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Through the Eyes of a Child: The Portrayal of South Africa's Apartheid in Children's Cinema

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Through the Eyes of a Child: The Portrayal of South Africa's Apartheid in Children's Cinema

Abstract

August 1977: a thirteen-year-old African American girl stands at the gate of an airport holding a bouquet of flowers. Standing with her mother, she is anxiously awaiting the arrival of Mahree, a South African school girl her family has offered to host for the upcoming academic school year. The young African American girl, Piper, is excited to meet this South African girl, hoping their African heritage will bond them together. The passengers all exit the plane, and Piper starts to worry that they are at the wrong gate because neither Piper nor her mom spotted a fourteen-year-old South African girl leaving the plane. In hopes of locating Mahree, Piper calls out Mahree's name. Suddenly, a young white girl turns around and says "I'm Mahree Bok." Both parties are stunned; Piper pictured Mahree to be black South African, while Mahree pictured her host family to be white.

The scene described above is a scene from the children's movie, *The Color of Friendship*, released in 2000. From the outside, this scene seems to be an innocent interaction-- two young girls are meeting for the first time. However, put in the context of the South African apartheid, one learns that this scene carries certain historical truths that warrant a deeper understanding. Its 1977 and South Africa is still entrenched in a strict and oppressive system of racial segregation. When meeting her African American host family for the first time, is it safe to assume that Mahree's shock comes from a set of apartheid cultural ideologies that believe blacks to be inferior to whites. Directed by Kevin Hook, *The Color of Friendship* is a children's TV film that seeks to address issues of race in the context of the South African apartheid. The *Color of Friendship* raises important questions about the genre of children's film, memory, and history when analyzed through a historic lens. How can children's film be used to address important but difficult themes of discrimination and race? Can directors use children's film to accurately portray historical injustices? These series of questions can be answered through a deep historical analysis of the film, *The Color of Friendship*. The film's representation of South African race relations through the portrayal of Steven Biko's death and Afrikaner ideologies illustrates that difficult historical themes can be accurately portrayed through children's cinema.

Keywords

South Africa, Film, Africana Studies, Children's Film

Disciplines

African American Studies | Film and Media Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

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Through the Eyes of a Child:
The Portrayal of South Africa's Apartheid in Children's Cinema

Keira Koch

Professor Bamba

AFS 262

December 4, 2017

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work
and have not witnessed a violation of the honor coed.

August 1977: a thirteen-year-old African American girl stands at the gate of an airport holding a bouquet of flowers. Standing with her mother, she is anxiously awaiting the arrival of Mahree, a South African school girl her family has offered to host for the upcoming academic school year. The young African American girl, Piper, is excited to meet this South African girl, hoping their African heritage will bond them together. The passengers all exit the plane, and Piper starts to worry that they are at the wrong gate because neither Piper nor her mom spotted a fourteen-year-old South African girl leaving the plane. In hopes of locating Mahree, Piper calls out Mahree's name. Suddenly, a young white girl turns around and says "I'm Mahree Bok." Both parties are stunned; Piper pictured Mahree to be black South African, while Mahree pictured her host family to be white.¹

The scene described above is a scene from the children's movie, *The Color of Friendship*, released in 2000. From the outside, this scene seems to be an innocent interaction-- two young girls are meeting for the first time. However, put in the context of the South African apartheid, one learns that this scene carries certain historical truths that warrant a deeper understanding. Its 1977 and South Africa is still entrenched in a strict and oppressive system of racial segregation.² When meeting her African American host family for the first time, is it safe to assume that Mahree's shock comes from a set of apartheid cultural ideologies that believe blacks to be inferior to whites. Directed by Kevin Hook, *The Color of Friendship* is a children's TV film that seeks to address issues of race in the context of the South African apartheid.³ *The Color of Friendship* raises important questions about the genre of children's film, memory, and history when analyzed through a historic lens. How can children's film be used to address important but

¹ *The Color of Friendship*. DVD. Directed by Kevin Hook. Disney Educational Productions, 2012.

² Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 107.

³ *The Color of Friendship*. DVD. Directed by Kevin Hook. Disney Educational Productions, 2012.

difficult themes of discrimination and race? Can directors use children's film to accurately portray historical injustices? These series of questions can be answered through a deep historical analysis of the film, *The Color of Friendship*. The film's representation of South African race relations through the portrayal of Steven Biko's death and Afrikaner ideologies illustrates that difficult historical themes can be accurately portrayed through children's cinema.

The Color of Friendship, was released in 2000 to audiences in both the USA and Canada.⁴ The film centers on a series of true events and is loosely based off the life of California senator Ron Dellums and his family. Set in 1977, the movie opens with Piper, the daughter of Congressman Ron Dellums, begging her father to allow the family to host a girl from Africa. From this opening scene, it is clear that Piper is proud of her African heritage and hopes that hosting an African girl will allow her to further explore that part of her identity. On the opposite side of the world, Mahree, a white South African girl begs her mother and father to let her study in America. Mahree's parents agree to send her to America and the exchange agency matches Mahree with the Dellums. The first meeting does not go well. Both girls have incorrect pre-conceived notions about one another's countries. Mahree, knowing that she was to be hosted by Congressman Dellums family, expects the congressman to be white. Piper, while expecting a South African, does not realize that there are white residents in Africa.⁵

Circumstances become even more complicated, as Congressman Dellums is a fervent advocate of the anti-apartheid movement and Mahree's father is a South African policeman. Additionally, the current political state of South Africa and the news of Steve Biko's death puts these girls at odds. However, despite initial hostilities and political boundaries, Mahree and Piper

⁴ *The Color of Friendship*. DVD. Directed by Kevin Hook. Disney Educational Productions, 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

realize that they have more in common than they think. The girls form a friendship that defies the race relations of the South African apartheid and learn together how to move past barriers of race. In the end, both Mahree and Piper learn valuable lessons from the other. Mahree returns to South Africa with a new understanding of the apartheid regime and supports the anti-apartheid movement.⁶

Although the story of the South African apartheid is told through the eyes of two young girls, the narrative of the South African apartheid is still historically accurate. The film's representation of the politics related to the murder of Steve Biko illustrates this historical accuracy. Steve Biko was heavily involved with the Black Consciousness movement.⁷ Black Consciousness was loosely molded on similar movements such as the Black Power movement of the 1960s and drew upon post-colonial ideas of Fanon and Senghor.⁸ The movement emphasized black pride and self-assertion and stressed that South Africa belonged to its black people.⁹ However, Biko's concept of 'blackness' was not exclusive and extended to Colored and Indian groups who were equally negatively impacted by the apartheid.¹⁰ In addition to being a leader of the Black Consciousness movement, Biko was also the first president of the South African Students Organization (SASO), an organization founded in 1969 that articulated political ideals that became known as Black Consciousness. The South African Student Organization, along with other Black Consciousness organizations, promoted radical black theater in townships in order to create a unified black identity. Biko is also linked to the Black People's Convention created in 1972. This convention was created to oversee the formation of Black Consciousness

⁶ *The Color of Friendship*. DVD. Directed by Kevin Hook. Disney Educational Productions, 2012.

⁷ Rob Skinner, *Modern South African in World History: Beyond Imperialism*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 117.

⁸ Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa*, 127.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Skinner, *Modern South African in World History: Beyond Imperialism*, 116.

oriented trade unions and Black Community Programs engaged in welfare projects. These actions and groups that Biko was associated with made Biko a government target. In 1973, Biko, along with other Black Consciousness leaders, was issued banning orders. Four years later, Biko was found dead in his jail cell on September 11th. 1977.

The detention and murder of Steve Biko by South African authorities plays heavily in the movie's interpretation of South African race relations. In a conversation between Congressman Dellums and the South African Embassy about hosting Mahree, Dellums directly confronts the ambassador about Steve Biko's detention, stating: "while I have you on the phone, why don't you give me information regarding a Steven Biko you are hosting in one of your jails." The ambassador evades the question entirely, but this scene illustrates the political tension around the subject of Biko. Biko's death on September 11th also heavily factors into the movie's portrayal of race relations in South Africa. The day after Biko's death, South African embassy officials remove Mahree from the Dellums house in order to ensure her "safety". At the South African embassy Mahree is greeted with a crowd of protestors and learns about Biko's death. South African ambassadors tell Mahree that the "terrorist Biko had gone and killed himself and the Americans have gone daft over it". At the same time this is happening, Congressmen Dellums gets a call from amnesty international to confirm the cause of death: "Biko did not kill himself, he died from injuries sustained from being beaten by the police."¹¹ These conflicting narratives in the movie are accurate reflections the politics of Biko's murder in 1977.

Newspaper sources from all over the world reported the death of Steve Biko. Sources from both Great Britain and America questioned the validity of the claim that Biko killed

¹¹ *The Color of Friendship*. DVD. Directed by Kevin Hook. Disney Educational Productions, 2012.

himself. When Steve Biko's death was first reported, South African officials claimed that Biko died from a hunger strike. An article published in the *Times* titled ¹² "Black leader dies during South African detention" states South African Justice Minister James Kruger revealed to reporters that Biko died from starvation. Kruger claimed that "Biko had been regularly supplied with meals and water but refused to take them." Many responded to South Africa's claim that Biko starved himself with numerous protests and opinion articles. Two *Times* articles titled "Editor Claims Detained Back Leader Did Not Starve" and "Editors Challenge on Biko's Injuries" assert that starvation served as a cover-up for police brutality. Donald Wood, an editor of the *East London Daily Dispatch*, challenged the South African police and Kruger to make a statement on whether Biko died from being beaten. The reporter also asked Kruger to state if the medical report mentioned the rib and head damage Biko was reported to have sustained.¹³ Another article questioned how could a man of Biko's age (thirty) could die after eight days without food.¹⁴ An additional article published by the *Chicago Daily News* stated that "The true cause of the [Biko's] death remains a mystery. The [South African] government said it would take a month to get the autopsy report back from the laboratories. But independent pathologists said most autopsies can be completed in a few days to a week."¹⁵

¹² Eric Marsden, "Black leader dies during S African detention." *Times*, Sept. 14, 1977, accessed December 1, 2017, <http://find.galegroup.com/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=gett36723&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS84246849&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

¹³ "Editor's challenge on Biko injuries." *Times*, Oct. 1, 1977, accessed December 1, 2017, <http://find.galegroup.com/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=gett36723&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS84246849&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

¹⁴ "Editor Claims Detained Back Leader Did Not Starve." *Times*, Sept. 30, 1977, accessed December 1, 2017, <http://find.galegroup.com/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=gett36723&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS84246849&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>.

¹⁵ Daniel Drooz, "Biko Commanded Respect." *Chicago Daily News*, Sept. 24, 1977, accessed December 1, 2017, <file:///C:/Users/Keira/Downloads/6be376b95abe4d409cbb5302292603f3.pdf>

The conflicting narratives revealed through newspaper sources written at the time of Biko's death coincide with the film's portrayal of the political situation. As seen in both newspaper articles and the movie, the South African government wanted reporters and Mahree to believe that Biko's murder was a suicide. However, both Congressmen Dellums and various newspaper editors questioned the truth to South Africa's statements. Through the film's representation of Biko's death, children watching this film are given an accurate picture of what South African race relations looked like in 1977.¹⁶

Another way *The Color of Friendship* accurately depicts race relations in South Africa during the 1970s is through the portrayal of Afrikaner people and ideologies. The film's depiction of Mahree and her family reveals an accurate portrayal of the Afrikaner population in 1977. Afrikaners are a South African ethnic group that descended from primarily Dutch settlers. Afrikaner nationalism rose after they were defeated by British forces in the Boer War (1899-1902). Nationalist sentiments reached a high when the Afrikaner National Party won the 1948 general election. Shortly after gaining control of the state, the National Party instituted apartheid regime.¹⁷ A cornerstone of apartheid regime was the division of all South Africans by race. In 1949, the state passed a law that prohibited mixed marriages and the Population Registration Act passed in 1950 enforced strict classification systems of people.¹⁸ South African people were divided into four racial categories: White, colored, Asiatic (Indian) and 'Native' (Bantu or African).¹⁹ The policies on racial segregation lead the politically dominant Afrikaner minority to oppress, marginalize, and disenfranchise the African majority. Many white South African people

¹⁶ *The Color of Friendship*. DVD. Directed by Kevin Hook. Disney Educational Productions, 2012.

¹⁷ Adam Heribert and Kogila Moo "A Brief History of South Africa and Apartheid", in *Seeking Mandela: Peacemaking Between Israelis And Palestinians*, ed. Heribert Adam and Kogila Moo (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 50.

¹⁸ Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa*, 105.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

who benefited from apartheid regime believed that they were superior to Africans, and white children raised under apartheid regime embraced these ideologies.

The film correctly illustrates these South African ideologies through the character Mahree. When Mahree first meets Piper and Mrs. Dellums at the airport, she believes them to be Congressman Dellums' secretarial staff. When Mahree learns that Congressman Dellums is African American, she believes that the people are joking. Mahree's reaction to the Dellums' African heritage reveals that she is raised under a system that prohibits Africans from entering politics and believes that Africans do not belong in government roles. Later conversations between Mahree and Piper illustrate the National Party's divisions of race. In one scene, Mahree tells Piper that "[she] didn't realize she [Mahree] was going to a Bantu school." Mahree then goes on to explain that South Africa has various classifications for people who are of different races. This ideology is explored further when Mahree goes to the mall with the Dellums. On the way to the mall, they are stopped by black man who offers to wash their windshield. Confused Mahree exclaims "does his pass say that he can wash windows?". Mahree's comment refers to the identity of movement pass all African people were required to carry. The pass stated the holder's occupation, name, and area of movement, severely limiting an African's ability to travel.²⁰ When Piper questions why people of color need passes, Mahree exclaims "it's for their own good... [Black people] like carrying around these passes because it keeps them safe and out of trouble." When Mahree arrives at the mall, she is surprised to see so many different people of color peacefully occupying a singular space. Mahree's South African views start to crack as she leaves the mall questioning the racial classification systems she was taught.²¹

²⁰ Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa*, 107.

²¹ *The Color of Friendship*. DVD. Directed by Kevin Hook. Disney Educational Productions, 2012.

While the film accurately portrays South African apartheid ideologies of race, *The Color of Friendship* combats these racists' notions through Piper. Piper always questions and argues against Mahree's racist beliefs. By the end of the film, Mahree becomes an advocate of the anti-apartheid movement and understands the injustices the South African government promotes.²² Through the representation of Steve Biko's death and apartheid ideologies, *The Color of Friendship* provides young viewers with a historically accurate illustration of 1977 South Africa. The film does more than just provide accurate historical details; through the relationship between Piper and Mahree the film engages young audiences in important historical discussions on discrimination and race. Like Piper, *The Color of Friendship* urges its viewers to question and challenge notions of race that have been prevalent throughout history. Looking at past events through the eyes of a child cinema allows people critically understand and come to terms with the past.

²² Ibid.

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