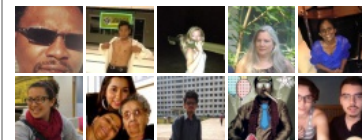
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viewed from the perspective of the city's maids. She begins her clandestine interviews with a friend's maid named Aibileen (Viola Davis), who reluctantly agrees to talk despite her fears that it could cost her job. Aibileen then persuades her feisty friend Minny (Octavia Spencer) to participate, but no other maids will talk with Skeeter.

"The Help" is primarily about the web of relationships among the black maids and between the maids and their employers. We see little about the maids' lives outside their work - including their own families, their church and neighborhood and the civil rights movement that was mobilizing and dividing both blacks and whites that summer.

The only acknowledgement of that movement is the maids' response to the murder of NAACP leader Medgar Evers, which occurred in front of his Jackson home in the early morning of June 12, just hours after President Kennedy's speech on national television in support of civil rights. The film shows the maids and other Jackson blacks cowering in fear after hearing the news of Evers' murder. In reality, Jackson's black community organized marches, meetings and vigils - all met with police violence - to protest Evers' killings and to demand that his murderers be brought to justice. Maids were part of that protest movement.

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By the summer of 1963, when the "The Help" takes place, Mississippi was already a cauldron of civil rights activism. Two years earlier, the Freedom Rides had challenged the Jim Crow laws. The previous fall, in September of 1962, James Meredith's attempt to enroll as the first black student in the history of the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) triggered widespread resistance from Southern whites (including Gov. Ross Barnett) and support from Southern blacks and Northern liberals, and forced President Kennedy to order federal marshals to the campus to protect Meredith. In 1963, while Martin Luther King was leading protest marches in nearby Birmingham, Alabama, civil rights groups - Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality and the NAACP - were engaged in a hardscrabble grassroots voter registration drive among Mississippi's disenfranchised black population. Blacks in Jackson (the state capital) and other towns were challenging Jim Crow segregation laws.

In "The Help," two local incidents - Jackson police brutally beating one of the maids without provocation and Evers' assassination - unleash the maids' pent-up anger. In the film, however, they confine their protests to giving testimony to Skeeter for her book. They describe the humiliations and occasional joys, of their work and lives. While Skeeter's book may be guaranteed to upset Jackson's white elite, it's hard to view it as a strategy for bringing change.

In contrast to "The Help," the 1990 film "The Long Walk Home" shows African-American maids as active participants in the civil rights struggle.

"The Long Walk Home" is set in Montgomery, Alabama, during the 1955 bus boycott. It stars Whoopi Goldberg as Odessa Cotter, a black maid employed by Miriam Thompson, an upper middle-class women played by Sissy Spacek (who also has a smaller role in "The Help"). This film has some of the same elements of domestic drama as "The Help," including the relationship between Odessa and Miriam and the ugly racist slights that Miriam's family members, especially her bigoted brother-in-law, inflict on Odessa as she serves meals and takes care of the Thompsons' daughter.

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But the boycott is at the center of the film. The well-known heroes of the boycott story - Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, JoAnn Robinson, E.D. Nixon and other organizers for the NAACP, the Women's Political Council and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) - are all off-camera in this film. Instead, "The Long Walk Home" is about the grassroots activism of Montgomery's everyday black citizens who participate in the well-organized carpool system set up by the MIA to take boycotters to and from work, and whose morale is sustained by rallies, church services and the hope that their actions will bring down the city's despised segregated bus system and, ultimately, lead to a better life for their children.

Odessa and her husband (a factory worker played by Ving Rhames) have not been political activists, but they feel compelled to join the boycott, even though it causes them considerable inconvenience and could get them fired from their jobs. (At a time when about 90 percent of black women in the South worked as maids, losing a job - and being blacklisted from other jobs by the informal network of white families - was a serious consequence of civil rights activism.)

On days when they miss the carpool, the maids (and other Montgomery blacks) have to walk to work. On many days, Odessa has to wake up several hours earlier and return home long after dark, to make the eight-mile walk to and from work, leaving her feet with blisters and her husband and children without her for breakfast and dinner. One day, when Odessa arrives late to the Thompson home, the family discovers that their maid is participating in the controversial boycott.

Miriam offers to pick Odessa up at her home and drive her to and from work. Despite the fact that Odessa has worked for her family for years, it is the first time Miriam has been to Odessa's house. In the process, she gains new respect for Odessa and becomes sympathetic to the boycott. She gradually joins the handful of whites who participate in the carpool operation. When Miriam's husband (a housing developer) discovers her involvement with the boycott, he moves out of their house. He cannot handle her growing independence and self-confidence, nor the ridicule he's subjected to from his friends for allowing his wife to consort with civil rights agitators. For him, allowing his wife and other whites to treat blacks humanely - even letting them sit in the front seat of the car - is the opening wedge to full equality, integrated schools, inter-racial marriage and the breakdown of his entire way of life.

Unlike "The Help," "The Long Walk Home" examines how a city's whites - and its power structure - maintained segregation. It shows how, at its root, Jim Crow was built on a foundation of economic control, political power and the vigilante violence of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council.

In "The Long Walk Home," for example, the Montgomery cops kick Odessa out of a public park - where she has brought the Thompson children for a picnic - because they are off-limits to blacks. Whites also resort to extra-legal means to keep blacks in their place. The film shows white teenagers beating up Odessa's daughter when she rides the bus in defiance of the boycott. When the local White Citizens Council - which includes many of the city's "respectable" political and business leaders - discovers that Miriam is helping the boycott carpool, they let her husband know that his business will suffer - the local political establishment will deny him permits for his housing developments - if he doesn't control his wife's involvement. And it depicts the middle-class White Citizens Council threatening the black and white drivers in the MIA carpool with violence, using tire irons and other weapons, knowing that the local police will look the other way.

Although "The Long Walk Home" was criticized for having a white narrator (Miriam's

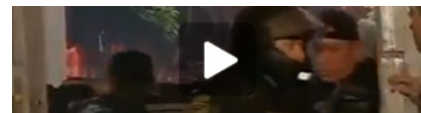
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daughter, looking back about 15 years later) and for focusing on the white family, the film devotes considerable time to Odessa's life outside work and the burgeoning bus boycott movement among Montgomery's rank-and-file black community. The Montgomery bus boycott was one of the most amazing examples of effective community organizing in American **history**.

About 17,000 African-Americans - almost all of the city's black bus riders - participated in the 381-day boycott, despite threats from employers and others that doing so could cost them their jobs. The boycott propelled the civil rights movement into national consciousness. King became a public figure. The boycott's success led King and other black ministers to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which became a major instigator of civil rights protest. The movement picked up steam after February 1, 1960, when four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, organized the first sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter. The sit-in strategy spread quickly throughout the South, led primarily by black college students who formed SNCC. The Freedom Rides and the voter registration drives, especially in Mississippi, laid the groundwork for the events of 1963 that occur in the background of "The Help."

More than any other Hollywood film about the civil rights years, "The Long Walk Home" offers viewers insights into the complex work of grassroots mobilization and the quiet day-to-day courage needed to build a movement for social justice.

Peter Dreier is the Dr. E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy Program, at Occidental College in Los Angeles. His next book, *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*, will be published by Nation Books next year.



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