

## Review:

**Clare Oberon Garcia, Vershawn  
Ashanti Young, and Charise Pimentel  
(Eds.). *From Uncle Tom's Cabin to The  
Help: Critical Perspectives on White-  
Authored Narratives of Black Life***

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When the film adaptation of Michael Lewis's *The Blind Side* premiered in November 2009, I was five months removed from high school, where I played a season of football. My attention was piqued by the story of athletic triumph, of racial triumph. But as I encountered more about the film, I became uneasy. Maybe it was Sandra Bullock's embellished southern accent. Probably, though, it was the film's poster, showing her silhouette walking alongside that of Quinton Aaron, who portrays Michael Oher, the black teen Bullock's character takes in and guides to football stardom. Even as the film won Oscars, there remained something untrustworthy about it, something in the way the poster depicted Bullock next to Aaron's lumbering, faceless body, evoking Lenny from *Of Mice and Men*. It all made *The Blind Side* seem like another film whose purpose was to make Americans feel absolved, via altruism, of the vast inequity of their country. Into such uneasiness steps *From Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-*

*Authored Narratives of Black Life*, edited by Clare Oberon Garcia, Vershawn Ashanti Young, and Charise Pimentel.

This collection sets out to subvert the unexamined, mainstream praise of works such as *The Blind Side*, Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (which eight of the text's fifteen chapters focus on), and older, more traditionally canonical pieces. In limiting their scope to white-authored narratives, Garcia, Young, and Pimentel promote distinctly racialized frames of reading familiar works, frames that undercut their (the works') statuses as progressive commentaries on American race relations. *From Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Help* emerges as a collection that is as well-researched as it is passionate, filling a gap in race studies and providing a template for similar texts. At a time in which subversive commentary, especially by writers and educators of color, is being marginalized across the U.S., this text reminds its audience of what such thought looks like—and of what it can do.

Any review of this collection has to start with how it appraises *The Help*. Stockett's novel gets rightfully skewered from every angle, from the critical race theorists to the feminists to the historicists. In "Taking Care a White Babies, That's What I Do': *The Help* and Americans' Obsession with the Mammy," Katrina Dyonne Thompson situates the novel's black female characters within the archetype of the mammy, seen in nineteenth-century figurines well through *Gone with the Wind*. Likewise, in "'When Folks Is Real Friends, There Ain't No Such Thing as Place': Feminist Sisterhood and the Politics of Social Hierarchy in *The Help*," Shana Russell powerfully highlights Stockett's tone-deafness by evoking the experiences of her (Russell's) mother:

My mother and other black women like her were not looking to Kathryn Stockett to reveal an uncertain truth about a history they did not get to choose. The problem of white authorship, then, is not an inability to tell our story on screen. It's a refusal to follow these fictional narratives into the mundane spaces, like my mother's kitchen, where they are given life. (81)

These examples illustrate how, for all of its good intentions, *The Help* utterly misunderstands the lives of black people in its time.

Stockett's novel emerges as a blithe, even nostalgic text tainted by misinformation and a simplification of black perspectives.

Of the non-*Help*-related articles, Pimentel and Sarah Santillanes's "Blindsided by Racism: A Critical Racial Analysis of *The Blind Side*" is the most powerful and thoroughly researched. The authors challenge the film's white-savior narrative, its willful colorblindness, and, perhaps most importantly, its preference for philanthropy over a conversation about the systemic, unequal structures of U.S. society, structures making it possible for someone like Michael Oher to experience such desperation. As they themselves put it:

Rather than illuminate the social relations of power that create and sustain racial inequities, the narrative in *The Blind Side* (re) produces a color-blind racial ideology that is ahistorical and devoid of a sociopolitical context. As such, the life outcomes we see in *The Blind Side*...appear to be outcomes that simply and directly result from individual choice and responsibility. (208)

What truly distinguishes Pimentel and Santillanes's article is how prominently the words of Oher himself figure. In *I Beat the Odds: From Homelessness, to The Blind Side, and Beyond*, the National Football League veteran details the discrepancies between the book/film and his life, pointing out, among other details, that he played and studied football long before his adoption (198). (In the film adaptation, his white saviors need to teach him the basics of the game.) He adds that Lewis never consulted him during the drafting process, instead relying on other sources (197). Driven by the ethos of Oher and the authors themselves, "Blindsided by Racism" is not only a fine contribution to race studies, but it's also a companion piece to Oher's memoir itself. One imagines the two texts complementing each other well in a course involving Critical Race Theory.

All of this isn't to suggest the collection's authors want white artists to stop depicting black lives altogether, be it in novels or elsewhere. For example, in "'Must the Novelist Ask Permission?': Authority and Authenticity of the Black Voice in the Works of Eudora Welty and Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*," Ebony Lumumba praises Welty's rarely studied photography, characterizing the writer as a rather responsible

chronicler of her milieu. Welty deliberately acted, as Lumumba puts it, “within her voyeuristic role in an effort to ensure that the [black] communities and situations she observed remained authentic and untainted by her outsider presence” (31). Likewise, Karen A. Johnson endorses aspects of Quentin Tarantino’s 2012 film *Django Unchained*, calling it a “counterhegemonic...production of slavery” (212). Such chapters speak to this collection’s overarching goal of fostering constructive dialogues around these texts. Lumumba, Johnson, & Co. don’t want to outlaw those who produce art cross-culturally, but rather to engender in them a more critical consciousness, an awareness of perspective.

Besides its wisdom, *From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Help* lastly offers a rich, interdisciplinary template that can be adapted by others in race studies. Its voices come from various fields across the humanities, each possessing a facility with Critical Race Theory. As its lineup illustrates, such a text can showcase the work of both emerging and established thinkers of color. Though not all ethnic groups have recently had to navigate a *Help*-like phenomenon, this collection is a fine blueprint for combating one.

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