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# Contemporary portrayals of blacks and mixed-blacks in lead roles: Confronting historical stereotypes of African Americans on the big screen

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**Contemporary portrayals of blacks and mixed-blacks in lead roles:  
Confronting historical stereotypes of African Americans on the big screen**

by

**Melissa Ann Garrett**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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Program of Study Committee:  
Tracy Lucht, Major Professor  
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Linda Shenk

The student author and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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**DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful parents, friends and loved ones who have faithfully supported and encouraged me to pursue my master's degree. I owe my success to my loved ones and thank them for all the prayers, letters, phone calls and texts that helped me stay strong and focused throughout my graduate and undergraduate years at Iowa State University.

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines portrayals of lead characters played by black and mixed-black men and women in four contemporary top-grossing box office films released from 2010-2015. The qualitative textual analysis assesses whether leads played by black or mixed-black people conform to or stray from Hollywood's historical messages that have allowed for racial and gender inequalities on screen. By cross-analyzing characters in terms of genre and gender and forming an understanding of how each character functions in their respective narratives, my analysis identified four major themes. Lead characters played by black and mixed-black people are shown a) having broken or absent families; b) engaged in servitude and/or subordination, which also included uniformity in terms of appearance; c) associated with criminality and/or weaponry; and d) facing one's fears and striving for a better life, which often involved confronting one's financial struggles. My findings also suggest that there is more complexity to be found in the roles given to black and mixed black actors/actresses than has been the case historically, as historical portrayals of African Americans are challenged and complicated by contemporary films with both historically based and fictionally based plots.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Scholars have long examined how Hollywood cinema has oppressed women and people of color, particularly in the case of black/African American and mixed-black/African American actors and actresses. Through a destructive tradition of providing few and stereotypical roles for non-white actors, scholars have argued, Hollywood cinema has oppressed both African American men and women by limiting a number of speaking roles, which are available to a majority of white actors (Smith, Choueiti, Case & Tofan, 2016; Fain, 2015; Covington, 2010; hooks, 2009; Mapp, 2008; Smith & Cook, 2008; Smith & Choueiti, 2008; Berry & Berry, 2007; Berry & Manning-Miller, 1996). Hollywood is accused of consistently selling negative and incomplete images of African American culture to viewers at the box office (hooks, 2009), normalizing the notion of white dominance over blacks by means of an “old racism developed with the historical legacy of colonialism and modern slavery” (Giroux, 1994, p. 74-5). Hollywood films are said to project these damaging images to audiences through the exploitation of blacks that relies on a patriarchal white supremacist lens, where black bodies are distorted and commercialized for the sake of entertainment (Glenn & Cunningham, 2007; Covington, 2010). Throughout history, African American existence in the United States has “consisted of sustained oppression and discrimination, with those of African descent characterized as subhuman, irresponsible, lazy and unintelligent” as they have been deprived of basic human rights under “a system that privileges white, light and fair skin color as well as other physical characteristics that suggest a background other than African heritage” (Norwood, 2014, p. 141, 151).



As Hollywood's attitudes were translated to the big screen leading up to the civil rights movement, blacks protested the racist images coming out of Hollywood alongside their protests about racial inequalities. Covington (2010) found that because race is "constructed in a way that it justifies black exclusion and exploitation, there is a long history of blacks protesting these conditions. Hence, to maintain a racial hierarchy in which blacks can be exploited and excluded, it has been necessary for white elites to contain and control the black population" by often "construct[ing] blackness in such a way so that it seems to justify this kind of white domination" (p. 2). Fighting for an end to racism in U.S. culture, black protests called for a change in the negative images produced by Hollywood after the civil rights movement and further advocated for equality and freedom from persecution by whites:

Prior to the civil rights movement, blacks appearing on the big screen had largely been confined to the subservient roles of toms, coons, mammies and tragic mulattos. These characters were routinely trotted out in films about the antebellum south to justify slavery by displaying the obvious inferiority of the lazy, dim-witted or fiercely loyal black slaves, who were inevitably presented as content with the plantation system. These lazy, slow, dim-witted, loyal black characters also appeared in films set in the years after slavery as black actors were routinely cast as servants in wealthy white households, or as shoeshine boys and happy, but childlike, sidekicks to white performers. (Covington, 2010, p. 40)

In response to the civil rights movement, Hollywood images of blacks began to change and "black images came to be defined by the virtuous, nearly perfect, assimilationist black male characters that were frequently played by Sidney Poitier," while previously making use of the "de-sexed mammy to attach inferiority to black womanhood and to show off the racial order to movie audiences" (Covington, 2010, p. 186, 200).

Speaking to the inequality of today's society, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has discussed the effects of gender and race inequality as an African American woman and told narratives of the injustice she has faced. In her text *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), Adichie says, "If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal" (Adichie, 2014, p. 13). Thus, by normalizing race and gender inequality through white supremacist ideals, audiences and filmmakers allow this inequality and discrimination to continue by projecting the idea that these race and gender inequalities are acceptable in mainstream films consumed by the masses at the box office (Covington, 2010; Norwood, 2014; Glenn & Cunningham, 2007). In efforts to appeal to the masses, Mapp (2008) suggested that "there is a prevailing notion that global audiences won't be able to identify with black actors" and "evidence seems to support the idea that European and Asian investors prefer leading characters with white, rather than black, faces" (p. xi). Given that whites are the dominant group in American society, Covington (2010) asserts that "whites have traditionally had the power to construct race in ways that benefited them. Hence, they long ago selected an identifying characteristic like skin color to make racial distinctions and then proceeded to attach all manner of negative biological, physical, intellectual, emotional, psychological, cultural and spiritual traits to persons identifiable as black based on skin color" (p. 1). This justification of white dominance and black deference to whites historically has been normalized and communicated to Hollywood movie audiences.

Speaking out against oppression, groups such as Black Lives Matter recently have led the public outcry about racial inequality, working toward "a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise" (Cullors et al., 2016). The

Academy Awards historically have been picketed “in the interest of equal opportunity for African Americans” (Mapp, 2007, p. xiii). Protests against the 2015 Oscars ceremony resulted in a storm of media coverage stemming from the Twitter hashtag #OscarsSoWhite. During that year’s ceremony, “a montage of re-imagined 2015 popular films with black actors in the lead role” featured Oscars host and black comedian Chris Rock playing Matt Damon’s stranded character in *The Martian* (2015)— “only this time, [white actors] Jeff Daniels and Kristen Wiig didn’t want to bring the black astronaut back because it was too expensive” (Alexander, 2016). This re-imagining of black actors and actresses in nominated film roles occupied by white actors in films such as *The Martian* (2015), *The Revenant* (2015), and *The Danish Girl* (2015) drew its humor from the truth it revealed about the limited roles available to African American men and women.

### **Cultivation Theory**

To understand how the visual representations of race and gender on screen influence our culture and society, George Gerber’s cultivation theory suggests “the stories of a culture reflect and cultivate its most basic and fundamental assumptions, ideologies and values” (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). In discussing how television affects viewers over time, Gerbner stressed that “long-term, ritualistic exposure to formulaic stories with consistent lessons would be expected to mean something to those who consumed them” (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). According to Luther, Lepre and Clark (2012), this means that cultivation theory “proposes that mass media contour or cultivate the viewpoints of individuals regarding their surrounding environment,” given that Gerbner first proposed the theory in the late 1960s to explain “the broader role of television in shaping culture and society” (p. 20). Though Gerbner applied much of his theory to television, cultivation theory is highly applicable to

film studies and “is valuable in studying other forms of ‘mass produced stories’” such as the stories that are produced on the big screen (Ramoutar, 2006; Gerbner, 1998). In “The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film,” Glenn and Cunningham (2007) found that “the projected images pertaining to the interaction and relationships between people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds have significant implications for audience members’ perceptions of race relations,” while films have a tendency to use exaggerated characteristics and limited roles of black characters to appeal to a broader audience.

Cultivation theory is also based on the principle that television’s primary function is to entertain (Adams-Bass, Stevenson & Kotzin, 2014). In viewing the pedagogical power of film, Luther, Lepre and Clark (2012) suggest that “through the pictures they choose and the narratives they construct, the mass media relay, sometimes indirectly or unconsciously, discriminatory ideas about blacks to the public” (p. 56). Thus, film is used as a visual communication platform to convey impactful messages which are internalized and often unquestioned by viewers (Berry & Berry, 2007), whether intended or unintended:

Throughout human history, the art of visual communication and interpretation has played a significant role in fostering understanding both within and across cultures ... We take in this information, digest it, and draw conclusions from what we see. And, far too often, we accept these conclusions as truth without question. We buy into their validity, and, having no other source information to draw upon, we accept these filmed representations as fact. (p. xxiii)

Film can be used to help viewers construct their own ideas of social reality by presenting them with easily digestible images, many of which are derogatory and incorrect but which

are perceived as unquestionable in what Berry and Berry (2007) suggest is a mindless consumption of images. Though the Declaration of Independence clearly states that “all men are created equal,” Berry and Berry argue in *Historical Dictionary of African American Cinema* (2007) that “society set out to define its darker hue population as ‘something less than’” in an attempt to justify the existence of slavery in America (p. xxiii). Supporting the notion that film, among other media, has helped sustain negative images and portrayals of African Americans, Luther et al. (2012) also found that researchers carrying out studies on the framing of African Americans have argued that “by visually and textually associating perpetrators of crime with male African Americans through the framing process, the news sustains the old stereotype of the violent and self-interested African American male,” while negative framing of African American females has also been found (p. 17). Covington (2010) adds that depictions of white superiority and black inferiority initially “were vital for justifying the exploitation of black labor during slavery. They continue to be important, even today, because they have been passed down from one generation to the next and as such are now part and parcel of American culture” (p. 1).

For Gerbner, communication involves “interaction through messages,” which “both creates and is driven by the symbolic environment which constitutes culture” (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). With cultivation defined as the “process within which interaction through messages shapes and sustains the terms on which the messages are premised” it is important to analyze and understand what images are portrayed on screen, since “the very notion of cultivation builds on the assumption that the major impacts of television materialize by means of the way it exposes people to the same images and metaphors over and over again” (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

In a 2014 study by Adams-Bass, Stevenson and Kotzin, cultivation theory was used to examine the effects of black media stereotypes on African American youth in relation to their racial identity, black history knowledge and racial socialization. The study emphasized that understanding television depictions of black media stereotypes could provide insight into whether or not viewing these images is harmful to the identity development processes of black youth (Adams-Bass et al., 2014). Adams-Bass et al. (2014) discovered that there are correlations between racial identity and racial socialization, where a direct relationship exists between received messages about blackness and how youth identify as black. The idea that even today's "stereotypical characters are not modified despite contemporary contexts and frames" supports the claim that images of black stereotypical images viewed on television are internalized by those who consume these images (Adams-Bass et al., 2014).

The purpose of this study is, with a qualitative textual analysis, to examine four top-grossing box-office films released between 2010 to 2015 that featured a black or mixed-black male or female in a lead, speaking role. With this exploratory assessment, I hope to expand the research conducted about black and mixed-black men and women lead roles in film and assess whether contemporary characters played by black or mixed-black people conform to or stray from Hollywood's historical messages that have allowed for racial and gender inequalities on screen.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In his fourth edition of *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, film historian Donald Bogle identified six prevalent representations of African Americans (Bogle, 2001):

1. The “Tom”—a “kind-hearted and submissive black man” who is “well liked and willing to endure white domination.”
2. The “Coon”—often characterized as selfish and ignorant with “no drive in life,” while being “the minstrel type that enjoys entertaining others.”
3. The “Bad Buck”—characterized as violent and having “pent-up rage,” physically strong and especially threatening to whites.
4. The “Mammy” figure—a “loud, argumentative, usually large, black woman,” who is “often devoted more to her white boss’s family than her own family” (Luther et al., 2012, p. 58).
5. The “Tragic Mulatto”— a “mixed race woman who is viewed as exotic and sexually attractive, especially to white men” who is “doomed to some form of tragedy in the end.” Mulatto females are often attempting to pass for whites all while searching for acceptance but remain a “victim of divided racial inheritance” (Missouri, 2015, p. 6; Luther et al., 2012, p. 58).
6. The “Buddy/Sidekick”— “basically present to support the main white character, often put in positions of saving his white buddy” (Luther et al., 2012, p. 58).

Considered a “noted African American film historian and prize-winning author” who is “one of the leading authorities on African Americans in the movies” (Biography for Donald Bogle, n.d.), Bogle wrote the first edition of *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of blacks in American films* in 1973, in which he initially identified five basic black stereotypes in film: toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies and bucks (Spears, 1999, p. 47). Bogle added the buddy/sidekick stereotype as a sixth prevalent stereotype for blacks in film in the second edition of his book in 1991 (Spears, 1999, p. 48). The fourth edition (2001) continues Bogle’s examination of “the images of African Americans in the movies” as well as the work of black actors, actresses and filmmakers “who have contributed so much to the tone and texture of American cinema” (Bogle, p. xv). In approaching this “historical overview,” Bogle examined “the response of the audience, especially African American moviegoers, to certain key movies and star personas,” beginning with a chapter on “Black beginnings: From *Uncle Tom’s cabin* to *The birth of a nation*” and ending with a final chapter on “The 1990s: New stars, new filmmakers, and a new African American cinema” (Bogle, 2001, p. ix-xi). In addition to his first book, some of Bogle’s other works include *Brown sugar: Over one hundred years of America’s black female superstars* (2007), *Bright boulevards, bold dreams: The story of black Hollywood* (2006), and *Primetime blues: African Americans on network television* (2001).

Referencing Bogle’s idea of the six regularly recurring representations of African Americans in film, Kimberly Fain argues in her book *Black Hollywood: From butlers to superheroes, the changing role of African American men in the movies* (2015) that although there have been idealized representations of African American males playing the roles of great orators (*Malcolm X*’s Denzel Washington), fathers, God (*Bruce Almighty*’s Morgan



Freeman), military officers (*Officer and a gentleman's* Louis Gossett Jr.), and world leaders (*Mandela's* Idris Elba), “the overwhelming prototypes of African American manhood are negative” and these negative images depict images of African American men as angry, deviant, hypersexual or uneducated, which are often “featured as universal archetypes” (p. xiv).

In *Crime and racial constructions: Cultural misinformation about African Americans in media and academia* (2010), Jeanette Covington uses her sociological perspective to examine “how crime has figured in racial representations of black folks in media (especially in film) and academia in the post-civil rights era” (p. 2). With this focus, Covington tries to explain “why black criminality has assumed such significance in the constructions of racial categories in the past 40 years,” where she looks at how blackness has historically been defined in terms of crime (2010, p. 2). Covington has written a number of articles on fear of crime and neighborhood change in journals such as *Social Problems*, *Sociological Quarterly*, *Urban Affairs Quarterly* and *Criminology*, her earlier work focused on drugs and crime (Rutgers Department of Sociology, 2017). However, in her book (2010), Covington makes “cinematic representations of race the focal point” of her analysis.

After examining numerous 20<sup>th</sup> century Hollywood films, Covington (2010) found that “black men and black women alike were depicted as nonthreatening coons, toms and mammies who were loyal to their white masters and mistresses and content with their subordination first in slavery and later in Jim Crow” (p. 7). According to Covington, much of the changeover to the kinds of deviant black male characters that “cried out for control” came to the big screen in the aftermath of the civil rights movement (2010, p. 7). Following the civil rights movement, Covington found, also came the popular genre of the biracial buddy

film, addressing Bogle's "buddy" stereotype (Bogle, 2001; Luther et al., 2012). This type of film features a black lead character alongside a white lead character in a way that "the presence of the white buddy assured white audiences that nothing substantial would be said about white racism and its role in perpetuating racial inequalities" but instead the story line in many of these films often "forced the black and white buddies into situations where they were required to cooperate to attain a goal, and thus racial harmony could be achieved on screen even as racial divisions persisted in the real world outside the theater" (Covington, 2010, p. 49).

While the number and variety of messages and images about African Americans in the media have increased (Berry & Manning-Miller, 1996), African Americans in film have largely been cast in stereotypical roles, heavily dependent on their race. As movie producers seek to entertain the masses and generate a high revenue at the box office, millions of people "flock to theaters to view the fantasy world that Hollywood has created, all the while processing a large amount of information that guides their formations and expectations in actual society" (Glenn & Cunningham, 2007). bell hooks (2009) agrees that movies "make magic" and "change things" by giving a "reimagined, reinvented version of the real" where what is portrayed on screen "may look like something familiar, but in actuality it is a different universe from the world of real" (p. 1).

With the visual consumption of these images, Laura Mulvey's work in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975, 2004) suggests that the magic of Hollywood style arose from "its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure" where, "unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (838-39). Mulvey (1975) also argues that the classical Hollywood film is made for the pleasure of

the male spectator (p. 838-39; Diawara, 2004, p. 892). Despite this “fantasy world” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 838-39) that is sold to audiences as they consume Hollywood films, hooks asserts in *Reel to Real* (2009) that “[w]hether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people” (p. 2). Although filmmakers may not intend to teach audiences anything, this does not mean that lessons are not learned (hooks, 2009, p. 2). For example, “one may note how black male characters in contemporary Hollywood films are made less threatening to whites either by white domestication of black customs and culture—a process of deracination and isolation—or by stories in which blacks are depicted playing by the rules of white society and losing” (Diawara, 2004, p. 895).

In an analysis of black women in film and other media, Jeffries and Jeffries (2015) found that black women have historically been among the most stereotyped, hypersexualized and disenfranchised racial groups in the United States, while black women have been “villainized and admired simultaneously and specifically for their oversexualized, manipulative ways” (p. 125-26). According to this study, much of what is consumed by mainstream culture is “a skewed, caricatured perception of Black women created by those outside of their demographic” (2015, p. 127). The study also shows a severe lack of black women’s voices and presence in both media productions’ illustration of them and in the scholarship about them (Jeffries & Jeffries, 2015, p. 127). For instance, it was not until 2016 that actress Viola Davis became the first woman of color to win the Emmy Award for Best Actress in a Drama Series for her role in Peter Nowalk’s “How to Get Away With Murder” (Fox/Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, 2016). In a stirring speech, Davis said, “The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win

[awards] for roles that are simply not there” (Fox/Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, 2016).

In an assessment of the landscape of media content distributed by major entertainment companies from 2014 to 2015, the 2016 Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment (CARD) study found that female characters filled only 28.7 percent of all speaking roles in film where “the evidence points to the reality that has drawn public notice and vocal response: Hollywood has a diversity problem” (CARD, 2016). The study also found that “the complete absence of individuals [of color] from these backgrounds is a symptom of a diversity strategy that relies on tokenistic inclusion rather than integration” while “the film industry still functions as a straight, White, boy’s club” (CARD, 2016). As Smith and Cook (2008) argued, “No one can argue that viewing again and again an imbalanced fictional ‘world’ where females are often underrepresented or unmotivated can be good for young females or young males. Females take up half the space in society, yet, especially in films aimed at children, they appear much less frequently than do males.”

By limiting roles for women in film, especially women of African American descent, film scholar Richard Dyer has argued that mainstream cinema is primarily a reflection of white experience and society and that representations of other races can tend toward tokenization and thus be problematic (Luther et al., 2012, p. 158). It is no secret that African Americans have been “consistently judged by white Americans on the basis of their status as ‘persons of African descent’ and their skin color has served as the predominant ‘badge of [that] membership’” (Norwood, 2014, p. 123). Through white “Othering” of blacks, Covington (2010) found that due to American society’s devaluing of African Americans and also of women in favor of projecting a white patriarchal supremacist culture both on screen

and off, African American women “face the dual dilemma of being both female and blacks in a popular culture which values neither. This means that, unlike white females, black females are devalued even further on screen because of their race” (Covington, 2010, p. 186). For instance, prior to the civil rights movement, Hollywood “routinely made use of cinematic images of the de-sexed mammy to attach inferiority to black womanhood” in films that “parad[ed] one loyal black mammy after another before the movie-going public” in such a way that “the film industry was able to graphically depict a racial order that was defined by black women showing deference to white female slaveholders in films set in the slave era or to white female mistresses of the house in films set after slavery” (Covington, 2010, p. 200).

Luther et al. (2012) found that communication researchers have “long recognized that communication, especially mass communication, is a key player in the foundation of stereotypes” (p. 14), which can be formed from repeatedly being exposed to unquestioned or unprotested images of race and gender inequality on the big screen. Luther et al. (2012) also argue that stereotyping in the media and in general “goes far beyond categorizing or typing by reducing individuals to a few simple characteristics and presenting them as unchangeable because they are determined by nature. The end result is that stereotyping symbolically erects fences or boundaries around groups of individuals, thus enabling exclusion to come about” (p. 25). With these symbolic boundaries in place, those who fall outside of the boundary of what is considered normal or mainstream are considered to be “Others” and are isolated and devalued (Luther et al., 2012, p. 25). In commenting on mainstream cinema, hooks (2009) suggests that “audiences act in profound complicity with the status quo,” which includes going along with and paying to see films that have been “deeply invested in racist mythography as part of [their] narrative structures” (p. 93).

In an analysis of society's adherence to the "status quo" (hooks, 2009, p. 93), James Lull discusses the power of the hegemony, which he describes as "a process of convergence, consent and subordination" where "[i]deas, social institutions, industries and ways of living are synthesized into a mosaic which serves to preserve the economic, political and cultural advantages of the already powerful" (2012, p. 54). By giving power to political and social elites, power is then exerted over those with less power as the "dominance permeates society in such a manner that those being ruled are often not aware of, or are accepting of, the dominance" which is carried out through "cultural, political and economic means" (Luther et al., 2012, p. 23). Thus, Lull (2000) argues that hegemony "requires that ideological assertions become self-evident cultural assumptions, [and] its effectiveness depends on subordinated peoples accepting the dominant ideology as 'normal reality or common sense...in active forms of experience and consciousness'" (p. 50-1). With society's overall scale and complexity, Lull argues that hegemony can "easily go undetected" (2000, p. 51).

Luther et al. (2012) argue that the United States is still healing from "the scars left by slavery, condoned prejudice, and unfair treatment" (p. 58). As African American status has evolved in the United States, Luther et al. (2012) also found that films, radio and television outlets, newspapers and magazines have offered content that is "more reflective and relevant to the lives of this group," but there is much progress still to be made in terms of changing the highly negative images of African Americans that have been communicated across all media platforms that have formed damaging hegemonic and stereotypical portrayals of African American men and women in the minds of media consumers.

While much has been done quantitatively in terms of analyzing portrayals of blackness in film and television, my study seeks to understand how blacks and mixed-blacks

are portrayed in contemporary films, where plots that are both historically based and fictional are considered. Qualitative research on characters played by men and women of African American descent is lacking, especially with regard to non-historically-based genres, such as fictional action-adventure or science-fiction fantasy films. My study further expands the research on lead characters played by black and mixed-black men and women in terms of how they are portrayed in comparison to white characters and also in terms of subservience, servitude and criminality in contemporary films.

### **Research Questions**

While previous work by Covington (2010) examined blackness with a sociological lens in terms of crime and racial constructions and film scholar work by Bogle (2001) examined portrayals of blackness in film from the early 1900s up till the 1990s, my study seeks to understand portrayals of contemporary lead characters played by black and mixed-black men and women from 2010 to 2015. In approaching this topic as a mass communication scholar, I bring a unique interdisciplinary reading of the literature as well as an inductive approach to understanding contemporary portrayals of blacks and mixed-blacks in lead roles. Thus, my research builds on African American studies and film studies that have sought to understand portrayals of leads played by blacks and mixed-blacks on the big screen and contributes to the work that has been done on contemporary films from both historically based and fictional action films by examining both male and female leads.

The two questions that guided my qualitative textual analysis are as follows:

*Research Question 1:* How are lead characters played by black and mixed-black actors/actresses portrayed in historically based and action-adventure films from 2010-2015?

*Research Question 2:* How are these characters portrayed in terms of subservience/servitude and/or criminality?



## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

For this qualitative study, I conducted a textual analysis of four top-grossing box office films featuring lead characters played by black or mixed-black actors and actresses from 2010 to 2015, which I chose from Box Office Mojo's weekly index of top-grossing films. According to its website, Box Office Mojo is the leading online box-office reporting service, owned and operated by the International Movie Database (IMDb). From the list, I sorted all top-grossing films released from 2010 to 2015 for each year and selected a purposive sample of films that featured black or mixed-black actors/actresses in lead roles from two genres, which I refer to as historical drama or fictional sci-fi action films (table 1).

**TABLE 1.** Film Selections

<i>Film Title:</i>	<i>Genre:</i>	<i>MPAA Rating:</i>	<i>Distributor:</i>	<i>Worldwide Total Gross:</i>	<i>Production Budget:</i>	<i>Release Date:</i>
<i>The Help</i>	Historical Drama	PG-13	Buena Vista	\$216,639,112	\$25 million	Aug. 10, 2011
<i>Lee Daniels' The Butler</i>	Historical Drama	PG-13	Weinstein Company	\$176,598,908	\$30 million	Aug. 16, 2013
<i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i>	Fictional Sci-Fi/Action	PG-13	Buena Vista	\$773,328,629	\$170 million	Aug. 1, 2014
<i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i>	Fictional Sci-Fi/Action	PG-13	Buena Vista	\$2,068,223,624	\$245 million	Dec. 18, 2015

#### Film Selection

In choosing these films, I wanted to have a relatively equal distribution of lead characters played by black and mixed-black males and females to compare across categories; however, the majority of top-grossing box office films from 2010-2015 appear to feature

African American men more frequently than women in lead speaking roles. By selecting two historical dramas and two fictional sci-fi/action films, I intentionally chose films that portrayed both male and female black or mixed-black people in each genre. This allowed me to compare characters across genders, such as comparing female maids versus male butlers within their respective historical contexts, while I was also able to discover how portrayals of villains transitioning into hero characters differentiated or were comparable in terms of gender and how each character functioned in a non-historically-based plot. My study produced a total of three female leads—Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson in *The help* (2011); Gamora in *Guardians of the galaxy* (2014)—and two male leads—Cecil Gaines in *Lee Daniels' the butler* (2013) and FN-2187/Finn in *Star wars: The force awakens* (2015), meeting my objective of having an equal or near equal distribution of gender. I also selected the four films based on their comparable genres, with two historically based and two non-historically-based portrayals of lead characters played by black or mixed-black actors and actresses. Films with similar plots or with similar issues were initially cross-analyzed; however, characters were also examined individually.

In my initial analysis, I typed all instances in which lead characters portrayed by black or mixed-black men and women were speaking on screen or off screen in a voiceover or were spoken about by other characters. I also typed the actions or reactions of lead characters when they were either speaking or merely present in the scene. After my initial notes were typed, which included over 430 pages, I used a color coding method to evaluate lead characters portrayed by black or mixed-black actors and actresses in terms of the lines they spoke either on screen or in a voiceover, lines spoken about them, and character action or reaction descriptions. After color coding all of my notes, I made comments throughout all

four films' notes in terms of the characters' demographic characteristics (sex/gender portrayal, age, apparent race/ethnicity traits and role in the film); domestic traits (parental status and relational status); sexualization (clothing, nudity and level of attractiveness,); and noted when characters appeared on or off screen, especially how the camera framed them in the overall picture.

In approaching my qualitative textual analysis of four contemporary films featuring lead characters portrayed by black and mixed-black people, I took an inductive approach, using grounded theory, to develop my own themes. By moving away from character categorizations, such as the stereotypes outlined in Bogle's (2001) six prevalent representations of African Americans in film, I sought to understand each film and its lead characters inductively, thus allowing my findings to emerge from the texts themselves. After color coding each film's notes, I determined what lead characters played by blacks and mixed-blacks thought of themselves and what other characters thought of the five leads I examined in addition to coding for lead characters' actions and reactions to dialogue. As Charmaz (2006) asserts: "Coding distills data, sorts them and gives us a better handle for making comparisons with other segments of data. Grounded theorists emphasize what is happening in the scene when they code data" (p. 3). Thus, by color coding my data, I developed specific themes that arose from my color-coded notes, and I was able to "separate sort and synthesize these data through qualitative coding," where coding "means that we attach labels to segments of data that depict what each segment is about" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3).

***Lee Daniels' The Butler (2013) and The Help (2011)***

Both *Lee Daniels' the butler* (2013) and *The help* (2011) feature African Americans in active servitude to White/Caucasian employers. These films were chosen to compare portrayals of African American servitude and/or subordination to whites in relation to the historical context of each film, especially with regard to the history of African American enslavement by white slaveholders. Forest Whitaker's role in *Lee Daniels' the butler* (2013) examines his life serving in Macon, Georgia, and in Washington, D.C., as Whitaker's portrayal of the titular butler spans the course of eight presidential terms and ends with President Barack Obama's election. In comparison, *The help* (2011) features portrayals of black women serving as maids to white women and takes place in Jackson, Mississippi, during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

***Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) and Star Wars: The Force Awakens (2015)***

For films in the fictional sci-fi/action genre, I chose to focus on FN-2187/Finn (John Boyega) from *Star wars: The force awakens* (2015) and on Gamora (Zoë Saldana) from *Guardians of the galaxy* (2014). I selected these films based on my interest in seeing how lead characters played by black and mixed-black men and women are portrayed in sci-fi fantasy and action-adventure genres. In these fictional worlds, both characters are associated with their respective film's villains, yet they almost immediately reassert themselves to become heroes and fight their enemies by the end of the film. Boyega's portrayal of FN-2187 begins the film aligned with the malevolent First Order as one of their soldiers, or Stormtroopers, but upon meeting good-guy rebel leader Poe, FN-2187 makes the transition from being merely a number to being nicknamed Finn and bravely leaves the Dark Side to

join other heroes in the fight against the First Order. Comparatively, Saldana's Gamora in *Guardians of the galaxy* (2014) is raised to become the perfect weapon in her role as villain Thanos' personal assassin and adopted daughter, according to IMDb. While Gamora "has earned a reputation as a formidable warrior," she "seeks redemption for her past crimes" and is accepted by Guardians of the Galaxy group leader Peter Quill (Chris Pratt) as a Guardian of the Galaxy and trusted ally while she is forgiven of her past crimes by the end of the film (Biography for Gamora, 2014).

### **Explanation of Chosen Method**

Because grounded theories are drawn from data, they are "likely to offer insight, enhance understanding and provide a meaningful guide to action" (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p. 12). With a grounded theory approach, analysis becomes "the interplay between researchers and data," where the researcher "begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the 'reality' than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation..." (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p. 12). As Corbin and Strauss (1998) outline in *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, using a grounded theory approach provides a "sense of vision; where it is that the analyst wants to go with the research. The techniques and procedures (method), on the other hand, furnish the means for bringing that vision into reality" (p. 8). With this approach, theory can be "derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process" (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p. 12).

In taking this inductive approach with grounded theory, Charmaz (2006) asserts: "Just as the methods we choose influence what we see, what we bring to the study also influences

what we *can* see. Qualitative research of all sorts relies on those who conduct it” (p. 15). This is essential, considering my interdisciplinary approach to the four texts and five lead characters that I chose to analyze as a mass communication scholar. Charmaz (2006) says that the “logic of grounded theory can reach across substantive areas and into the realm of formal theory, which means generating abstract concepts and specifying relationships between them to understand problems in multiple substantive areas” (p. 8). With grounded theory methods, the researcher is able to “shape and reshape” their data collection and, therefore, “refine” their collected data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 15). This approach is essential to my study, since grounded theory allows for “flexible guidelines rather than rigid prescriptions. With flexible guidelines, you direct your study but let your imagination flow” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 15).

As Neil Postman (1998) suggests, the purpose of research is “to rediscover the truths of social life; to comment on and criticize the moral behavior of people; and finally to put forward metaphors, images and ideas that can help people live with some measure of understanding and dignity” (p. 18). In considering “the diversity of meanings and values in media,” I have chosen to conduct a qualitative textual analysis instead of a quantitative content analysis, as I hope to assess the four films on a deeper level than would be possible by tabulating the number of African Americans in lead speaking roles and coding for their characteristics in a content analysis (Brennen, 2003, p. 5). While I believe content analysis is useful, I am more interested in how African Americans are specifically portrayed in these films and how the characters I will examine either meet and/or challenge Bogle’s six representations of African Americans in film, which could only be accomplished through a more in-depth textual analysis.

Given that textual analysis is “all about language, what it represents and how we use it to make sense of our lives,” language is a “basic element of our human interactions, and it is through language that meanings of our social realities are constructed” (Brennen, 2003, p. 192). By trying to understand “the variety of ways in which it is possible to interpret reality” with qualitative work, “we also understand our own cultures better because we can start to see the limitations and advantages of our own sense-making practices” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). According to Priest (2010), “visual presentations contain rich symbolism, suggest subtle reactions and interactions, and present other complicated patterns in ways that we do not always know how to summarize or articulate into words in an adequate way. [Researchers] certainly don’t know how to assign numerical values to most of the interesting things about visual content,” which makes the open-ended nature of textual analysis useful for analyzing film and other visual media (p. 171). In this way, rather than trying to focus on media effects or influences, my qualitative approach will “attempt to understand the many relationships that exist within media and society” (Brennen, 2003, p. 5).

Although interpretive methods, specifically textual analysis, “cannot directly answer questions about cause and effect,” Priest (2010) argues that “a purely qualitative approach is preferable in cases where the particular aspects of content being studied are difficult to capture in quantitative analysis schemes or are simply not definable with certainty in advance of the study” (p. 109). Priest (2010) adds that qualitative work also builds on existing bodies of knowledge “not by formal hypothesis testing but by more free-ranging exploration of actual social practices,” where “[t]he structures of social organizations, the deeper meanings of media products, and the patterns of political events are all extremely important social phenomena to understand—and extremely difficult to reduce to measurable variables” as

with a quantitative study (p. 178). The purpose of qualitative work is not to study texts to “predict or control how individuals will react to messages but instead to understand how people use texts to make sense of their lives” (Brennen, 2003, p. 194). Considering the four films I will examine as “texts,” Brennen (2003) asserts that “texts are thought to provide traces of a socially constructed reality, which may be understood by considering the words, concepts, ideas, themes and issues that reside in texts as they are considered within a particular cultural context” (p. 193).

Jensen (2012) adds that qualitative research studies focus on meaning, “both as an object of study and as an explanatory concept. Humans interpret their ordinary lives as well as the extraordinary events that they encounter, increasingly through communication technologies, as inherently meaningful” (p. 266). While Smith et al. (2014) examined “Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race & LGBT Status from 2007 to 2014” and Smith et al. (2016) conducted a study titled “Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment” using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, it is clear that further analyzing the “invisibility” and “inclusivity” of African Americans in top-grossing box office films from 2010-2015, and how Hollywood makes them invisible or deviant on screen, is both a timely and worthwhile topic.

### **Comparative Analysis**

In providing detailed and organized notes for each film and for every lead character portrayed by black and mixed-black men and women, I assessed each film and its characters within the context of their films and in comparison to one another before reassessing these lead characters to determine whether characters met or challenged the stereotypical African American film categories that were outlined by Bogle (2001). By typing my notes and



organizing my findings and themes into supplemental tables, I hoped to arrange my findings so that other researchers could understand and follow my thought process as I explained my analysis and creative process in understanding the plotlines and character constructions for each film. I engaged in multiple viewings of the films, explicating and quoting specific scenes and moments, until I reached a point of saturation when I ceased to discover new material.

In approaching the films from various angles, I was able to assess the portrayals of lead roles played by black and mixed-black men and women individually, in relation to other characters of similar and dissimilar races/ethnicities, and how these characters were portrayed in the film as a whole. While I initially paired the four films into two groups, including historically based and non-historically-based films, I was able to find both similar and dissimilar characteristics among the selected film genres. My approach incorporates Bogle's categories among other researchers' contributions and ideas about existing African American stereotypes in Hollywood films both prior to and after the civil rights movement and additionally draws from other studies, both qualitative and quantitative, which have contributed to the existing body of research on representations of African Americans.

I acknowledge that I am a mixed White/Caucasian/Hispanic woman examining lead characters portrayed by black and mixed-black men and women, and thus I understand that I cannot fully relate to or paint a full picture of African Americans' stereotypical portrayals on screen due to the limitations of my socioeconomic background, race and gender. However, it is my hope as a qualitative researcher that I will contribute new information on portrayals of black and mixed-black men and women playing lead roles in contemporary top-grossing box office Hollywood films since much of the existing body of film studies focuses on black

men, while the body of research on African American women (and men) is still growing. By adding to the smaller body of qualitative research that has been done on black and mixed-black women in addition to building on the research regarding African American men in film, I hope to expand our understanding of lead roles portrayed by black and mixed-black actors/actresses.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Throughout the course of watching and analyzing all four films, I selected five lead characters played by black or mixed-black characters who were both prominently featured on screen and were central to the overall plot of their respective films. For my findings, I analyzed three women, including Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis) and Minny Jackson (Octavia Spencer) from *The help* (2011) and Gamora (Zoë Saldana) from *Guardians of the galaxy* (2014). I also identified and analyzed two male leads: Cecil Gaines (Forest Whitaker) from *Lee Daniels' the butler* (2013) and FN-2187/Finn (John Boyega) from *Star wars: The force awakens* (2015). In understanding these characters, I found that struggling to understand one's identity seems to be the focus of each character's development, regardless of whether leads were part of historically based or fictional action worlds.

After forming an understanding of the five acknowledged lead characters' function and purpose in the context of their films in terms of their identities, my analysis identified four major themes that discuss how all lead characters struggle with their identities. These four overarching themes include lead characters portrayed by black and mixed-black men and women a) having broken or absent families; b) engaged in servitude and/or subordination, which also included uniformity in terms of appearance; c) associated with criminality and/or weaponry; and d) facing one's fears and striving for a better life, which often involved confronting one's financial struggles (table 2).

**TABLE 2.** Themes of lead characters played by blacks and mixed-blacks

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<i>Having broken or absent families</i>	Character is portrayed as having no family members; has family differences, which can involve arguments or violence (both physical or verbal)
<i>Servitude and/or subordination</i>	Character is shown taking risks to serve or assist white characters in completing tasks in addition to (or in place of) their own needs and desires; wears some sort of uniform
<i>Association with criminality and/or weaponry</i>	Character is accused of a crime they did or did not commit; associated with villains or crime, such as being called a “thief” or a “traitor”; seen wielding a weapon or fighting in combat
<i>Facing one’s fears and striving for a better life</i>	Character faces their fears and strives for a better life; confronts financial and/or class struggles; faces identity crises and/or feelings of displacement and/or uncertainty

### **Broken or Absent Families**

In all four films, I found that characters in historically based films were portrayed as having broken, struggling or incomplete families, while films in the sci-fi fantasy or action-adventure genres portrayed characters as lacking or missing a family. Both instances force lead characters to confront their identities, where having a broken or absent family has a critical impact on how characters understand their identities in relation to other characters. Minny (Octavia Spencer) is portrayed in *The help* (2011) as being married with five children, Minny’s husband Leroy is physically abusive toward her. Minny struggles to survive and consistently fears what Leroy will do to her, often leaning on Aibileen (Viola Davis) for support. Aibileen, unlike Minny, lives alone and lost her son in a tragic accident, which

Aibileen says “planted a bitter seed” inside of her. Toward the beginning of the film, Aibileen says, “I lost my own boy, Treelore, four years ago. After that, I just didn’t want to live no more. It took God and Minny to get me through it” (*The help*, 2011). Since Minny’s husband is abusive and Aibileen has no one but Minny to lean on in times of trouble, the women form a sisterly bond in the film and are often shown taking care of each other. When Skeeter (Emma Stone) worries what will happen to Minny and Aibileen if she leaves Jackson after the scandal surrounding the real stories behind *The help*, Minny puts her arm around Aibileen, saying, “I’m gonna take care of Aibileen. And she’s gonna take care of me,” speaking to the strong bond that Minny and Aibileen share.

In comparison to Aibileen and Minny’s portrayals in *The help* (2011), Cecil Gaines (Forest Whitaker) in *Lee Daniels’ the butler* (2013) loses both his parents at a young age while working on a cotton plantation. Though the audience never sees Aibileen and Minny’s childhood, young Cecil watches as his father (David Banner) is shot in the head and killed by a white plantation owner (Alex Pettyfer), who also rapes Cecil’s mother (Mariah Carey). While Cecil and his wife Gloria (Oprah Winfrey) appear to be happy when he works at The Excelsior hotel, Cecil’s marriage faces a number of struggles once he is hired to work as a butler at the White House due to his demanding work schedule and his inability to connect with his older son, Louis (David Oyelowo), with whom he argues in nearly every scene. Cecil additionally loses his younger son, Charlie, who dies fighting in the Vietnam War, and outlives Gloria. It is not until the near-end of the film, prior to Gloria’s death, that Cecil is finally able to reconcile his differences with Louis and restore their bond as father and son, thus strengthening his family.

In *Guardians of the galaxy* (2014), Gamora (Zoë Saldana) is described as “the adopted daughter of the Mad Titan, Thanos,” a powerful evil being, “sister” to Nebula, and compatriot to Ronan, the film’s main villain (*Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014). While Nebula and other characters associate Gamora with Thanos and Ronan, Gamora adamantly refuses to confirm any associations, saying, “I’m no family to Ronan or Thanos. I’m your only hope at stopping him.” Gamora reveals to Peter Quill (Chris Pratt), the leader of the Guardians of the Galaxy, that Thanos is not her father and is ultimately responsible for the destruction of her home planet and the loss of her family:

GAMORA: My father didn’t stress diplomacy.

QUILL: Thanos?

GAMORA: He’s not my father. When Thanos took my home world he killed my parents in front of me. He tortured me, turned me into a weapon. When he said he was going to destroy an entire planet for Ronan, I couldn’t stand by and...

(Gunn, *Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014)

When Gamora speaks about Thanos, it is clear that she does not see him as a fatherly figure. Thanos is responsible for killing Gamora’s parents and also for turning her body into a weapon. Nebula, whom Gamora calls “sister,” is the only adopted family member that Gamora seems to care for, and she tries multiple times to convince Nebula to help her fight Ronan. Toward the beginning of the film, Nebula tells Gamora, “I am daughter of Thanos, just like you,” but when Nebula overhears Thanos scold Ronan for having “alienated my favorite daughter, Gamora,” Nebula appears deeply angered by not being the favorite daughter and takes it upon herself to help Ronan find and attempt to kill Gamora. Moreover, upon being arrested by the Nova Corps, Xandar’s police, Gamora is taken into a room where her stats and familial relations are represented on the screens behind which she stands. In this

visual representation of Gamora, she is indicated by a green circle, whereas her adopted sister Nebula and Ronan are represented in blue circles and Thanos with a purple circle. Visually, this helps to distinguish Gamora from the members of her adopted family by showing her as the lone green circle on the diagram. This is significant, since she is also said to be the sole survivor of the Zehoeerd people. Gamora visually is unlike any other character in the film, set apart by her bright green, glowing skin and her long dark brown and bright red/purple ombre, often curled, hair, which deeply contrasts with her green skin and portrays her in a way in which she appears exotic or uniquely beautiful, especially to Quill. However, her bright skin also makes her easily recognizable, which ultimately leads to her arrest. Once Gamora chooses to associate herself with Quill and the other Guardians of the Galaxy, she seems to find a place of belonging when she says, “I have lived most of my life surrounded by my enemies. I will be grateful to die among my friends.”

In contrast to Gamora, Finn (John Boyega) begins *Star wars: The force awakens* (2015) under the name “FN-2187” as one of the malevolent First Order’s soldiers, the Stormtroopers. While beginning the film as merely a numbered soldier, Finn becomes fast friends with Resistance pilot Poe Dameron, who nicknames him “Finn,” since Finn said FN-2187 was “the only name they ever gave me” (*Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015). Of all five lead characters played by black and mixed-black characters, Finn is the only character who never knew his family. Finn tells his love interest and companion Rey, “I’m a Stormtrooper. Like all of them, I was taken from a family I’ll never know. And raised to do one thing.” In saying he was “raised to do one thing,” Finn suggests he was only raised to kill for the First Order since he was taken from his family. He is spoken of by General Hux, of the First Order, in terms of how he was raised when Hux says, “My men are exceptionally

trained. Programmed from birth.” This suggests that Finn was taken at infancy and has grown up with the other Stormtroopers. Learning to fight for the Dark Side is the only life he has ever known. While Finn does not have a family, he forms a connection with Rey, a scavenger from the planet Jakku, who consumes his thoughts and leads his actions through most of the film as he transitions from being taught how to be a Stormtrooper to fighting the Stormtroopers and the Dark Side, which he eagerly leaves behind.

### **Servitude and/or Subordination**

Regardless of genre, all five leads were portrayed in some manner of servitude and/or subordination. I found three leads were portrayed as serving white characters as part of their profession, such as Aibileen and Minny’s jobs as maids and Cecil’s job as a butler, while two leads were portrayed in subordination to white and other non-human characters, such as when Gamora helps complete missions with the Guardians of the Galaxy and Finn helps white characters complete their missions. Despite having characters who are in historically based films and in the sci-fi fantasy or action-adventure (or non-historically-based) genres, all characters portrayed by black and mixed-black men and women are shown assisting white characters with tasks in addition to fulfilling their own desires. Analyzing how characters are portrayed in terms of servitude and/or subordination is important to fully understand these characters’ struggles to assert their identities.

In describing her job as a maid, Aibileen says in a voiceover, “I know how to get them babies to sleep, stop crying and go in the toilet bowl. I do all the cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing and grocery shopping. But mostly, I take care of Baby Girl...” (*The help*, 2011).

With this description, Aibileen describes that her primary job is to take care of Mae Mobley,



whom she affectionately calls “Baby Girl” or “baby” throughout the film. Though Aibileen serves Elizabeth Leefolt as her maid, Aibileen is ultimately portrayed as the primary caretaker for Mae Mobley, since Elizabeth often neglects her child and is easily frustrated with her. In comparison to how Elizabeth treats her child, Aibileen dotes on Mae Mobley and teaches her important life lessons:

AIBILEEN: Baby. Baby. I need you to remember everything I told you, OK?

MAE MOBLEY: OK.

AIBILEEN: You remember what I told you?

MAE MOBLEY: You is kind, you is smart, you is important.

AIBILEEN: That’s right, Baby Girl.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

In the film, Aibileen instills confidence into Mae Mobley, since her mother is not nurturing toward her and is only shown once holding her hand. Mae Mobley learns that she is “smart, kind and important,” and she imitates Aibileen’s dialect. While Aibileen’s job is to serve Elizabeth and her family, Aibileen refers to the children she takes care of as her babies, suggesting she feels responsible for the white children as if they were her own children to take care of. Aibileen is portrayed as hardworking and motherly throughout the entire film, where she is almost always seen serving others food and beverages, doing household chores or taking care of Mae Mobley.

Although Aibileen is paid to work as a maid for the Leefolts, she also earns money helping Skeeter (Emma Stone) by agreeing to be interviewed for a provocative book she writes about the help, who serve the women of Jackson. It is not without struggle that Skeeter recruits Aibileen, who fears “what Miss Leefolt do to me if she knew I was telling stories on

her.” Aibileen initially is too afraid to help with the book, but she eventually agrees to help Skeeter and is the first of one dozen maids to be interviewed, saying “God and Miss Hilly Holbrook” influenced her to change her mind. Aibileen is forced to endure Hilly and her racial slurs when Hilly discusses the need for “separate but equal” bathrooms to be installed in every home that has black help, which Aibileen overhears as she serves Hilly, Elizabeth, Skeeter and other women at bridge club, which Elizabeth hosts:

HILLY: If Aibileen uses the guest bath, I’m sure she uses yours, too.

ELIZABETH: She does *not*.

HILLY: Wouldn’t you rather them take their business outside?

SKEETER: Have you all seen the cover of *Life* this week? Jackie’s never looked more regal.

HILLY: Tell Raleigh every penny he spends on a colored’s bathroom he’ll get back in spades when y’all sell. It’s just plain dangerous. They carry different diseases than we do.

ELIZABETH: (playing cards) Pass.

HILLY: That’s why I’ve drafted the Home Health Sanitation Initiative.

SKEETER: The what?

HILLY: A disease-preventative bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. It’s been endorsed by the White Citizens’ Council.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

In this scene, Hilly discusses the issue of the black help using the same bathroom as white guests, which she frames as “dangerous” and refers to black people as “they” and “their” in a sort of “us” versus “them” argument, where black people are Othered as opposed to the white people who have hired them on as the help. The title of “Home Health Sanitation” implies a need for sanitation or cleansing, where blackness is portrayed as needing to be cleansed and

separated from whiteness. The issue of “separate but equal” bathrooms is shown later on when Aibileen uses the newly built bathroom outside Elizabeth’s home in 100-degree heat. As she uses the toilet, which is basically a wooden box with a door, Elizabeth and Mae Mobley wait outside for her and Elizabeth pesters her to “hurry.” Even Mae Mobley, who is too young to understand the racial implications of the “separate but equal” bathrooms, knows, “That’s Aibee’s bathroom, Mama,” which Elizabeth makes her promise she will not enter. Aibileen is asked multiple times about her new bathroom, which she must say “thank you” for not only to Elizabeth but also to Hilly, who provided the funds for the bathroom to be built in the first place, when she serves them beverages later in the film:

HILLY: Aibileen, are you enjoying your new bathroom over at Elizabeth’s?

(AIBILEEN silently peers down at HILLY, who sits smiling up at her, almost in a scoffing way.)

HILLY: Nice to have your own. *Isn’t* it, Aibileen?

(AIBILEEN gives what appears to be a forced smile, looking directly at HILLY.)

AIBILEEN: Yes, ma’am. And I thank you.

HILLY: Separate, but equal. That’s what Ross Barnett says, and you can’t argue with the governor.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

While Aibileen is initially silent and tries to avoid Hilly’s inquiry about her new bathroom, Aibileen is often forced to say what white women want to hear. Aibileen is not one to complain about anything openly and often responds with “yes, ma’am” when asked to complete tasks. When she decides to help Skeeter with her book, Aibileen hosts Skeeter in her house and becomes overly nervous, even spilling tea that she serves with cookies to Skeeter. Though Skeeter is a guest in her home, rather than at Elizabeth’s where she is being

paid as Elizabeth's maid, Aibileen is used to serving white women like Skeeter and quickly moves to mop up the spilled tea as soon as she over-pours it into Skeeter's cup. Aibileen stands rather than sits, placing her hands in front of her in a sort of fidgeting way. Skeeter appears to feel guilty for causing her to act in this way. She initially compliments Aibileen's dress, saying, "I've never seen you out of uniform before. You look really nice," but Aibileen struggles with the compliment, as she straight-facedly looks down quickly at her yellow button-up dress, rather than her button-up blue and white maid's dress, and gives a simple "thank you" in response. Aibileen nervously pants and admits to Skeeter, "I ain't never had no white person in my house before." By helping Skeeter with her book, Aibileen takes the risk of breaking Mississippi law, which she states in a voiceover: "Any person printing, publishing or circulating written matter urging for public acceptance or social equality between whites and Negroes is subject to imprisonment." Thus, by helping Skeeter with her book voluntarily, Aibileen could potentially face jail time or lose her job, which she does lose by the end of the film.

In comparison to Aibileen's experience serving white women, Cecil faces racial slurs along the way to becoming a butler. Miss Annabeth almost immediately takes him in after his father dies and tells him, "Stop crying. I'm gonna have you in the house now. I'm gonna teach you how to be a house nigger" (*Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013). Rather than calling him a butler, Miss Annabeth uses the term "house nigger," which appears to be slang for a black butler. Cecil is taught to invisible until needed:

MISS ANNABETH: And quiet when you're serving. I don't even want to hear you breathe.

CECIL: Yes, ma'am.

MISS ANNABETH (VOICEOVER): The room should feel empty when you're in it.

(Daniels, *Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013)

By Miss Annabeth saying she does not “even want to hear you breathe” to Cecil, he learns one of the many “faces” of being a butler, which is being both silent and obedient while he serves, often with a closed mouth and staring straight ahead until needed by a white person. Upon leaving the plantation Cecil finds himself hungry and jobless and breaks into a shop, which has cakes behind its glass window. As he sits and eats, an older black man named Maynard approaches him and scolds him for breaking their shop's window, and Cecil desperately asks him for a job:

CECIL: You looking for some help? I know how to serve.

MAYNARD: You done broke our window, you done stole our food, and now you asking for a job?

CECIL: Back in Macon, I'm a house nigger, a good one.

(MAYNARD angrily slaps CECIL across the face, and CECIL looks back at him, seemingly confused.)

MAYNARD: Don't you ever use that word, son. That's a white man's word. It's filled with hate. Didn't your father ever teach you any better?

(Daniels, *Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013)

In this scene, Cecil has no idea how offensive the term “house nigger” is to black people outside of the plantation, since it is a term he has accepted and heard since he was a child. Maynard tells Cecil it is a “white man's word” that is “filled with hate,” questioning if his father ever taught him better. Cecil's father, however, has suggested to Cecil that he and other blacks live in a white man's world in telling him not to lose his temper with the white plantation owner: “Don't you lose your temper with that man. This his world. We just living

in it. You hear me?” With this understanding since childhood, Cecil quickly learns from Maynard how to please white people: “You got to look through their eyes. See what it is they want... See what it is they need... Anticipate...Bring a smile to the eyes of your principal.” Cecil internalizes Maynard’s advice and uses it throughout his career as a butler. Maynard helps Cecil secure a job in Washington, D.C., working at The Excelsior hotel, which Cecil describes as “the most beautiful hotel I’d ever seen,” though he initially resists taking the job:

MAYNARD: The manager of Excelsior, in D.C., he came by yesterday. He offered me a job as a butler.

CECIL: He must be paying you top dollar, huh, boss?

MAYNARD: Yeah. I was thinking about taking it, but I don’t know. I’m too old to be leaving North Carolina. I’m just fine right here. I told him to hire you.

CECIL: I’m just now finding my way around this hotel. Ain’t ready for all them highfalutin white people, all their fancy words.

MAYNARD: Cecil, we got two faces: ours, and the ones that we got to show the white folks. Now, to get up in the world, you have to make them feel non-threatened. Use that, them fancy words that I’ve taught you. White folks up north, they like some uppity coloreds. Yeah.

(Daniels, *Lee Daniels’ the butler*, 2013)

In this scene, Maynard explains to Cecil the “two faces” they have as a butler: “Ours, and the ones that we got to show the white folks.” This implies that Cecil is required to put on a performance for the white people he serves so as to “make them feel non-threatened” in order to “get up in the world.” Cecil takes this advice and always seems to know what to say to the white people he serves, by saying what they want to hear and giving them what they need, as Maynard taught him. Cecil says in a voiceover, while driving home from working at The Excelsior, “Never in my life did I dream I’d work in a place as fancy as this. I never dreamed

my life could be so good.” In nearly all of the scenes, Cecil is shown in some sort of uniform or suit, as he transitions from working in the fields and wearing suspenders and work clothes to wearing white button-up shirts with a black bow tie and suit jacket when he gets a job at The Excelsior and is hand-picked to fill one of the few open butler positions at the White House.

Cecil clearly enjoys serving and even tells his son, Charlie, how it “beats working for a living.” However, later in the film Cecil gets into an argument with his other son, Louis. Louis has made fun of Sidney Poitier, who he says is “nothing but a rich Uncle Tom” and deeply offends Cecil, who argues that Poitier’s movies “have him fighting for equal rights.” Cecil becomes viciously angry with Louis, who has come home after several years of being involved with the Freedom Riders and is now part of the Black Panther Party. The scene places Cecil’s idea of serving in conflict with Louis’ idea of civil rights activism and freedom. Cecil yells at Louis, “I can’t take this no more!” and “I’m gonna snatch the life out of you, boy!” But Louis only mocks Cecil in front of his wife, Gloria, his younger son, Charlie, and also in front of Carol, his girlfriend and fellow Panther, when he says, “I’m sorry, Mr. Butler. I didn’t mean to make fun of your hero.” While Gloria pleads with Cecil not to make Louis leave the house, Louis’ insult to Cecil causes Gloria to immediately smack Louis across the face, which knocks him into a wall. As Louis stares at her angrily, and in disbelief, Gloria tells him, “Everything you are and everything you have is ‘cause of that butler. Now you take that trifling, low-class bitch and get out of this house.” Cecil later speaks to Louis again on the phone and dismisses him when he calls asking for money, saying, “You should feel ashamed of yourself. You’re a grown-ass man calling your mama, asking for money. And guess what? It’s the *butler’s* money. It’s *Uncle Tom’s* money. And he ain’t giving none out

today.” In this moment, Cecil calls himself “Uncle Tom,” when he talks about the money he has earned being a butler, thus equating himself with being Uncle Tom. Cecil continues to serve as a butler for the majority of the film, which spans across eight presidential terms. However, considering that the film begins in 1926 in the South and ends in Washington, D.C. in 2008 with Barack Obama’s presidential election, Cecil’s experience with serving white people only grows more confusing as he begins to question his profession and even his place in the changing world. The most evident moment of this struggle is when Cecil is invited by Nancy Reagan to attend the State Dinner as a guest, “not as a butler.” As Cecil is shown sitting at the dinner table, he nervously looks around at the smiling and talking white people in their fancy dresses and suits, as he and Gloria have also dressed in fancy clothing for the occasion. Cecil cannot believe he is there as a guest and seems to observe the other butlers as he sits being served:

CECIL (VOICEOVER): It was different sitting at the table instead of serving it. Real different. I could see the two faces the butlers wore to survive. And I knew I’d lived my life with those same two faces. Gloria looked so happy, but I didn’t feel the same way. I guess I wished we were there for real instead of for show.

(Daniels, *Lee Daniels’ the butler*, 2013)

As Cecil is served, he comments on the “two faces the butlers wore to survive,” which he has also used. Cecil seems to believe that he and Gloria, who are the only two black people besides the butlers at the event, are there “for show” and questions whether the invite Nancy Reagan gave him was not genuine. While Cecil is shown initially enjoying serving white people, everything changes once he is served as a white person would be: “Nothing seemed right to me after that State Dinner. Got all confused.” By the end of the film, Cecil’s “confusion” about serving, and his deeper consideration of what civil rights mean for him,



eventually leads to his resignation from the White House as he chooses his family and his needs over the presidents’.

In strong contrast with Cecil, Minny often questions the orders given to her by white women and is quite outspoken outside of work. Minny initially serves Hilly’s mother, Mrs. Walters, who suffers from dementia, though she is often shown serving Hilly secondarily, which Aibileen explains in a voiceover: “Once Missus Walters’ arteries went hard, Miss Hilly moved her into her house and fired the maid she had to make room for Minny, too. See, Minny about the best cook in Mississippi, and Miss Hilly wanted her” (*The help*, 2011). Aibileen makes it clear that Hilly hired Minny for her cooking skills and even fired Mrs. Walters’ previous maid so that Minny could work for her instead. Hilly often orders Minny around, barking things like, “Put Mama in a chair before she breaks a hip,” or “Minny! Go get mama!” While Minny follows orders that are given to her by Hilly and Mrs. Walters, she is quick to judge Hilly in private with Aibileen in the kitchen. In an early scene of *The help* (2011), Minny arrives at Elizabeth’s house with Mrs. Walters and Hilly for bridge club and immediately goes to the kitchen to gossip about Hilly with Aibileen:

MINNY: Ooh. Forgive me, Lord, but I’m gonna have to kill that woman, Aibileen. Now she gone to putting pencil marks on my toilet paper.

AIBILEEN: (laughing) Did she?

MINNY: Mm-hm. But I carry paper in from my own damn house. That fool don’t know.

(Both AIBILEEN and MINNY laugh.)

AIBILEEN: (laughing) Miss Leefolt got so much hairspray on her head she gonna blow us all up if she light a cigarette.

MINNY: (laughing) And you know she will!

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

As she gossips about Hilly, Minny comments jokingly on how Hilly has gone to the extent of marking small pencil dots on the bathroom's toilet paper to see if Minny is using her bathroom. Hilly's distrust and disliking of Minny shows during an intense storm, which kills 18 people, when Minny is told to use the bathroom outside during the middle of the vicious storm. Minny stares outside in fear, and Mrs. Walters tells her, "You go on ahead and use the inside bath, Minny. It's all right." Hilly, however, counters her mother and says, "Oh for crying out loud, it's just a little rain. She can go on up and get an umbrella from William's study." In this scene, it seems that Hilly would rather have Minny risk her life going outside in the middle of the storm. Ironically, as Minny looks outside, an umbrella blows past the pool in front of the outside bathroom that Hilly had specially built for Minny to use. Minny, who desperately has to use the bathroom, tells Mrs. Walters she is going to get her some tea and is followed by Hilly, who finds that Minny has lied and actually gone straight to the inside bathroom, which Mrs. Walters had already given her permission to use:

(The camera pans to MINNY, who has just squatted on the toilet. The door handle rattles.)

HILLY: Minny? (leaning against the bathroom door) Minny, are you in there?

(The camera pans to MINNY, who stands up, rolling her eyes, readjusting her clothing.)

MINNY: Yes, ma'am.

HILLY: (on camera, outside the door) And just *what* are you doing?

(MINNY, on camera, makes a face, pursing her lips, and slides herself next to the toilet, flushing it.)

HILLY: (off screen, shouting, while MINNY stands with her arms folded) Get off my toilet!

(HILLY pounds on the bathroom door.)

(MINNY slams the toilet lid down, putting her hands on her hips.)

(HILLY screams angrily.)

HILLY: (knocking loudly on the door) You are *fired*, Minny Jackson!

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

In this scene, it is unclear whether or not Minny had the chance to use the toilet before Hilly follows her and finds her inside the bathroom. Judging by Minny's anger, there is more reason to believe that Minny did not get the chance to use the bathroom and, due to her anger, flushes the toilet and slams the lid down. Hilly, hearing the toilet flush and the lid slam down, becomes enraged and fires Minny for using her inside bathroom.

After being fired, Minny initially struggles to find a job, so her oldest daughter, Sugar, is forced by Leroy, Minny's husband, to "quit school to help him with the bills." On her way to the help's bus, Minny gives Sugar a crash-course lesson on how to serve white women:

MINNY: You cooking white food, you taste it with a different spoon. If they see you put the tasting spoon back in the pot, might as well throw it all out. Spoon, too. And you use the same cup, same fork, same plate every day. And you put it up in the cabinet. You tell that white woman that's where you're gonna keep it from now on out. Don't do it and see what happens. When you're serving white folks' coffee, set it down in front of them. Don't hand it to them, 'cause your hands can't touch. And don't hit on they children. White folks like to do they own spanking. And last thing. Come here.

(MINNY pauses, placing a gentle hand on SUGAR's shoulder.)

MINNY: Look at me. No sass-mouthing.

(SUGAR, rolling her eyes, tries to turn her head from MINNY, who stops her.)

MINNY: No sass-mouthing. I mean it.

(MINNY places a loving hand on SUGAR, who smiles at her.)

MINNY: Give your mama a kiss.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

In her quick lesson with Sugar, Minny describes the implications of segregation between the black help and the white people in which they serve. Minny focuses on how it affects her cooking when she points out the importance of having a separate tasting spoon for “white food,” which becomes trash, along with the spoon, if it were to be mingled with the black help’s saliva. Minny also spends much of her lecture cautioning Sugar not to talk back to the white women, which Minny personally struggles with. Minny tells herself, “No sass-mouthing, Minny Jackson,” when she approaches the home of her next employer, Miss Celia Foote. While Minny is used to being told what to do, often rudely, by Hilly and Mrs. Walters, Minny has a completely different experience working for Celia, who is blonde, bubbly and new to hiring help, with Minny being the first maid she has ever hired. Upon accepting a job with Celia, Minny is taken aback when Celia immediately runs up to hug her, jumping around giddily and laughing happily. Minny appears overly uncomfortable with the physical contact, telling Celia, “Ooh. No hugging. No hugging.” While Minny just told Sugar not to let her hand touch a white woman’s hand when serving, Celia appears to have no boundaries when it comes to hugging Minny and does not hesitate as she grabs her arm to lead her around her home for a grand tour. Though Celia proves to be kind to Minny, who happily teaches her how to cook, Minny is portrayed as reluctant to trust white people and is wary to help with Skeeter’s book. Minny discovers Aibileen working with Skeeter on the book and is quick to question Skeeter’s motive in wanting to write about the help:

MINNY: (to SKEETER) And just *what* makes you think colored people need your help? Why do you care?

AIBILEEN: Minny.

MINNY: Maybe you just want to get Aibileen in trouble.

SKEETER: No. I want to show her perspective. So people might understand what it's like from your side.

MINNY: Well, it's a real Fourth of July picnic. It's what we dream of doing all weekend long. Get back into they house and polish the silver. And we just love not making minimum wage or getting Social Security.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

In her confrontation with Skeeter, Minny asks her, “what makes you think colored people need your help? Why do you care?” Minny immediately assumes that Skeeter might want to get Aibileen in trouble, while Skeeter seems genuine when she tells Minny she hopes to “understand what it's like from your side” by writing about what it is like to serve white women in Jackson. Minny is sarcastic when she discusses her job as a maid, calling it “a real Fourth of July picnic” and “what we dream of doing all weekend long.” She also brings up the issue that the black help are paid less than minimum wage and do not receive Social Security benefits, which is visually shown later in the film when Minny's five children all have to sleep in one bed. It is clear that Minny is dissatisfied with her job as a maid, though her working conditions improve when Celia treats her kindly and is appreciative of the work she does for her. Unlike Aibileen or Cecil, Minny is not afraid to express her real opinion on the poor working conditions she faces, including receiving below minimum wage pay and the deeper implications of what it means to be “separate but equal” to the white women she serves.

While Gamora straddles the line between being a leader and being a follower, she is often shown assisting white characters, like Quill, and non-human characters, like Rocket, complete their tasks. Though Gamora does not initially trust anyone but herself, she is arrested alongside Quill, Rocket and Groot as they transition from being enemies to

eventually becoming friends and allies in a shared desire to stop Ronan from retrieving the Orb for its powerful Infinity Stone. Gamora serves as part of the Guardians of the Galaxy, often taking orders from Quill and Rocket, who form several plans of action. For instance, as Rocket discusses the items he needs in order to initiate their escape from prison, Gamora offers to help retrieve a security band, which controls their “ins and outs”, from one of the guards as the other Guardians each are delegated tasks to complete by Rocket, who plans to break them out of prison. When Gamora asks how they are supposed to reach the watchtower in order to execute the final part of their plan, Rocket tells her, “Well, supposedly, these bald-bodies find you attractive. So, maybe you can work out some sort of trade” (*Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014). With this, Rocket seems to imply that Gamora can work out an arrangement with the guards by using her looks to get what she wants. Gamora protests disgustedly, saying, “You must be joking,” but Rocket insists, “No, I really heard they find you attractive.” In this moment, Rocket appears to reduce Gamora to simply her beauty rather than take her combat skills into account as they make their plan. Gamora quickly and efficiently retrieves the security band by the sheer force of her strength and does not need to use her “attractiveness” to retrieve it. She, instead, breaks a man’s arm in order to get it:

GAMORA: (her leg wrapped around the guard’s arm) I’ll need this.

GUARD: Good luck. It’s internally wired.

GAMORA: (fiercely) I’ll figure something out.

(GAMORA grunts and moves her leg downward, snapping the man’s arm.  
The GUARD screams in pain.)

(Gunn, *Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014)

After retrieving the arm band, she proceeds to toss it to Rocket and then leaps across from one side of the room to the watchtower, reaching down to help Rocket climb toward it.

Clearly, as this scene illustrates, Gamora is more than capable of fulfilling tasks given to her without succumbing to using her looks to accomplish her tasks.

In terms of her appearance, Gamora is always shown wearing a variety of tight leather outfits. While she often wears black leather and shows skin on her arms and upper chest, she initially wears all black and restrains her hair up, showing minimal skin, on her upper chest and arms when she is introduced alongside the evil Ronan at the beginning of *Guardians of the galaxy* (2014). Upon meeting Quill, Gamora is shown in a completely different look, where she has let down her hair and curled it, and wears a sleeveless cropped leather top that shows part of her midriff and her chest, with some cleavage visible. As he sees Gamora, Quill's mouth drops open and he simply stares at her as she is perched outside a collector's shop. Gamora is shown leaning against the wall and slurping, sucking, on what she is eating as she looks over at Quill. While Gamora is portrayed as sultry and exotic, she is also predominantly portrayed as a fierce fighter and is practically unstoppable, though the camera angles of her fighting are often suggestive and tend to emphasize the audience's attention toward her body. For instance, during a group discussion about Ronan and his army, which is led by Gamora and Quill, the camera pans from the Guardians getting armed and uniformed in their new red leather outfits while Gamora is shown speaking on screen, already in her new uniform. As she speaks, the camera pans back and forth from her zipping up her uniform, cutting off her head and zooming in on her chest and lower body:

GAMORA: Once they know we're on board, Ronan will isolate himself behind impenetrable security doors on deck, which I can disable by dismantling the power source.

QUILL: We'll make it to the flight deck, and I'll use the Hadron Enforcer to kill Ronan.

(The camera pans to GAMORA's chest as she zips up her jacket.)

(The camera pans to the side of GAMORA's lower body, especially focusing on her buttocks and hips. GAMORA's hand tucks a gun into her side pant loop as she turns her hips slightly to the side in a way that shows more of her buttocks than before.)

(The camera pans to GAMORA and QUILL's discussion again, as GAMORA walks around the room.)

GAMORA: Once Ronan is dead, we will retrieve the Stone. (The camera pans to a man handing out small Orbs.) Use these devices to contain it. If you touch it, it will kill you.

(Gunn, *Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014)

As Gamora speaks, her body becomes fractionalized as the camera zooms in on her chest and her lower body, including her breasts as she zips up her jacket and also her buttocks as she tucks a gun into a strap on her pants. Gamora is the only woman in the Guardians of the Galaxy, and her body is treated as such, with camera angles that cater to the male gaze. No other character's body is fractionalized in such a way, but when Gamora puts on her uniform her head is cut out of the frame and the audience is forced to see pieces of Gamora's body rather than also seeing her face. Gamora is shown in relation to the other Guardians as they all walk in slow-motion down a hallway, wearing their new uniforms, where Quill emerges wearing his red leather jacket and pants and is quickly joined by Gamora, who walks beside him. While their outfits are nearly identical, Gamora's shows more skin on her chest and fits tighter than Quill's uniform fits him. The only character showing more skin than Gamora is Drax, who only wears his leather uniform pants and does not typically wear a shirt. Although Gamora tends to show more skin and stands out as the only woman in the Guardians of the Galaxy, she is portrayed as fierce and as a force to be reckoned with. Gamora allows herself to work as part of a team, while Rocket, Quill and Gamora alternate between who delegates tasks. Quill, nicknamed Star-Lord, is designated as the true leader of the Guardians, but



Gamora appears happy to serve alongside him and the other Guardians, whom she deems her “friends.” At the end of the film, all five Guardians are shown in Quill’s ship and Gamora acknowledges Quill as group leader when she smiles and says, “We’ll follow your lead, Star-Lord,” implying that she accepts Quill as her leader and will stand beside him and the other Guardians. Rather than being forced to serve Quill as one of the Guardians, Gamora chooses and appears happy to be part of a group that fights to protect the galaxy rather than destroy it.

In *Star wars: The force awakens* (2015), Finn begins the film as simply FN-2187, one of many Stormtroopers who have numbers and random letters instead of names. He wears the same white helmet and body armor as all the other Stormtroopers and is indistinguishable from the others until his first battle. FN-2187 watches a fellow Stormtrooper die in front of him, and as he dies he reaches upward toward FN-2187’s helmet and streaks blood down the forehead and chin of it. Though FN-2187 gets blood on his helmet, he is the only Stormtrooper who refuses to follow villain Kylo Ren’s orders to “slaughter” the villagers and disobeys orders to fire upon them (*Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015). Upon returning to the First Order’s base, FN-2187 removes his helmet, revealing the face of a young black man in his 20s. As he stands in the hallway panting and breathing heavily, FN-2187 is almost immediately discovered by Phasma, a female captain of the First Order, and scolded for not wearing his helmet:

PHASMA: FN-2187. Submit your blaster for inspection.

FN-2187: Yes, captain.

PHASMA: And who gave you permission to remove that helmet?

FN-2187: I’m sorry, captain.

PHASMA: Report to my division at once.

(Abrams, *Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015)

As soon as he removes his helmet, FN-2187 is reprimanded for not wearing part of his uniform. FN-2187 has been told what to do his whole life and wants nothing more than to be free from the First Order. Pasma discusses that prior to the instance when FN-2187 did not follow orders in the village, he showed “no prior signs of nonconformity,” with this being his “first offense.” This suggests that until FN-2187 is told to kill the innocent villagers, he typically followed all orders given to him. Upon meeting Poe Dameron, a white male Resistance fighter who is taken captive by the First Order, FN-2187 decides to help him, though it is not without motive:

FN-2187: Listen carefully. If you do exactly as I say, I can get you out of here.

POE: What?

(FN-2187 removes his mask, his entire face gleaming with perspiration.)

FN-2187: (whispering quickly and panting) This is a rescue. I’m helping you escape. Can you fly a TIE fighter?

POE: You’re with the Resistance?

FN-2187: What? No, no, no. I’m breaking you out. Can you fly a TIE fighter?

POE: I can fly anything. Why? Why are you helping me?

FN-2187: (nodding) Because it’s the right thing to do.

POE: You need a pilot.

FN-2187: I need a pilot.

(Abrams, *Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015)

In this scene, FN-2187 is just as desperate to leave the First Order as Poe is to escape them, so they form a companionship, where Poe is the pilot and FN-2187 takes the “gunner”

position on the small ship they use to escape. As they escape, Poe gives FN-2187 the nickname Finn, which he happily accepts, and they work together to defeat Pasma and other First Order ships that chase after them. While Finn meets Poe early on in the film, he does not see him again for quite some time, believing him to be dead upon crash-landing on the planet Jakku, where he meets Rey (Daisy Ridley), a young white female scavenger, also appearing to be in her early 20s, and BB-8, a droid robot that belongs to Poe. Finn initially lies to Rey, who believes him to be with the Resistance, though he must tell the truth to BB-8, since Finn does not know the coordinates of the Resistance base as he says he does. Finn bargains with BB-8 and gets him to agree to tell Rey where to fly, as he chimes in, “Yeah, the Ileenium system. That’s the one. Get us there as fast as you can.” He and BB-8 exchange a sort of thumbs up, which comes across as humorous in the film. Thus, with the help of BB-8, and later Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Chewie, Finn is able to bring BB-8 back safely to the Resistance base and conclusively helps Poe complete his mission by doing so, since BB-8 contains a map to Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), which Poe risks his life to save and conceal from the First Order. To his surprise and delight, Finn discovers Poe is alive and he greets Finn as his “buddy” as they share a friendly hug.

Despite Finn’s bravery in helping save Poe’s life and in helping BB-8 and Rey locate the Resistance base, Finn is often shown in instances where he needs saving and is knocked to the ground several times throughout the film. For instance, when Finn first gets to Jakku, he is desperate for water and runs toward a well to drink water alongside a large elephant-like alien creature that sloshes and slurps at the water. Finn is desperate enough to drink from the same water hole as the large creature, though he sputters and gags as he attempts to drink from it. The camera pans so that Finn is juxtaposed alongside the alien as both bring their

faces toward the water. While Finn scoops up the water with his hands, the alien sticks its large mouth into the water, spilling it all over the ground. The creature sees Finn and purposefully knocks him over, taking the water hole for itself, as Finn seems to be less thirsty than before. Shortly after being knocked to the ground by the large creature, Finn is chased by Rey and knocked to the ground by her staff and later is thrown by a blast from the Stormtroopers chasing him, Rey and BB-8. Finn loses consciousness for a moment and is awakened by Rey, who often is shown helping to save him. In a subsequent scene, Finn and Rey accidentally release the Rathtars, which are large alien creatures with several sets of teeth and large tentacles, while aboard Han Solo's ship. As they run, Finn leads Rey around a corner and she barely has time to say, "Are you sure?" before a Rathtar reaches around the corner and grabs Finn by the legs, knocking him to his stomach and dragging him down the hallway. Finn yells loudly and repeatedly for Rey while he is dragged to another compartment of the large ship:

FINN: This way.

REY: Are you sure?

(A Rathtar's tentacles reach around the corner and grab FINN by the legs, knocking him to his stomach on the ground.)

FINN: No, no, no!

REY: (spinning around in horror, yelling) Finn!

(FINN yelps, being carried away by the Rathtar.)

REY: Finn!

FINN: (reaching out for REY, yelling with fear) Rey!

(The Rathtar reaches its tentacles out toward REY, who yelps and backs away.)

FINN: (yelling at the Rathtar) Get off! Get off!

(REY runs after FINN. A Rathtar howls faintly.)

FINN: (off screen, faintly) Rey!

REY: (running toward the voice) Finn! Finn!

(Abrams, *Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015)

As Finn is dragged away by the Rathtar, it appears he is helpless to save himself, since the Rathtar will not release him from its tentacles. Rey yells for Finn and tries to find him, finding a monitor with multiple screens that control the doorway of the ship. In the nick of time, Rey presses a button and Finn, who is being dragged by the Rathtar, is released when a door closes on the Rathtar's tentacles, cutting him free from the creature. As he scrambles to his feet, he manages to untangle himself as Rey runs into the room and yells his name, which startles him. Finn, panicked, says, "It had me! But the door..." to which Rey responds, "That was lucky." Finn is quite "lucky" throughout the film, since Rey and Han Solo always tend to arrive just before he is potentially injured or they assist him in regaining consciousness when he happens to get injured. Finn is portrayed as the male version of a damsel in distress, and his attempts to assert authority and give orders rather than take them come across as humorous. For instance, when Finn, Han Solo and Chewie attempt to find Rey after she is taken by Kylo Ren, Finn tries to interrogate Pasma and is over-the-top in his efforts to be taken seriously:

FINN: You remember me?

PHASMA: FN-2187.

FINN: Not anymore. The name's Finn and I'm in charge. *I'm* in charge now, Pasma. *I'm* in charge.

(HAN SOLO reaches up, putting a hand on FINN's shoulder.)

HAN SOLO: Bring it down. Bring it down.

FINN: (leaning forward in PHASMA's face) *Yeah*. Follow me.

(Abrams, *Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015)

While Finn attempts to be serious in telling Phasma he is “in charge now,” his interrogation scene comes across as overly humorous in the way that he gets in her face repeatedly, bouncing around as he says, “...I’m in charge. *I’m* in charge now, Phasma. *I’m* in charge.” Finn often uses repetition as a technique throughout the film when he talks to himself, usually when he tries to convince himself of something. In this case, Finn repeats that he is in charge, when perhaps he realizes he is not in charge and must therefore try to convince others that he is. Even Han Solo tells Finn to “bring it down” a notch, since Finn is not portrayed as intimidating in the slightest and instead continues to make a fool of himself in front of his former First Order captain. To further show Finn’s inability to interrogate Phasma, it is Han Solo and Chewie who hold weapons to Phasma’s head as Finn talks to her, which suggests that they are the muscle behind Finn’s attempt to intimidate Phasma into lowering the enemy’s shields. With Finn’s inability to defend himself in times of trouble and his reliance on others for guidance, Finn is thus portrayed as subordinate to the white characters he befriends, who often bring him out of harm’s way.

### **Association with Criminality and/or Weaponry**

A third common theme among all five lead characters is an association with criminality and/or weaponry, depending on the genre. Overall, I found that all leads, except Gamora, are accused of being a “thief” at one point or more in their respective films, while both Gamora and Finn are called “traitors” for choosing to fight against their enemies. This

theme examines how being accused of criminality and having an association with weaponry impacts how lead characters view themselves and how other characters view them, since being associated with crime and/or weapons appears to have an effect on these characters' identities.

In terms of being associated with criminality, Minny is the first character in *The help* (2011) to get fired simply for using Hilly's inside bathroom. Hilly's anger leads her to tell "every white woman in town" that Minny is a thief, saying she stole a candelabra when she never stole anything. Though Minny is wrongly accused of being a thief, Minny tells Aibileen, "Oh, but I got her back," which sets the scene for Minny's "terrible awful" she did to Hilly (*The help*, 2011). Discussion of the "terrible awful" comes up multiple times throughout the film, though it is more than halfway through the story that Minny provides more detail, saying, "She got what she deserved, Aibileen." While Minny is initially hired by Hilly for her cooking skills, Hilly never suspects Minny would bake her feces into her famous chocolate pie and feed it to her. As Hilly eats the pie, Minny stares down at her with delight, watching her take bite after bite, not knowing to suspect anything. Hilly insults Minny and says, "So... Nobody wanted to hire a sass-mouthing thieving nigra. Did they?" When Hilly insults Minny, she simply smiles at her, though her eyes reveal a deep hatred for Hilly. Minny angrily plans to "get back" at Hilly by bringing her the special chocolate pie in apology, knowing she will eat it immediately. Although Minny reveals to Aibileen and Skeeter that she "just wanted to see her take a bite," Minny's temper boils over and she unintentionally reveals the contents of what else is in the pie besides chocolate:

HILLY: What do you put in here that makes it taste so *good*?

MINNY: (smiling) That good vanilla from Mexico...and something else *real* special.

HILLY: Mmm.

(MRS. WALTERS reaches for the pie, and MINNY quickly slides it away.)

MINNY: No, no, no, Missus Walters. That's Miss Hilly's *special* pie.

HILLY: (her mouth full) Mama can have a piece. (scoffing, thrusting the pie at MINNY) *Cut* her one. (dismissively flicking her wrist at MINNY) Go get a plate.

(HILLY bends down to continue eating her pie.)

MINNY: (slamming the pie down) *Eat* my shit.

(HILLY, seemingly appalled, stops chewing, her fork suspended in mid-air, and stares at MINNY, her mouth slightly open.)

HILLY: (confrontationally) *What'd* you say?

(The camera pans in closely to MINNY's face.)

MINNY: (steadily, with enunciation) I said, '*Eat... my...shit.*'

(HILLY rises up slowly, squinting her eyes angrily at MINNY.)

HILLY: (with some pie in her teeth) Have you *lost* your mind?

(The camera pans to MRS. WALTERS, who looks open-mouthed from HILLY to MINNY.)

MINNY: No, ma'am, but you about to, (smiling, looking down at the pie) 'cause you just did.

HILLY: (slowly, with enunciation and anger) Did *what*?

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

In this scene, which occurs in a flashback as Minny tells the story to Aibileen and Skeeter, Minny overtly tells Hilly, "*Eat my shit,*" and literally makes her do so. Of all five lead characters, Minny is the most confrontational and is not afraid to stand up to her enemies. Though Minny never intended for Hilly to know about the pie being contaminated with



feces, her anger only extends toward Hilly and she cannot sit by and watch Mrs. Walters suffer the same fate as Hilly, who eats two full slices of the pie before realizing what is in it. Mrs. Walters, who laughs at Hilly, mocks her, saying, “And you didn’t eat just one. You had *two* slices!” She laughs hysterically as Hilly realizes what she just ate and runs out of the room gagging, while Minny begins backing out of the room and makes her way quickly out of the house. Mrs. Walters tells her, “Run, Minny, run!” and laughs and drinks what appears to be wine or some other spirit in this humorous scene. Minny expresses to Aibileen and Skeeter, “I done ask God to forgive me. But more for what happened to poor Miss Walters. Miss Hilly threw her in that nursing home...just for laughing.” Because of Minny’s actions, not only does she get fired, but Mrs. Walters is thrown into a nursing home by Hilly, which Minny takes responsibility for. Although the scene with the pie is made to be humorous, the real implications of Minny getting back at Hilly occur once Skeeter’s book is published and the story of the “terrible awful” is printed for all to see. Interestingly, Minny is least affected by the book once it is published, since she knows putting in the story about the “terrible awful” keeps her “insured” in that she believes Hilly is “gonna go to her grave convincing folks this book ain’t about Jackson. Now that keeps us safe.” While Minny was partially correct in telling Aibileen and Skeeter that her provocative story would keep them safe from harm, Aibileen ultimately is blamed by Hilly for helping write the book, even though she only contributed her own story.

Whereas Skeeter and Minny are unscathed when *The help* is published and read by all the white women at bridge club, Aibileen is blamed for the book and is personally attacked by Hilly, who wrongly accuses her of being a thief. Aibileen has never stolen anything in her life, yet Hilly makes it her personal vendetta to destroy her career as a maid working for

Elizabeth. Like Minny, Aibileen is wrongly accused of stealing from Hilly, who is motivated by her anger with her, Minny and Skeeter for writing about her in *The help*. While Hilly accuses Aibileen of stealing three pieces of her silverware, Hilly makes her motive known after Aibileen insists she never stole anything from her:

AIBILEEN: I didn't steal no silver.

HILLY: Maybe I can't send you to jail for what you wrote, but I can send you for being a *thief*.

AIBILEEN: (fiercely) I know something about you. Don't you forget that. From what Yule Mae says, there's a lot of time to write letters in jail. Plenty of time to write the truth about you. *And the paper is free*.

HILLY: (exploding with anger) Nobody will believe what you wrote!

AIBILEEN: (interrupting, fiercely) I don't know. I been told I'm a pretty good writer. Already sold a lot of books.

(ELIZABETH reenters the room.)

HILLY: (to ELIZABETH) Call the police.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

Once Hilly is alone with Aibileen, she angrily tells her that even though she cannot prove Aibileen helped with the book and send her to jail for libel, she *can*, however, send her to jail for being a thief. Besides accusing her of being a thief, Hilly fires Aibileen on behalf of Elizabeth after Aibileen tells her she does not have her silver, though Elizabeth tries and fails to tell Hilly, "She says she doesn't have them." Prior to getting fired for supposedly stealing Hilly's silverware, Aibileen witnesses another maid, Yule Mae, getting arrested for actually stealing a ring she found while vacuuming at Hilly's house. While both Minny and Aibileen are wrongly accused by Hilly for being thieves, Yule Mae is the only woman who steals from Hilly. Aibileen witnesses Yule Mae's arrest and is treated as if she, too, is guilty in the way

that policemen restrain her and hold her back against the help's bus as she watches Yule Mae struggle with the police. Thus, while Aibileen did nothing wrong, the white male police officer holds her and attempts to restrain her as they bend Yule Mae over the police car and beat her with a baton as Aibileen cries out to her, "Don't fight, Yule Mae! Yule Mae, don't fight." Aibileen telling Yule Mae not to fight with the police speaks to the importance Aibileen places on following the law and on survival. In consideration of the law, Aibileen is highly resistant and afraid to help Skeeter with her book, though Skeeter appears to be ignorant of the implications of what could happen to Aibileen for helping with *The Help* interviews:

SKEETER: I'd really like to interview you, Aibileen... I know it's scary.

AIBILEEN: (fearfully) They set my cousin Shinelle's car on fire, just 'cause she went down to the voting station.

SKEETER: (passionately) A book like this has never been written before.

AIBILEEN: 'Cause there's a reason. I do this with you, I might as well burn my own house down.

(AIBILEEN nervously looks from side to side as white people nearby look over at her and SKEETER talking.)

SKEETER: I promise we'll be careful.

AIBILEEN: (exclaiming, panting) This already ain't careful, Miss Skeeter! You not knowing that is what's scaring me the most. Scare me more than Jim Crow.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

In approaching Aibileen at the help's bus stop, Skeeter is anything but inconspicuous. She calls attention to herself first by calling out to Aibileen from across the way, as Aibileen and other maids look toward Skeeter, who smiles and approaches Aibileen as if they are friends. Though Aibileen serves Skeeter at Elizabeth's house during bridge club, she and Skeeter

have never spoken outside of the context of Elizabeth's house, so Aibileen is not only taken aback but is also afraid of who else is observing and potentially overhearing her conversation with Skeeter, who does not realize that what she asks Aibileen to do would break a number of Mississippi segregation laws. When Skeeter says, "I know it's scary," it is evident that she truly does not understand Aibileen's fear of helping a white woman, especially since Skeeter is asking her to talk about her employer, Elizabeth, in the book. Only later, when Aibileen decides to help Skeeter, does Skeeter realize, "I know now that it's against the law, what we're doing." However, Aibileen faces the consequences of her actions once Hilly fires her for Elizabeth and becomes forced to retire her position as a maid.

While both Minny and Aibileen are wrongly accused of being thieves, Cecil's association with criminality begins as soon as he decides to leave the cotton plantation. Cecil, who is shown running through the rain, struggling to find shelter and walking alone late at night describes his difficulty with finding food and shelter as well as the malevolent laws in place at the time: "No one would give me a job nor a place to sleep. Any white man could kill any of us at any time. The law wasn't on our side. The law was against us" (*Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013). As he says this, walks along at night and looks up, fierce lightning flashes and thunder rumbles as he sees two young black men, around his age, lynched by two ropes as the blood on their mouths and bodies glisten. Cecil looks up in fear as he quickly runs away from the jarring image before him, knowing that he is not safe and the law is against him. He describes, "I was hungry all the time" and comes across a window with a few large cakes that are beautifully decorated and seeming to glimmer under the light shining down upon them. In desperation, Cecil breaks the window and is shown sitting on the floor eating the cake ravenously with severely bloodied hands. As he eats, Maynard, the shop's older

black worker, approaches and scolds him, saying, “You know what can happen to you, son? Get up.” After Maynard helps bandage up Cecil’s hands, he indirectly calls him a thief for having “stole our food” and “broke our window.” In a later scene, teenage Cecil is shown serving a white woman and attempts to slightly move her purse over so that he can put her drink down beside her, and the woman immediately assumes he is trying to steal her purse and rips it off the table, glaring at him. Cecil, understanding her mistake, says, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, ma’am” as he then gives her the drink. Cecil is not accused of stealing again and typically avoids confrontation with the law, though his son Louis is frequently arrested throughout the film for his civil rights activism. Cecil is frequently shown in conflict with Louis, given their different views of the world, which is best illustrated after Louis’ first arrest. The argument takes place as Cecil goes to get a drink from a segregated drinking fountain, where the left side says “WHITE” and the right side says “COLORED.” Cecil hangs up his hat on the drinking fountain ledge and leans down for a drink as Louis approaches him, leaning against the wall to talk to him:

LOUIS: Something special is going on down here, Dad.

CECIL: (angrily) What’s so special about another colored man in jail?  
...What are you doing with my hard earned money, Pop? Are you even in school?

LOUIS: I’m trying to change the way Negroes...

CECIL: (angrily) You’re breaking the law. That judge just sentenced you to 30 days in the county workhouse. You fixing to get killed.

LOUIS: (defensively) If I can’t sit at any lunch counter I want, then I might as well be dead. We’re fighting for our rights.

CECIL: (exploding with anger, yelling) *Rights?* What are you talking about?

LOUIS: I’m trying to change the nation’s consciousness toward the American Negro.

CECIL: (angrily talking over LOUIS) Them postcard you've been sending me? You're a damn liar!

(CECIL advances closer to LOUIS, getting in his face.)

LOUIS: (yelling) I have been in school!

CECIL: *Hey!*

(CECIL grabs the front of LOUIS' sweater, getting in his face and shaking him against the wall as LOUIS frowns at him.)

CECIL: (holding LOUIS' shirt, exasperatedly) Who do you think you're talking to? I brought you into this world, I can take you out of it.

(Daniels, *Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013)

As they argue, Cecil points out to Louis how he is not only breaking the law but also accuses him of wasting his “hard earned money.” Louis angers Cecil by using elevated language that he has learned at Fisk University such as “trying to change the nation’s consciousness toward the American Negro,” which Cecil cannot begin to fathom or understand. Cecil’s argument with Louis occurs just after Louis is arrested for protesting by sitting in the white section of a segregated diner and refusing to sit in the colored section as he and his college friends are told to comply with. Cecil does not see anything “special” about “another colored man in jail,” despite Louis’ enthusiasm and commitment to civil rights.

Throughout his career as a butler in the White House, Cecil hears of Louis’ multiple arrests, one of which he discusses with President John F. Kennedy (James Marsden). Kennedy tells Cecil of Louis being imprisoned with Martin Luther King Jr. and that, during Kennedy’s presidency, he was arrested 16 times in a two-year period, which Cecil responds, “Yes, sir. Will that be all, sir?” Though Cecil does not want to discuss Louis’ arrests with Kennedy, Kennedy shares that Louis and the other “kids” have “changed” his heart. Cecil,

who avoids eye contact throughout most of this conversation, looks up at Kennedy, finally meeting his gaze. In this moment, it is clear that the activism Louis and his friends are doing is finally reaching the ears of people in power, like Kennedy, who can try and enact changes on society. Sadly, as the years go by, Cecil continues to fail to understand the implications of Louis' activism until the near-end of the film as a much older Cecil looks through an old box of Louis' things. He finds a book titled *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction of Black America, 1945-1982*, and turns it over to read the back cover. He says, "They had started writing books about everything Louis and his friends had done." As he opens the book, he sees a photo of Louis' mug shot and holds it up to stare at it for the first time. He continues in a voiceover, "Louis was never a criminal. He was a *hero*, fighting to save the soul of our country." In this moment, Cecil is proud of Louis for the first time in several decades and decides to make an effort to reconnect with him. Cecil resigns from being a butler and goes to find Louis, who leads a "Free Mandela" protest outside the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C., where a crowd of people has gathered. Louis, who is in the middle of a speech, sees Cecil across the street and stares at him in disbelief, before he hands the microphone off to another man. Cecil and Louis approach one another slowly, and Louis could not be more surprised to see his father after so many years of estrangement:

LOUIS: Hi, Dad.

CECIL: Hi, Louis.

LOUIS: What are you doing here?

(CECIL takes off his hat. The crowd continues chanting "Free Mandela!" in the background.)

CECIL: I came here to protest with you.

LOUIS: (with concern) You'll get arrested, Dad... You'll lose your job.

CECIL: (nodding, as his mouth quivers) I lost you... I'm sorry. (whispering)  
I'm sorry, son.

(Daniels, *Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013)

Upon apologizing, Cecil holds his arms outstretched to give Louis a hug, for the first time in the film, as they finally embrace, both with tears in their eyes. When Cecil chooses to protest with Louis, he is shortly after taken to jail, as Louis tells him, "Don't worry, Dad, we'll be out of here in a few hours." Cecil responds with a smile as he looks around the jail cell, which has several other protesters talking among themselves, and says, "Who said I was worried?" Both he and Louis smile as they stand side by side in the jail cell, finally having fought for the same cause. Thus, even though Cecil is taken to jail, he could not be more cheerful to support his son and be by his side, even if it means going to prison for a few hours.

Unlike Aibileen, Minny and Cecil, who are all characters in historically based films with racially charged plot lines that take place alongside civil rights activism movements, Gamora and FN-2187/Finn are characters who are part of fictional worlds, where anything can happen. However, it seems that both Gamora and FN-2187/Finn are almost immediately associated with both criminality and weaponry at the start of their respective films. For instance, Gamora is called "traitorous" by her adopted sister Nebula, who chastises her for helping the Guardians of the Galaxy try to retrieve the Orb from the villain Ronan, her former compatriot. Nebula tells her, "You have always been weak," and she proceeds to call her "stupid" and "traitorous" (*Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014). As soon as she arrives on the planet Xandar and attempts to take the Orb from Quill, Gamora is shown swiftly kicking him in the stomach as she snatches the Orb and takes it for herself. After a fight breaks out with



her, Quill, Rocket and Groot, Gamora and the others are arrested by Xandar's police, the Nova Corps, who examine them as subjects in a laboratory. Gamora is immediately "apprehended" as "one of Ronan's compatriots," where Nova Corps explains, "Recently, Thanos lent her and her sister Nebula out to Ronan, which leads us to believe that Thanos and Ronan are working together." With this explanation, it is clear that Gamora is "lent out" to Ronan as a sort of weapon, which is exactly what she is. Gamora says how Thanos was responsible for killing her parents in front of her and turning her into a weapon. As illustrated on the screen behind Gamora, the Nova Corps' laboratory stats reveal that she has several superhuman "enhancements," including a "cybernetic skeleton, ocular and respiratory implants, enhanced neurological system" and an "enhanced regeneration implant." With these enhancements, Gamora is made into a killing machine by Thanos, who makes her stronger and practically invincible in battle. Gamora is mocked by Ronan for losing the battle to Quill, whom Ronan refers to as "some primitive." Besides her bodily enhancements, Gamora appears to be dressed for combat and often wears leather from head to toe, including combat boots, and she is seen wielding a large knife that extends into a sword. Despite choosing to end her alliance with Ronan and alienate herself from Thanos, Gamora cannot seem to escape her past when she is taken to the Klyn, a high security prison, with the other Guardians of the Galaxy. As they walk, handcuffed, Quill asks her, "What's the Orb?" to which she replies, "I have no words for an honorless thief." Rocket immediately insults her, saying, "Pretty high and mighty coming from the lackey of a genocidal maniac," referring to her alliance with Thanos and/or Ronan. Gamora whips her head to look down at Rocket, who adds, "Yeah, I know who you are. Anyone who's anyone knows who you are." Rocket implies that Gamora, with her unique green skin and appearance, is highly conspicuous in a

prison holding some of the most dangerous criminals in the galaxy. As Gamora and the others walk through the main floor of the prison, she is, as Rocket predicted, instantly recognized and must endure the jeering prisoners, who point and yell death threats and insults at her:

PRISONER #1: You first! You first!

PRISONER #2: Murderer!

PRISONER #1: Coming for you first, Gamora! You're dead! You're scum!  
You're scum!

(The prisoners throw things at GAMORA, who looks down and then up at them.)

ROCKET: It's like I said, she's got a rep. A lot of prisoners here have lost their families to Ronan and his goons. She'll last a day, tops.

PRISONER #3: Murderer!

QUILL: The guards will protect her, right?

ROCKET: They're here to stop us from getting out. They don't care what we do to each other inside.

GAMORA: Whatever nightmares the future holds, are *dreams* compared to what's behind me.

(Gunn, *Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014)

The scene with the jeering prisoners illustrates how Gamora has a reputation for criminality due to her association with Ronan and Thanos, who are two of the most dangerous men in the galaxy, if not the most dangerous. Gamora is called “murderer” and “scum” by the prisoners, who clearly have a deep hatred for her. Quill expresses concern for Gamora’s safety, asking if the guards will protect her, though Rocket confirms that the guards “don’t care what we do to each other inside” the prison. The same night Gamora is thrown into prison, she is taken by some of the angry prisoners, who receive guidance from the guard: “Take her down to the

showers. It'll be easier to clean up the blood." Gamora is then shown being slammed against a wall, as multiple prisoners surround her, holding her at knifepoint. One prisoner tells Gamora to "consider this a death sentence for your crimes against the galaxy." However, before the prisoner has a chance to try and kill her, Drax, who is tall, muscular and known as "The Destroyer," who has "slayed dozens of Ronan's minions," appears. Drax holds a lot of anger toward Ronan for murdering his wife and daughter, saying, "He slaughtered them where they stood. And he *laughed!*" Drax, approaching the prisoners, says, "Her life is not yours to take. He killed my family. I shall kill one of his in return." With Drax's logic, he views Gamora as not only Thanos' but also Ronan's family, which is not true. While Drax intends to kill Gamora, Quill luckily followed after her, waiting for the right moment to reveal himself, and convinces Drax, who later joins the Guardians, that Gamora is more valuable alive than dead, due to her extensive knowledge of Ronan and his army. He also tells Drax, "You know, if killing Ronan is truly your sole purpose, I don't think this is the best way to go about it... She betrayed Ronan. He's coming back for her." Quill is the first character to defend Gamora, though he is motivated to keep her alive to find out more information about the Orb he intends to sell. Despite this, Gamora befriends Quill and the other Guardians of the Galaxy and manages to help them defeat Ronan by the end of the film. In doing so, Gamora and the other Guardians, who also possess criminal records, are told by the Nova Corps that their "criminal records have also been expunged," while they are warned against "breaking any laws in the future." Once cleared of her crimes and leaving her past as a "warrior and assassin" for Thanos and Ronan, Gamora is able to have a clean slate and continue to strengthen her new alliance with the Guardians of the Galaxy.

Similarly, in *Star wars: The force awakens* (2015), Finn transitions from being raised to kill for the First Order to fighting against them. After crash landing on the planet Jakku, Finn saves Poe's brown leather jacket from the ship just before it is swallowed whole by a sand pit, which appears out of nowhere, leaving Finn alone in the desert. Upon reaching the Jakku markets, Finn encounters Rey and BB-8, who, seeing him wearing Poe's jacket, accuse him of being a thief after Rey knocks him to the ground with her staff, which she intimidatingly points near his chest:

REY: What's your hurry, *thief*?

FINN: (appearing confused) *What? Thief?*

(BB-8 rolls toward FINN and zaps him in the leg.)

FINN: (yelling) Ow! Hey, what?

REY: The jacket. This droid says you *stole* it.

FINN: (defensively) I've had a pretty messed up day, all right? So, I'd appreciate it if you stop accusing me of...

(BB-8 zaps FINN again.)

FINN: (yelling angrily) Ow! Stop it!

REY: Where'd you get it? It belongs to his master.

FINN: (sighing) It belonged to Poe Dameron. That was his name, right? He was captured by the First Order. I helped him escape, but our ship crashed. (sadly) Poe didn't make it.

(Abrams, *Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015)

Almost immediately when she sees Finn, who BB-8 called her attention to, Rey charges after him and accuses him of being a thief simply for wearing Poe's jacket. She greets him as "thief" and does not ask for his name for several scenes. Shortly after Rey agrees to trust Finn, who says he is with the Resistance, Stormtroopers arrive seeking Finn and BB-8's map

and chase after them through the Jakku markets. As they hide in one of the tents, Rey worriedly expresses to Finn, “They’re shooting at both of us” (*Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015). Finn proceeds to tell Rey that she is now “marked” since the Stormtroopers saw her with him. Rey becomes guilty by association with Finn, as they are both referred to as “fugitives” wanted by the First Order. In a later scene, Finn, Chewie and Han Solo are shooting and fighting other Stormtroopers. As Finn thrusts his lightsaber through a Stormtrooper, who clatters to the ground, another Stormtrooper yells, “Traitor!” As Finn turns to face him, he wields Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber, which he fiercely holds up by his face. Upon seeing Finn’s lightsaber, the Stormtrooper throws his shield to the ground and whips out a large weapon that glows with electricity, much like a lightsaber. They fight, though Finn struggles to attack the Stormtrooper effectively and is forced backward as he fights, since the Stormtrooper exerts more strength in fighting than he does. Finn, who is hit in the chest by the Stormtrooper’s weapon, flies backward to the ground and looks up in fear as the Stormtrooper raises his weapon up to strike him one last time and fiercely brings it down, but he goes flying into a wall before hitting Finn. Finn whips his head around, pants and looks up from the ground to see Han Solo fired the shot that saved him from the Stormtrooper, and he even helps Finn to his feet. Finn is also referred to as a “traitor” by Kylo Ren, who also accuses Finn of also taking his lightsaber:

KYLO REN: (angrily yelling) Traitor!

(FINN retrieves his lightsaber from the snowy ground and turns to face KYLO REN. FINN activates the lightsaber, which glows bright blue.)

KYLO REN: *That* lightsaber. (angrily pointing at it) It belongs to *me*.

FINN: Come get it.

(Abrams, *Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015)

Finn, facing his enemy and former leader, bravely wields his lightsaber to Kylo Ren, who calls him a traitor and indirectly calls him a thief. Though Finn loses the battle and becomes severely injured, he tries his hardest to fight Kylo Ren, who is more skilled and trained in wielding a lightsaber than Finn, who appears to be inexperienced in every battle he undertakes. Because of Finn's past association with the First Order, he is privy to information about their weapons, which becomes invaluable to the Resistance fighters and ultimately assists in their ability to destroy the First Order's base and shut down their weapon, named Starkiller Base, which possesses the power to destroy entire planets. Much like Gamora, Finn is associated with criminality and weaponry throughout the film, though he manages to escape his enemies and join in the fight against them.

### **Facing One's Fears and Striving for a Better Life**

In all four films, the five lead characters I examined are portrayed as striving for a better life, which often involves facing one's fears among financial and/or class struggles, confronting one's enemies and persevering against all odds. While four of five leads mention financial worry at some point and two leads are fired from their jobs, all leads appear to have secured or are shown trying to secure a better life for themselves, and for their families in Minny and Cecil's cases. This theme discusses how characters are portrayed as having to undergo identity crises as they face their fears and strive for a better life; thus, characters must often confront their enemies and their fears as they struggle to understand their identities.

At the beginning of *The help* (2011), the film shows Aibileen being interviewed by Skeeter, which is shown again later in the plot. In the scene, Aibileen, who is in the kitchen

doing dishes, describes to Skeeter how she always knew she would be a maid, which is what women have done in her family for generations:

AIBILEEN: I was born 1911, Chickasaw County, Piedmont Plantation.

SKEETER: And did you know as a girl growing up that one day you'd be a maid?

AIBILEEN: Yes, ma'am, I did.

SKEETER: And you knew that because...

AIBILEEN: My mama was a maid. My grandmama was a house slave.

SKEETER: (writing in her notebook) House... slave... Do you ever dream of being something else?

(AIBILEEN, still washing dishes, smiles softly and nods.)

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

In describing her childhood, it becomes clear that servitude runs in Aibileen's family, given that her mother was also a maid and her "grandmama" was a house slave (*The help*, 2011). Though serving runs in Aibileen's family, she shyly admits that she dreams of being something other than a maid. When Skeeter asks Aibileen about what it feels like "to raise a white child when your own child's at home being looked after by somebody else," Aibileen says, "It feels..." and is unable to answer the question. The camera pans to her green wall, where a framed image of a young black man wearing glasses in his graduation cap and gown hangs, while other smaller photos have been tucked into the large frame. As Aibileen looks at the photo, her smile fades and her face appears to express a deep and mournful sorrow. In a serious voice, Aibileen's voiceover says, "I done raised 17 kids in my life. Looking after white babies, that's what I do." In assuming the role of secondary mother in addition to being a maid, Aibileen is tasked with raising numerous white children, with her most recent

assignment being for Elizabeth Leefolt to take care of Mae Mobley in addition to completing “all the cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing and grocery shopping.” With her many tasks, Aibileen mentions her salary, which is “95 cents an hour. That comes to \$182 every month.” Though Aibileen does not complain about working “eight to four, six days a week” and does not comment on her salary, she makes less than a dollar an hour for all the work she does for the Leefolts. Despite her low salary, Aibileen seems to most enjoy getting to spend time with Mae Mobley, who she adores and fiercely protects as if she were her own child. During the big storm that kills 18 people in Jackson, Mae Mobley’s parents are nowhere to be found, and it is Aibileen who comforts and holds the child, who frets as Aibileen holds up a twin mattress against the wall, which is placed at an angle so that she can protect herself and Mae Mobley from harm. As she bounces Mae Mobley on her lap, Mae Mobley distinctly is heard saying, “daddy,” as Aibileen tells her “It’s okay, it’s okay. Aibee’s here, honey. Aibee’s here.” Aibileen kisses the top of Mae Mobley’s head and holds her close, protectively as a mother would for her child, while even in the midst of the storm Mae Mobley is looked after by Aibileen and not her own parents. Though Aibileen expresses to Minny and Skeeter that she lost her son Treelore, who died at age 24, Aibileen acts as mother to Mae Mobley, who tells her, “You’re my real mama, Aibee.” Throughout *The help* (2011), Aibileen is portrayed as maternal toward Mae Mobley in the way she calls her “Baby Girl” and through the affectionate hugs and kisses she her. Aibileen judges Elizabeth’s poor mothering skills and points out that “Miss Leefolt don’t pick Baby Girl up but once a day.” When Aibileen decides to write about Elizabeth in Skeeter’s book, she tells Skeeter, “Miss Leefolt should not be having babies.”



While Aibileen has been a maid for most of her life, nothing prepares her for the day she gets fired by Hilly, who accuses her of stealing “a fork and two spoons” from her silverware and speaks for Elizabeth in choosing to terminate Aibileen’s job working for the Leefolts. At the moment Aibileen is fired, Mae Mobley walks into the room, where Elizabeth, Hilly and Aibileen stand, and she walks straight up to Aibileen, saying, “Aibee, my throat hurts.” This moment is very telling in that Mae Mobley seeks Aibileen for care rather than her own mother, even when given the choice of both. Aibileen immediately offers to “go get some syrup” and makes a move toward the door, while Hilly interjects, “Elizabeth can take care of her own children.” Although Elizabeth is never seen taking care of Mae Mobley’s needs and just had a second child, whom she will likely neglect, Elizabeth optimistically offers, “I’ll go get the cough syrup,” when it is obvious she has never had to make grocery runs for her children before. Even though Aibileen is fired, she does not leave the house without fiercely standing up to Hilly and telling her what she really thinks of her after being silent to Hilly’s insults and scoffing remarks throughout the entire film:

AIBILEEN: (to HILLY) All you do is scare and lie and try to get what you want.

(HILLY, with tears in her eyes, fearfully looks at AIBILEEN.)

ELIZABETH: Aibileen, stop!

AIBILEEN: (ignoring ELIZABETH and shaking her head at HILLY) You a *godless* woman. Ain’t you tired, Miss Hilly? Ain’t you tired?

(AIBILEEN stares looking at HILLY, who quickly leaves the room.)

(ELIZABETH and AIBILEEN are left alone. ELIZABETH holds a bottled drink, not wanting to make eye contact with AIBILEEN, who stares off.)

ELIZABETH: (her eyes quickly flickering up to AIBILEEN and then back down) Aibileen, you have to go now.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

Throughout the scene in which Aibileen is fired, Elizabeth avoids making eye contact with her, especially when Hilly fires her own maid for her. Aibileen confronts Hilly and her lies, asking her, “Ain’t you tired, Miss Hilly?” After Elizabeth finally looks at Aibileen and tells her she needs to leave, Aibileen hesitates as tears continue to form in her eyes and she knows she has to say goodbye to her “Baby Girl.” In a heartbreaking moment, Mae Mobley begs Aibileen, “Don’t go, Aibee,” as Aibileen painstakingly tells her, “I gots to, baby.” As she stands up, crying, Aibileen walks up toward Elizabeth and fiercely tells her, “You give my sweet girl a chance.” Elizabeth, who frowns and bats her eyes, finally makes eye contact with Aibileen as she walks out the door. Once Aibileen walks outside the house, she lets the tears stream down her face as she says, “Mae Mobley was my last baby.” Aibileen’s love for Mae Mobley is so strong that she is truly aggrieved to leave her behind. Screams of “Aibee! Aibee! No!” and Mae Mobley’s pounding on the window are audible as Aibileen tries and fails to walk forward. Clutching her stomach, Aibileen cries, shutting her eyes and breathing heavily as she is unable to walk. As this happens, Aibileen’s voiceover says, “In just ten minutes, the only life I ever knew was done.” Forcing herself to find her strength, Aibileen’s voiceover says, “God says we need to love our enemies. It hard to do. But it can start by telling the truth. No one had ever asked what it felt like to be me. Once I told the truth I felt free.” As she says this, Aibileen wipes away her tears and walks forward into a sunlit path. In her dialogue, Aibileen expresses how “free” she feels after coming to terms with her life and having the courage to write about serving as a maid to white women in Skeeter’s book, *The help*. Walking into the sunlight, Aibileen smiles and thinks of her son, Treelore, when she says, “My boy, Treelore, always said we were going to have a writer in the family one day. I

guess it's gonna be me.” After a long life of taking care of white people's needs and their children, Aibileen is left with the satisfaction in fulfilling her son's words by becoming the writer in her family. As Aibileen reflects on “all the people I know” and “all the things I seen and done” in addition to sharing her story in Skeeter's book, she continues onward, while she seems optimistic in beginning a new chapter of her life in her retirement.

Similar to Aibileen, Minny is fired and loses her job as a maid because of Hilly's false accusations of calling her a thief. However, Minny, unlike Aibileen, is portrayed as a suffering victim of domestic violence in a toxic marriage with Leroy, who we hear but never see. As soon as Minny loses her job, she fears for her life and expresses her fear to Aibileen on the phone: “Oh Lord, Leroy gonna kill me.” As she talks on the phone, Minny worriedly shakes her head from side to side as a door opens and footsteps are heard. Minny nervously lowers the phone and peers around the corner, only to be greeted by an angry and violent Leroy:

MINNY: Leroy?

LEROY: (yelling angrily, off screen) What you done did *now*, Minny?

(Kitchen items fly in MINNY's direction, as she fearfully braces herself against the wall, sliding down it in fear.)

LEROY: (yelling, off screen) Get off that phone, *woman!*

MINNY: (pleadingly) Leroy, *please!*

(More clattering is heard.)

AIBILEEN: (fearfully, listening on the phone) Minny? Minny!

MINNY: (screaming) *Please! Please!*

LEROY: (yelling) *Come here!*

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

Although Leroy is never shown on screen, his impact on Minny's life is ever-present. When Minny loses her job, and her oldest daughter has to work to help support the family, she fears she may never find another job, since Hilly lies and tells "every white woman in town" that Minny is a thief. Aibileen describes the threat of Leroy in Minny's life: "And every day Minny went without a job, might have been a day Leroy took her from our world." As Aibileen describes, the threat of Leroy and the uncertainty of what he might do next to physically or verbally abuse Minny is also what motivates her to try to secure a new job as soon as possible. Fortunately, Aibileen knows "the only white lady Miss Hilly hadn't gotten to with her lies" and helps Minny secure a job working for Celia Foote. In negotiating her hours and her salary, Minny learns that Celia wants to secretly hire her, though Minny fears what Celia's husband, Johnny, will do to her if she is discovered working at his house:

MINNY: Now. What your husband say you can pay?

CELIA: Johnny doesn't know I'm bringing in help.

MINNY: (fiercely, with concern) And what Mr. Johnny gonna do when he come home and find a colored woman in his house?

CELIA: It's not like I'd be fibbing. I just want him to think I can do this on my own. (pleadingly) I really need a maid.

MINNY: (smiling reassuringly) ...I'll be here tomorrow morning about 9:15.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

In Minny expressing her concern for "what Mr. Johnny gonna do" if he finds her in his house, she appears to be afraid of Johnny and fears that he could hurt her, as Leroy does at home. Even though Minny appears to enjoy working for Celia, she constantly fears of being "caught" by Johnny, and she insists that Celia tell her husband about her secret employment. Minny, who believes Johnny might kill her if he sees her, says to Celia, "And look, now, I

ain't messing around no more. Now Mr. Johnny gonna catch me here and shoot me dead right here on this no-wax floor. You gots to tell him." While Johnny is portrayed as friendly and amicable, Minny does not meet him until nearly the end of the film after Celia confides in her that Johnny does not know about her multiple miscarriages. Minny comforts Celia, who cries in bed after losing her third child, as Minny presses a damp towel to Celia's head and neck. In a later scene, Minny is cooking in the kitchen and appears to have a blackened eye, which is bloodied and looks swollen. While Minny took care of Celia at her lowest point, Celia notices Minny's injury and tells her, "That looks bad. Let me take a look." Minny, who looks down at the ground, tries to change the subject, saying, "I got to get these peas on," but Celia continues to walk toward Minny and says, "I know you didn't fall in no tub, Minny." Minny looks at Celia, wide-eyed, knowing she is caught in a fib from earlier in the day and finally sighs, sitting down on a stool in front of her. As she dabs at the wound, Minny winces in pain, as Celia flinches and then looks at Minny head-on when she says, "You know what I'd do if I were you? I'd give it right back to him. I'd hit him over the head with a skillet, and I'd tell him, 'Go straight to hell.'" In caring for Minny, Celia encourages her to fight back against Leroy, to "give it right back to him." Though Minny silently allows Celia to care for her, she appears to listen to Celia's advice when she finally faces both her fear of Johnny and her husband. Toward the end of the film, Minny is shown walking with a large sack of groceries outside of Celia's house. As she walks, a fancy red convertible pulls up behind her, with Johnny in the driver's seat. Minny, who does not turn around, fearfully slows her step as Johnny calls out, "Need some help with those?" As he gets out of the car, and Minny hears the car door slam, she drops everything she is carrying and runs for her life, yelling, "Miss Celia!" as Johnny calls after her, "Minny, hey stop, Minny!" Seeing a large

tree branch on the ground, Minny scoops it up and wields it as a weapon, holding it out defensively in front of her as a sort of barrier between her and Johnny. As they talk, Minny slowly realizes that Johnny already knows about her working for Celia as he reassures Minny that she is in no harm:

MINNY: (flinging the groceries at JOHNNY, picking up a fallen tree branch)  
Stay back!

JOHNNY: I'm not here to hurt you! Girl... (He holds his hands up.) You gonna put the stick down?

MINNY: (shaking her head, still holding the stick defensively) Uh-uh.  
(breathing heavily)

JOHNNY: Listen, Celia finally told me about the babies. All of them. ...But I also know, the minute you started working here, she started getting better. So, you saved her life.

(MINNY's face changes, as she slightly begins to lower the stick.)

MINNY: You knew I was here the whole time?

JOHNNY: (laughing) Fried chicken and okra on the first night? (smirking) I mean, y'all could have at least put some cornpone on the table.

MINNY: No. (throwing the stick down) I couldn't let you eat no more cornpone, Mr. Johnny.

(Taylor, *The help*, 2011)

While Minny feared Johnny throughout the entire film, she comes to realize that he, unlike Leroy, is kind and trustworthy, thus she no longer needs to worry about him as a threat. After helping Minny pick up her fallen belongings, Johnny smiles and briefly places a friendly hand on her back as they walk toward the house to find Celia. As soon as Minny enters the dining room, she comes to find a table filled with all the various dishes that she taught Celia how to cook and asks, "What's this?" Celia proudly tells Minny how she cooked everything by herself, and says, smiling, "I wanted to do something special. I wanted to say thank you."

Minnie nervously asks if she is going to lose her job, but Celia and Johnny tell her she has “a job here for the rest of your life. If you want it.” In a moment of happiness, Minny allows Johnny to pull out her chair for her so she can sit down at the table while Celia dutifully serves her a plate. Aibileen’s voiceover occurs as Minny looks around at the wide spread of food before her: “That table of food gave Minny the strength she needed. She took her babies out from under Leroy and never went back.” By encouraging Minny to overcome being a victim of domestic violence, Celia gives Minny the strength and the means to leave her abusive husband, while she is offered job security from a couple that appreciates her and treats her with the respect and kindness that she deserves.

In *Lee Daniels’ the butler* (2013), Cecil makes the difficult decision as a teenager to leave the cotton plantation in seeking a better life for himself. Cecil describes, “Part of me was scared to leave. It was the only world I ever knew” (*Lee Daniels’ the butler*, 2013). In spending his early life on a cotton plantation, Cecil endures watching his father get shot in front of him and hears his mother’s screams as she is raped by the white plantation owner and is unresponsive for the rest of his childhood. In facing such a terrible loss at such a young age, Cecil struggles on his own after he leaves the plantation, saying, “I don’t think God meant for people to not have a family.” Though Cecil struggles initially with hunger and cannot find work, he secures a job working at a hotel for Maynard, who teaches him “fancy words” and how to make white people feel “non-threatened,” which he says is key “to get up in the world.” In learning how to anticipate what people want to hear and mastering the “two faces” butlers wear, Cecil becomes popular with the white people he serves by always knowing what to say to hotel guests, like Mr. Jenkins, at The Excelsior hotel:

MR. JENKINS: Cecil, what do you think about niggers going to school with white children?

CECIL: (smiling politely) To be honest with you, Mr. Jenkins, I tend to not be too concerned with American or European politics.

MR. JENKINS: (chuckling) Nor should you, Cecil. They're all criminals. Earl Warren should be shot and hanged. That dumb son-of-a-bitch judge is trying to integrate our schools.

CECIL: (smiling) I think Judge Warren is going to find that quite challenging.

MR. JENKINS: (smiling, patting CECIL on the arm) Damn right, Cecil. Damn right.

(Daniels, *Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013)

As Cecil serves spirits to Mr. Jenkins and a small group of gentlemen, they ask for his political opinion, after using racial slurs against African Americans, though Cecil manages to maintain his smile and politeness throughout their conversation. While Cecil is serving Mr. Jenkins, R.D. Warner, who “oversees operations for the entire White House,” watches closely and is impressed with him, especially in how he converses with the white men he serves. Shortly after this scene, Cecil receives a call and is interviewed by Mr. Fallows, a black man who appears to be around his age who assists Mr. Warner with making note of “potential staff” around Washington, D.C. Even during his interview, Cecil impresses Mr. Fallows, who appears to be amazed by his ability to always know the right thing to say:

CECIL: I know I was quite surprised when I got the call.

MR. FALLOWS: It was a surprise for me as well. As the White House maître d', normally hire the butlers.

CECIL: Forgive me for saying this, Mr. Fallows. I certainly wouldn't want to be hired under circumstances that would make you feel uncomfortable.

MR. FALLOWS: Oh, really?

CECIL: You need butlers that you've handpicked, men to your liking that will fulfill your vision of a proper White House staff.



MR. FALLOWS: Hmm.

CECIL: (interestedly smiling, noticing an ornate bottle of alcohol) Is that... Louis XIII? These decanters are replicas of metal flasks that were found on the battlefield in Jarnac. Correct? The Italians, they know their wines, and the Irish, they certainly know how to make a great whiskey. But I believe the French have a *distinct* advantage when it comes to Cognac. *C'est vrai?*

MR. FALLOWS: Oh yeah, you'll make a good house nigger. Would you care for a demitasse?

(Daniels, *Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013)

Even as he is interviewed by Mr. Fallows, Cecil's ability to dazzle those he serves with his knowledge and "uppity" language impresses Mr. Fallows, who tells him he would "make a good house nigger." Cecil's smile fades as he hears the term "house nigger" rather than "butler," but he does not hesitate in accepting his new job at the White House. While Cecil's wife Gloria could not be more proud of his new job, Cecil tells his son Louis why he left the South as a teenager: "I got out of there so we could have us a better life. Right now, I'm working for the white man, make things better for us. And not just any white man either." Cecil's job at the White House is impressive to everyone but Louis, who is ashamed of his father's job serving white men, even if it is serving the United States' presidents. In a conversation with Martin Luther King, who asks Louis about Cecil's profession, he suggests:

The black domestic defy racial stereotypes by being hardworking and trustworthy. He slowly tears down racial hatred with his example of a strong work ethic and dignified character. Now, while we perceive the butler or the maid to be subservient, in many ways, they are subversive, without even knowing it. (Daniels, *Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013)

As King talks, the camera pans to butlers working hard at the White House, Cecil holding out a chair for President Johnson's wife, a black chef sanitizing the kitchen counter, and

Cecil polishing silverware. King suggests that even though Cecil is a butler, he is portrayed as trustworthy and hardworking, while being “subversive, without even knowing it.”

Throughout his career as a butler, Cecil is portrayed as subversive in that he courageously asks Mr. Warner about providing equal salaries for black staff: “Since the colored...the black staff does as much work as the white staff, I believe that our salaries should reflect our service, sir... I also feel that we should have...opportunities of advancement.” During Cecil’s first encounter with asking Mr. Warner for higher wages and job advancement opportunities, he is thoroughly ignored. Mr. Warner hardly provides him with any eye contact and appears displeased during Cecil’s inquiry, even scoffing at the term “black staff” rather than “colored.” He firmly dismisses Cecil, telling him, “You’re very well liked, Cecil. But if you’re unhappy with your salary or position, then I suggest you seek employment elsewhere.” Mr. Warner then proceeds to immediately ignore him and begins reading his newspaper. While Cecil is polite and hesitant during this conversation, he tries to continue talking to Mr. Warner, despite being ignored. Cecil says, “With all due respect...” and is cut off by Mr. Warner, who tells him, “Don’t let that Martin Luther King shit fill your britches out. Just remember where I found you.” Clearly, Mr. Warner does not care that Cecil and the other black staff are not receiving equal pay to white staff. He insults Cecil and says, “remember where I found you,” however, Cecil appeared perfectly happy working at The Excelsior and speaks of it fondly. Thus, Mr. Warner’s argument is invalid in that he suggests that Cecil was “found” by him, though Cecil “never dreamed” his life “could be so good” even before joining the White House staff. Upon being denied a higher salary, Cecil drives home during the aftermath in which the public learns of Martin Luther King’s assassination. He drives at night and watches as young black men break a store window, which explodes

behind him as he drives, causing a cloud of smoke. As he drives through the haze, Cecil is forced to stop and look at the scene of chaos before him. Unable to drive forward, he leaves his vehicle and walks among the crowd of people who are alternately crying or rioting in the streets to express their anguish or anger as they mourn the death of Martin Luther King, “the apostle of nonviolence in the civil rights movement.” Although Cecil overhears several conversations about civil rights issues as he serves a number of presidents, he finally confronts the world outside the White House and describes feeling displaced and confused with his own identity: “It was the first time I felt like I didn’t belong in my own neighborhood. The whole world was changing and I didn’t know where I fit in.” Cecil expresses not knowing where he fits into the changing world around him, which expresses his feelings of uncertainty, especially being a butler during times of great change and eventual progress for the civil rights movement. Following his feelings of displacement, Cecil is portrayed as unsmiling and weathered, as his aging becomes most evident. He waits nearly 20 years, during the Reagan Administration, to confront Mr. Warner again about seeking higher wages and advancement opportunities for the black staff. Even though the year is now roughly 1986, Cecil expresses to Mr. Warner, who continues to try and ignore him, that financial inequality between the black and white staff still persists:

CECIL: (seriously) I’ve been here for over 20 years now. For all that time, the *black* help has been paid a smaller salary than the white help. And I just don’t think that’s right, Mr. Warner.

(The camera pans to MR. WARNER, who continues to work and not meet CECIL’s eye contact.)

CECIL: There are black housemen who should be engineers by now. They should have been promoted *years* ago.

MR. WARNER: (appearing irritated) You think so?

CECIL: I'm gonna have to be paid... the same... as the white help, ... or I'm gonna have to move on.

MR. WARNER: (smugly) I guess you'll be moving on then.

(MR. WARNER immediately averts his eyes back down to his work.)

CECIL: (nodding) I told the president that you'd say that. He told me to tell you to take this up with him, *personally*.

(The camera pans to MR. WARNER, who stares at CECIL in disbelief.)

CECIL: Excuse me.

(Daniels, *Lee Daniels' the butler*, 2013)

As soon as Cecil turns to leave Mr. Warner's office, a triumphant orchestral fanfare plays, symbolizing how Cecil has finally stood his ground and received presidential support in asking for higher wages and equal opportunities for both black and white workers. Mr. Warner, who is quick to dismiss him, freezes when Cecil tells him to "take this up" with the president "personally" and is shown staring after Cecil as he leaves. This scene, in comparison to Cecil's earlier attempt to fight for equality in the workplace, shows how Cecil grows into a stronger, less overly polite butler. Instead of adding formalities, such as "sir" or "with all due respect," as with his earlier attempt, Cecil is straightforward with Mr. Warner and is portrayed as a force to be reckoned with. After his encounter with Mr. Warner, Cecil's popularity grows among the staff, as Nancy Reagan tells him, "You're very popular around here. Everyone says you're the man that got them the raises and promotions." After Cecil and Gloria are invited by the Reagans to attend the State Dinner as guests, Cecil describes getting "all confused" and describes his change of heart toward his job: "I had always loved serving but just felt different now. I didn't know an old man could feel so lost. That's how I felt." In feeling "lost" and being portrayed as no longer enjoying the job he used to love, Cecil resigns

from his post and tells Reagan of the “honor” it was serving him. Reagan is kind to Cecil and rests a hand on his arm as he says, “...I’m sure I speak for all the presidents when I say that you’ve served your country well.” By the end of the film, Cecil and Louis share an emotional moment as they watch on TV as Barack Obama is elected president. After so many years of Cecil subversively fighting for equal job opportunities for black staff and with Louis being involved in civil rights activism in various forms of protests, seeing Obama become president is meaningful to both men after overcoming instances of racial hatred and violence throughout their lives. Cecil cries and is comforted by Louis, who leans behind him on the couch and hugs him, as Obama says, “If there is anyone out there who still doubts America is a place where all things are possible...who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.” In this moment, Cecil is overcome with joy in seeing a black president transcend against all odds to become leader of the United States, as Cecil finds the desire within himself to return to the White House by the end of the film in order to meet with the president. While it is unclear whether Cecil intends to return to the White House to serve as a butler, he is shown walking down the long entrance hall as the voices of Kennedy, Johnson and Obama echo moments of progress in the civil rights movement, leading up to Obama’s presidency. As Cecil turns the corner, the screen fades to black, as a message reads, “THIS FILM IS DEDICATED TO THE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN WHO FOUGHT FOR OUR FREEDOM IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT.” Thus, by the end of the plot, Cecil is considered as one of the “brave men” who fought and secured his freedom and ultimately fulfills his dream of securing a good life for him and his family.

In comparison to other lead characters, Gamora also faces the struggle to secure a better life for herself in seeking the Orb in *Guardians of the galaxy* (2014). After facing the horrors of Thanos slaughtering her parents and destroying her planet, Gamora stands alone as the last living Zehoeerd woman. She is adopted by the same ego-maniac that caused her solitude, though she only pretends to be loyal to him and Ronan, who believes the people of Xandar and their culture “are a disease,” which he will “cure” after wiping them off the face of the earth (*Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014). Gamora listens as Ronan describes, “I promised Thanos I would retrieve the Orb for him. Only then will he destroy Xandar for me.” Though Ronan initially tells Gamora’s sister Nebula to go to Xandar to retrieve the Orb, Gamora suggests that she is a better fit for the task, saying, “But I know Xandar.” Ronan stands by Gamora and tells her, “You will not fail,” as Gamora replies, “Have I ever?” Trained as an assassin, Gamora is equipped with Ronan’s blessing and her impressive combat skills when she goes to Xandar to find the Orb. However, after attempting and failing to take the Orb from Quill, she later reveals how she never intended to bring the Orb to Ronan, which she tells Quill: “I wasn’t retrieving the Orb for Ronan. I was betraying him. I had an agreement to sell it to a third party.” By betraying Ronan and Thanos, whom she does not consider as family, Gamora bravely attempts to secure a better life for herself by selling the Orb to a third party buyer. After being imprisoned with the other Guardians and being sent to the Klyn, a high security prison, Gamora reveals her buyer is willing to pay four billion units for the Orb, which she says is her “opportunity to get away from Thanos and Ronan.” Thus, by selling the Orb, Gamora intends to alienate herself from the men who destroyed her family and her planet by financially having the means to extract herself from Thanos and Ronan’s clutches. She also promises Rocket and Quill a cut of the profit, saying, “If you free us, I’ll

lead you to the buyer directly and I'll split the profit between the three of us." As soon as Gamora reaches her buyer and leads the other Guardians to the city of Knowhere, Tivan, the collector, opens the Orb to reveal that it contains a powerful Infinity Stone, which can be used to "mow down entire civilizations like wheat in a field." In discovering this information, and being exposed to the Stone's power, Gamora insists that the Stone must be turned in to the Nova Corps, since there is "a chance they can contain it." Though Rocket argues against it, Gamora tells Quill, "We *cannot* allow the Stone to fall into Ronan's hands. We have to go back to your ship and deliver it to Nova." In Gamora's concern for what could happen if Ronan possesses the Stone, she takes into consideration the devastating effects of the Stone's power, whereas Quill and Rocket cannot think past the Stone's financial value. In her anger, Gamora manages to take the Orb, with intentions of giving it to the Nova Corps, even if it goes against her previous desire to sell it in order to escape Thanos and Ronan. When Ronan and Nebula arrive in search of the Orb, Gamora steals a small pod, which she attempts to fly out of Knowhere and nearly dies trying to escape with the Orb as Nebula attempts to kill her in order to retrieve it for Ronan:

GAMORA: (on the radio) Quill, I'm trapped. I can't make it to the *Milano*. I have to head out.

QUILL: (on the radio) Wait! These things aren't meant to go out there.

NEBULA: (on the radio) You are a disappointment, sister. Of all our siblings, I hated you least.

GAMORA: Nebula, please. If Ronan gets this stone, *he'll kill us all*.

NEBULA: (locking a target on GAMORA's pod) Not all.

(The camera pans to GAMORA, who is surrounded by enemy ships.)

NEBULA: (with satisfaction) You will already be dead.

(NEBULA presses a button and launches missiles at GAMORA's pod, which explodes. In slow motion, GAMORA flies forward out of the pod, thrown by the blasts. She appears to be dying as her body floats, suspended in space.)

(A beam of light shines down from NEBULA's ship and retrieves the Orb, as she takes it and zooms away.)

NEBULA: (off screen) Ronan, it is done.

(Gunn, *Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014)

In this scene, Gamora bravely tries to escape from Nebula and enemy ships that surround her and follow her as she flies out into space. As Quill points out, Gamora's pod was never meant to leave Knowhere and is not built for flying long-term, though she still tries to keep the Orb away from Ronan and Nebula. Though she fails, and Nebula tries to kill her, Gamora is saved by Quill, who sacrifices his own air supply by allowing Gamora to use his space helmet device, which provides oxygen, and ensures they will be saved when he contacts Yondu, who has been searching for Quill and has a 40,000-unit bounty on him, which is highly valuable. If Quill had not saved Gamora, she would have died trying to save the Orb and facing her enemies. As soon as Gamora regains consciousness on Yondu's ship, she fears of Ronan's plan to use the Orb to "wipe out Xandar," and worries that "billions of people will perish." Thus, instead of only thinking of herself and wanting to escape her enemies, Gamora commits herself to saving Xandar and thinks of saving billions of lives beside her own in convincing the other Guardians, "We have to stop Ronan." As Gamora commits to fighting her enemies, she must also fight against Nebula, her adopted sister. In an intense combat with Nebula, which occurs as the Guardians fight off Ronan's men while aboard his ship, Gamora kicks Nebula through an open part of the ship, as Nebula uses her robotic hand to stab into the ship's side to prevent herself from falling. As Nebula dangles from the ship, Gamora pleads her to join her in fighting against Ronan:



GAMORA: (reaching down for NEBULA) Nebula! Sister, help us fight Ronan. You know he's crazy!

(NEBULA angrily whips her head up to look at GAMORA.)

NEBULA: (angrily) I know you're *both* crazy.

(NEBULA swings at her arm, detaching herself from the wall.)

GAMORA: (screaming as NEBULA falls) No!

(Gunn, *Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014)

Although Gamora is committed to fighting against Ronan, Nebula's alliance to Ronan rather than Gamora is confirmed as Nebula chooses to detach her robotic hand from Ronan's ship rather than allow Gamora to pull her up. Nebula chooses Ronan over Gamora throughout the film, though she calls both he and Gamora crazy, and leaves Gamora to fight Ronan with the other Guardians of the Galaxy. Even though Gamora does not directly engage Ronan in combat, she joins Quill in harnessing the power of the Infinity Stone as its power is released. By joining hands with Quill, Drax, and Rocket, Gamora and the Guardians stand as a united front in stopping Ronan as they manage to use the power of the Stone to destroy Ronan, who disintegrates into nothing. Together, Gamora and Quill enclose the Infinity Stone into the Orb, which they safely return to the Nova Corps. In helping destroy Ronan, Gamora frees herself from one of her two enemies, since Thanos is not yet destroyed. In joining the Guardians of the Galaxy, Gamora finds that her newfound friendships are worth "dying for" as she commits herself to fighting her foes alongside her new companions.

Unlike other leads, Finn is the only character who does not specifically make any reference to his finances during *Star wars: The force awakens* (2015). Instead of worrying about his finances, Finn expresses an ongoing fear of the First Order as well as Kylo Ren and is portrayed as being worrisome and quick to startle due to his fears throughout the film. For

instance, when Finn and Rey are flying the *Millennium Falcon*, there is a moment when the ship's power drains and they are surrounded in darkness, all but for a red light that shines down on them. In seeing what he believes to be Kylo Ren's ship, Finn immediately assumes the First Order has found him:

FINN: That can't be good.

REY: No, it can't be.

(FINN and REY run to the front of the ship as REY worriedly flicks switches.)

REY: Someone's locked onto us. All controls are overridden.

(A dull clamoring from the roof of the ship is heard. FINN and REY look upward in fear.)

(FINN stands up on his seat, putting his hand on REY's shoulder and then her head, as he uses her as a step stool to listen to the ceiling.)

REY: Get off! Get off!

(FINN looks up, standing and peering out as a large ship passes overhead. He pants, looking afraid.)

REY: See anything?

FINN: Oh no.

(The camera pans to the *Millennium Falcon* being taken inside of a much larger ship. Red light shines from within it and ominous music plays.)

(The camera pans to FINN sitting back down in his chair, panting.)

FINN: It's the First Order.

(Abrams, *Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015)

Though Finn has no concrete evidence that the First Order has locked onto their ship, his fear of the First Order leads him to believe that they have been found. As Rey fails to bring the ship back to life, saying the controls are "overridden," Finn can hardly breathe and begins

panting in fear, as he does in several other moments of anxiety (*Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015). In a later scene when Finn sits at a table with Rey, Han Solo, Chewie and Maz, who runs a watering hole on a different planet, Finn discusses his fear of the First Order's power when he says, "There is no fight against the First Order. Not one we can win." Finn indirectly describes himself as prey when he speaks of the First Order, telling Rey, "They're hunting for us now. We've gotta get out of this system!" Despite Finn's fear of the First Order, he uses his fear as motivation to escape them at all costs. In seeking a better life for himself, Finn is quick to pretend he is part of the Resistance, clinging to his new identity "Finn" rather than continuing life fighting for the First Order as FN-2187, and he convinces Rey that he is a Resistance fighter:

REY: (interestedly) So you're with the Resistance?

FINN: (nodding) Obviously. (scrambling quickly to his feet) Yes, I am. I'm with the Resistance, yeah. (whispering) I am with the Resistance.

REY: (smiling) I've never met a Resistance fighter before.

FINN: Well, this is what we look like. Some of us. Others look different.

(Abrams, *Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015)

While Finn easily convinces Rey he is a Resistance fighter, he appears motivated to please Rey, who smiles at him in awe when she asks if he is with the Resistance. Finn, who seems enchanted by Rey, scrambles to his feet and tells her what she wants to hear, as Rey truly believes Finn, who has been a Stormtrooper his entire life. Despite Finn's early fib to Rey, he eventually tells her the truth about his past in a later scene when he says, "I'm not who you think I am. I'm not Resistance. I'm not a hero. I'm a Stormtrooper... But my first battle, I made a choice. I wasn't gonna kill for them. So I ran. Right into you. And you looked at me like no one ever had." In explaining his true identity, Finn explains the effect Rey had on him

upon their first meeting when he says she looked at him “like no one ever had.” Since Finn was taken from his family before he ever knew them, it is likely he never had any sort of affectionate relationships in that way that he has with Rey. He also tells her, “I was ashamed of what I was. But I am *done* with the First Order. I’m never going back.” In renouncing the First Order, Finn commits himself to fighting alongside the Resistance, even though his fear continues to paralyze him. In a conversation with Maz, Finn is framed as “a man who wants to run,” which angers him, though it is true. Finn defensively tells Maz, “You don’t know a thing about me. Where I’m from. What I’ve seen. You don’t know the First Order like I do. They’ll slaughter us. We all need to run.” While Maz indirectly calls Finn a coward, Finn expresses the malevolence of the First Order and suggests that they all should run and escape the First Order instead of facing them and fighting them. Finn hints at the horrors he has seen and fears how the First Order will “slaughter” him and the other characters, again referring to himself as prey to his enemies. Regardless of his fear of the First Order, Finn becomes motivated to confront his fears and fight against Kylo Ren when Rey is taken prisoner. Finn lies to the Resistance about the extent of his knowledge of the enemy’s weapon and convinces Han Solo and Chewie that he can lower the enemy’s shields for the Resistance fighters, saying, “but I have to be there. On the planet.” Since Finn is not a pilot, he relies on Han Solo and Chewie to get him there; however, upon arriving at the First Order’s base, Finn reveals he actually has no idea how to shut down the enemy’s shields, which angers his companions:

HAN SOLO: What was your job when you were based here?

FINN: Sanitation.

(HAN SOLO, angrily looking at FINN, grabs his shoulders and slams him into the wall to look at him. FINN frowns, looking at him.)

HAN SOLO: (angrily) Sanitation?! Then how do you know how to disable the shields?

FINN: I don't. (with guilt) I'm just here to get Rey.

HAN SOLO: People are counting on us. The *galaxy* is counting on us.

FINN: (confidently) Solo, we'll figure it out. We'll use the Force.

HAN SOLO: (exasperated) That's not how the Force works!

(Abrams, *Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015)

As Finn reveals, he worked in sanitation while he was a Stormtrooper, which could explain his poor combat skills throughout the film. Finn does not seem to be above lying in order to get what he wants, which in this case was to find Rey and save her from Kylo Ren's clutches. Upon locating Rey, Finn and Rey share an intimate hug after BB-8 chirps and tells her that finding her was Finn's idea. Rey, who becomes overwhelmed with emotion, tells Finn, "Thank you," as they proceed to hug tightly. Finn smiles, patting Rey's neck and holding her closely as she leans into him. Han Solo interrupts their hug, reminding them, "Escape now, hug later." In striving for a better life, Finn never anticipates his friendship with Rey, which comes across as a blooming romance. After leading the mission to save Rey, Finn's bond with her only grows stronger, and he stays by her side until the end of the film. When Rey and Finn escape the First Order's base, they run into a snowy forest and encounter Kylo Ren, who greets them with his glowing red lightsaber. He taunts them, saying, "It's just us now. Han Solo can't save you," which causes Rey to angrily react and rush forward to attack him. Kylo Ren uses his powers to launch Rey up and into a tree, which knocks her unconsciously to the ground. Finn, who watches helplessly from the sidelines, screams, "Rey!" and rushes to her aid, throwing his lightsaber into the snow as he forgets everything and crouches down

to cradle Rey in his arms. As he holds Rey, Finn says, “Rey. Rey, Rey. Oh, no. No, no. Rey,” repeating her name and holding her face to look at her. As he tends to Rey, Kylo Ren screams, “Traitor!” as Finn frowns and retrieves his lightsaber, brushing snow off of it and activating its bright blue hue. In this way, Rey being unconscious and unable to fight Kylo Ren indirectly forces Finn face to face his fears and battle his enemy, since there is no one to save him but himself. Finn holds the lightsaber like a baseball bat rather than a sword, as Kylo Ren does, and his inexperience in combat becomes even more evident due to Kylo Ren’s lightsaber training. During their fight, Finn haphazardly swings his lightsaber toward Kylo Ren and is ineffective in striking him during most of their battle. Finn is knocked to the ground and pinned against a large tree, as Kylo Ren burns his lightsaber into Finn’s shoulder as he screams in pain. Finn’s screams jar Rey awake, though her vision is blurry and she is unable to stand up to try and defend Finn. As Kylo Ren releases Finn from the tree, Finn manages to burn Kylo Ren’s shoulder, singeing the fabric of his clothing. Grunting in pain, Kylo Ren attacks Finn and disarms him of his lightsaber, which flies off into the snow. Finn, weaponless, is unable to defend himself as Kylo Ren punches him and then burns his lightsaber up his spine, causing Finn to fall to the ground, groaning in pain. Due to the severity of his pain, Finn falls face first into the snow and is unconscious for the remainder of his screen time. Finn may have fought bravely, but he still is defeated by Kylo Ren, who Rey defeats in battle shortly after Finn is knocked unconscious. She then rushes to Finn’s aid, rolling him over to look down at his bloodied face, yelling, “Finn! Finn. Finn.” Rey’s hands linger on Finn’s chest as she cries, falling down upon his body in grief. Fortunately for Finn, Chewie manages to carry him aboard the *Millennium Falcon* and Finn receives the medical attention he needs. Before the film’s end, Rey visits Finn one last time before she leaves to

find Luke Skywalker. She tells Finn, “We’ll see each other again. I believe that,” as she kneels down and kisses him on the forehead. She says, “Thank you, my friend” and lingers, staring down at him, as she leaves the room. This suggests, for the sequel, that Finn will return, though it is unfortunate that he spends his last few scenes being unconscious. Though Finn is not awake for his last scene in *Star wars: The force awakens* (2015), Finn fulfills his desire to leave the First Order and fights for the Resistance, even if it nearly kills him.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

In my findings, I discussed four overarching themes shared among lead characters portrayed by black and mixed-black men and women, including themes of having a broken or absent family; servitude or subordination to often white or non-human characters; being associated with criminality and/or weaponry; and, lastly, facing one's fears and striving for a better life, which often involves overcoming one's financial and/or class struggles. One underlying theme that transcends all genres and resonates deeply with every character played by black and mixed-black actors/actresses is the ongoing struggle to assert or understand one's identity. Moreover, the four themes discussed in my findings are all common traits associated with the black experience and with the larger theme of struggling to understand one's identity.

In my analysis, I found Bogle's six prevalent representations of African Americans to be incomplete, if not inaccurate, descriptions for the five lead characters I examined. In Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* (2001), he describes the main thesis of his book, where he says, "many black actors...have played—at some time or another—stereotyped roles. But the essence of black film history is not found in the stereotyped role but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype" (p. xxii). With this in mind, Bogle's categories stem from his interest in seeing how black men and women are portrayed in stereotyped roles and also how they surpass those stereotypes. In understanding Bogle's six categories—including the "Tom," "Coon," "Bad Buck," "Mammy," "Tragic Mulatto," and "Buddy/Sidekick"—I found that both Aibileen and Minny challenge the "Mammy"



figure and Cecil challenges the “Tom” as Gamora and Finn appear to fit into Bogle’s “Buddy/Sidekick” category, while Gamora additionally possesses traits for the “Tragic Mulatto” category. I did not, however, examine characters portraying traits of the “Bad Buck” or the “Coon” categories.

While Bogle’s “Mammy” figure is described as a “loud, argumentative, usually large, black woman,” who is “often devoted more to her white boss’ family than her own family,” neither Aibileen nor Minny appear to fit this category completely (Luther et al., 2012, p. 58). While Minny is often outspoken, which tends to get her in trouble, and is portrayed as slightly heavy-set in comparison to Aibileen, Minny challenges Bogle’s “Mammy” figure by failing to meet the “devotion” that is more so to her boss’ white family than her own. Minny fiercely adores her children and worries for their well-being, and she is never shown taking care of children that are not her own. Minny briefly is shown taking care of Mrs. Walters, an older white woman who suffers from dementia, and Celia Foote, whom she mostly teaches how to cook in addition to maintaining her home. In contrast to Minny, Aibileen begins *The help* (2011) living alone since her son was killed. Aibileen seeks affection from Minny, her best friend, and is portrayed as a secondary mother to Mae Mobley, the white child of Elizabeth Leefolt, for whom Aibileen works. In Aibileen’s case, she also does not completely fit into Bogle’s “Mammy” category, since she is not “loud, argumentative” or “large,” as Bogle says is indicative of the “Mammy figure.” Her circumstances leave her in charge of caring for Mae Mobley, though she is being paid to do so as a maid.

Bogle’s category of the “Tom” reflects a “kind-hearted and submissive black man” who is “well liked and willing to endure white domination,” and this appears to describe the first half of Cecil’s career as a butler (Luther et al., 2012, p. 58). Cecil especially displays

characteristics of the “Tom” in the way that he seeks to please the white people he serves, though he is motivated by his desire to secure a better life for his family by making white people feel “non-threatened” in order to “get up in the world” (*Lee Daniels’ the butler*, 2013). Bogle might argue that Cecil is “willing to endure white domination” in his job as a butler, which is evident in the way Cecil is eager to please white hotel guests and the white presidents he serves over the years. Once Cecil begins working at the White House, and Louis becomes involved in civil rights activism, Cecil eventually fights for equal wages and job advancement opportunities and gains the support of President Ronald Reagan in requesting equal treatment of black and white workers. Cecil enjoys serving for most of the film despite knowing of the racially segregated world he lives in. However, after serving during the civil rights movement and seeing how change is slowly but surely happening, Cecil is portrayed as feeling displaced and uncertain of being a butler in a changing sociopolitical landscape. Ultimately, Cecil exhibits traits of the “Tom,” and even refers to himself as “Uncle Tom” once during a phone call with Louis, who mocks him and calls him “Mr. Butler” during a heated argument over dinner. Cecil retires from his job as a butler, choosing to serve his own needs by restoring his relationship with Louis, and overcomes “white domination,” as Bogle says the “Tom” endures.

In accordance with Bogle’s “Buddy/Sidekick,” a stereotypical character “basically present to support the main white character” and “often put in positions of saving his (or her) white buddy,” Finn and Gamora both possess traits that challenge this category (Luther et al., 2012, p. 58). For instance, Finn is often the character being saved by other white characters and is prone to falling, becoming unconscious and failing to defeat his enemies in combat. Finn appears to be a sidekick to Poe Dameron, Rey, and Han Solo, since all give him orders

at some point, which he follows. For instance, Finn helps Poe escape from the First Order, but as soon as they are in their escape ship, Poe is the one that gives the orders for Finn to work the gunner's position and even calls him "buddy" when they are reunited later in the film (*Star wars: The force awakens*, 2015). Rey is the second character to give Finn orders after he escapes the First Order, though she is also portrayed as Finn's romantic interest. Due to his desire to please Rey and win her affection, Finn convinces her that he is with the Resistance and initially tries to help her by holding her hand when they are chased by Stormtroopers. However, Rey becomes irritated and suggests she can run faster without him holding her hand. Finn and Rey often save each other from harm, though Finn appears to be more of the damsel in distress because he is saved by Rey more times than he indirectly helps to save her. Han Solo calls Finn "kid" and often questions Finn's ability to lead others, especially when he tries to form a plan to find Rey, whom Han Solo locates before Finn has the chance to find her. With this in mind, Finn is almost the opposite of what Bogle deems to be the "Buddy/Sidekick" in that he is more of a liability as one needing saving and by getting frequently injured or in danger rather than helping to save white characters due to his inexperience in combat and his paralyzing and ongoing fear of the First Order. Also challenging the "Buddy/Sidekick" category, Gamora is shown more at odds with her "white buddy" Quill, as they do not begin *Guardians of the galaxy* (2014) as friends but rather as enemies. Gamora tries to kill Quill in order to retrieve the Orb, and she is only put in the position to save Quill toward the end of the film. She helps Quill harness the power of the Infinity Stone by taking his hand, and sharing the pain, along with Rocket and Drax, who also help with the task. Gamora does become part of the Guardians of the Galaxy, but she is trained as a "warrior and assassin" who can defend herself and win battles against her rivals,

unlike Finn (*Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014). Even though Gamora joins the Guardians in helping to defeat Ronan, she is also put in positions where she needs saving by white and non-human characters, where Quill is typically the one to save her from harm. For instance, when Gamora is held at knifepoint by the other prisoners of the Klyn and also held by the throat by an angry Drax, Quill is the one who convinces Drax to let her live. In a later scene, when Nebula blows up Gamora's pod in order to retrieve the Orb for Ronan, Gamora is thrown from her exploding ship and appears as lifelessly floating through space. Despite Rocket insisting that Quill could die saving Gamora, he risks his life to save her and turns himself in to Yondu, who has been searching for Quill, and succeeds in bringing her to safety. Thus, while Gamora only has to save Quill once, he saves her multiple times throughout the film, despite her ability to defend herself in combat.

In analyzing how lead character played by blacks and mixed-blacks understand their identities, I found it significant that none of the five leads I examined are perfect fits for Bogle's six prevalent representations of African Americans in film. Though Bogle's work (2001) spanned from the early 1900s to the 1990s, I found that the lead characters I examined are far more complex than Bogle's reductive categories account for. While Bogle (2001) was interested in seeing how characters challenged his categories, my work suggests that attempting to categorize contemporary lead characters played by blacks and mixed-blacks could limit researchers' understanding of these characters outside of existing stereotypes, such as the six outlined by Bogle. Rather, by taking an inductive approach, my analysis discarded the historical categorization of lead characters played by blacks and mixed blacks by using a grounded approach to understand each character in terms of their identity. My work builds on the work that has been done by Bogle (2001); however, it identifies key

issues with Bogle's categories and complicates our understanding of how lead characters played by blacks and mixed blacks are portrayed, especially in the way that these characters are shown confronting and challenging historical stereotypes on screen.

Given the research that has been done on portrayals of black and mixed-black women in film, I expected to see more portrayals of exoticized and sexualized black women. However, neither Aibileen (Viola Davis) nor Minny (Octavia Spencer) in *The help* (2011) are shown in romantic or sexualized situations. Minny suffers from domestic violence in her marriage to Leroy, while Aibileen is portrayed as unmarried and living alone as she endures the pain of losing her only son. Gamora, who is played by a mixed-black woman (Zoë Saldana), is portrayed as sexy and mysterious, being the only green-skinned woman left of her Zehoreed people. One could argue that Gamora reflects characteristics of Bogle's "Tragic Mulatto" category by being portrayed as "exotic and sexually attractive, especially to white men," specifically in her interactions with Peter Quill, Star-Lord (Missouri, 2015, p. 6; Luther et al., 2012, p. 58). According to Bogle's category, mulatto females are often attempting to pass for whites all while searching for acceptance (Missouri, 2015, p. 6; Luther et al., 2012, p. 58). However, Gamora does not need to "pass" as white, unlike Bogle's "Tragic Mulatto" woman, in searching for acceptance, since all of the Guardians of the Galaxy come from different worlds and species. In her first scene with Quill, Gamora immediately catches his attention and is shown several times in compromising circumstances, where the camera angles often make it look like she is on top of or underneath Quill's body. For instance, in a fight with Quill, the camera shows Gamora and Quill lying next to each other on the ground as punches and kicks fly. She manages to roll on top of him, lingering above him before she attempts to kill him, though she is knocked out of the way by Rocket and Groot. In a later

scene, upon being saved by Quill, Gamora and Quill are thrown onto Yondu's ship, while Quill is portrayed landing on top of Gamora between her legs as he caresses her face. Even when he saves Gamora, the camera angles show her body in fractionalized images, panning to her chest, buttocks and face alternately. This fractionalization occurs again toward the end of the film when the five Guardians of the Galaxy, including Gamora, are talking in a circle. While the men are shown fully in view, the camera often cuts off Gamora's head in the shot, instead focusing on her body. Gamora is portrayed as sultry and attractive, while there are several other shots of her and Quill that are questionable and sexual in nature. For instance, in the first scene that Gamora meets Quill, she is shown perched against the wall of the collector's shop in Xandar as she sucks and slurps at something she is shown eating. Quill, who first hears her slurping, turns to see her and is wide-eyed and gape-mouthed as he simply stares at her, lost for words. Gamora tells him, "You have the bearing of a man of honor," and approaches him, distracting him enough that she initially takes the Orb from Quill as he playfully and distractedly tosses it in the air while talking to Gamora. Whereas this scene is the first scene where Gamora is portrayed as sultry and hypersexualized, I found one of the most sexualized scenes with Gamora occurs when she and Quill are standing looking over the railing as they wait for Gamora's buyer to examine the Orb in Knowhere. As Quill and Gamora discuss their pasts, Gamora reaches down toward Quill's waistband, where he has attached his Walkman. As Gamora reaches down to detach Quill's Walkman from his waistband, the camera lingers and pans to only Gamora's hands touching Quill's waistband, thus sexualizing and prolonging the moment in which her hands are near his genitals. As they continue talking, the upturned curl of Gamora's eyelashes is noticeable from the side as she leans in closer toward Quill, who leans in toward her. While the moment

is intimate and overtly sexualized, Gamora ultimately stops Quill just before he kisses her and withdraws her knife, saying, "...I am not some starry-eyed waif here to succumb to your...your...pelvic sorcery!" (*Guardians of the galaxy*, 2014). Even though Gamora and Quill never express feelings for one another, the camera angles suggest and imply their potential for becoming a romantic duo in the upcoming sequel to *Guardians of the galaxy*, titled *Guardians of the galaxy, Vol. 2*, which will be released in May 2017.

With regard to my four overarching themes, it is disappointing that every character portrayed by black or mixed-black actors was not so coincidentally associated with criminality and/or weaponry. It seems that even in the last decade, in the four films I examined, characters that are part of both historically based plots and fantasy worlds, where anything could happen, are associated with crime and distrust. Not only are these characters often accused of crimes they did not commit, but they must also struggle with broken or absent families. However, despite their often bleak circumstances, all characters in this study were able to overcome their fears in striving for a better life for themselves. While struggling with one's identity is evident in every film I watched, only characters in historically based plots appear to struggle with overcoming racism amid a changing society, whereas Gamora and Finn must overcome their past associations with their respective film's villains in their effort to secure better lives for themselves. Regardless of genre or gender, all lead characters played by black or mixed-black actors and actresses were portrayed as struggling with their identities, especially as each character had to figure out where they fit into their respective worlds and also in relation to other white and non-human characters.

My findings concerning how characters played by blacks and mixed blacks are all associated with criminality and/or weaponry build on Covington's (2010) assertions on how

blackness has been constructed in terms of crime, where “one of the best strategies for making white domination appear warranted is to represent blacks as dangerous and criminal” (p. 2). Covington suggests that “if blacks can successfully be defined as a threat, all efforts to control them can be made to seem reasonable,” (2010, p. 2). While Covington (2010) discusses historical constructions of the “dangerous black man”, I found that portrayals of dangerous or criminal females, in addition to males, can also be examined (i.e. Gamora is a trained warrior and assassin; Minny and Aibileen are both accused of being thieves by Hilly Holbrook) (p. 7). Thus, associating both black and mixed-black males and females with criminality and/or weaponry on screen appears to be a recurring narrative for these characters.

In order for characters played by black and mixed-black people to strive for a better life, it seems they must lose part of their identity. For historically based films, characters portrayed in maid and butler roles must often act with a sense of double consciousness, in that Cecil, Minny and Aibileen all have their private thoughts within their shared communities and aspirations which are separate and frequently suppressed from the view of the white people they serve. Cecil specifically talks about the “two faces” that butlers live their lives by, where one face is shown to “white people” and the other is shown to family, friends and other black people. Cecil ultimately is forced to give up his job in order to secure freedom for himself and his family. Similarly, Aibileen begins *The help* (2011) as a maid who struggles financially, but she loses her job in her quest for a better life. Though Skeeter’s book *The help* provides additional financial support for both Aibileen and Minny, Minny, who struggles with financial and job security for most of the film, secures a job working as a maid for Celia and Johnny Foote indefinitely. However, regardless of job security, Minny



finishes the film as a single mother of five children after finding the strength to leave her abusive husband, Leroy. Despite having received money for her contribution to Skeeter's book, Aibileen's future is uncertain by the end of *The help* (2011). Yet she aspires to become the "writer in the family" as her deceased son, Treelore, insisted before his tragic death.

Interestingly, in both non-historically-based films, Gamora and Finn also decide to abandon their personal plans to escape from their enemies in order to help their newly acquainted white (and non-human) friends. Gamora forsakes her plan to sell the Orb in order to escape Thanos and Ronan. She, instead, finds belonging as one of the Guardians of the Galaxy and assists them with stopping Ronan from destroying the city of Xandar. She additionally helps Quill contain the powerful Infinity Stone, thus helping to save Xandar's people. Similarly, Finn decides against leaving for the Outer Rim, where he planned to escape the First Order, and chooses to stay and fight his enemies by joining the Resistance and leading a mission to rescue Rey from the enemy's base. In this way, both Finn and Gamora must relinquish their quests for a better life in order to fully transition from being associated with their respective films' villains. Both characters must also confront their enemies in order to become heroes. Thus, it is highly significant that all five leads must either give up their prospects for a better life or lose an essential part of their identity as they strive not only for better lives but also for survival. In these narratives, characters played by black and mixed-black people cannot possibly sustain their identities if they desire class mobility in seeking a higher socioeconomic status.

Further examination of my four themes shows how characters played by black and mixed-black people were often shown educating whites and others about cultural codes and often teaching whites about themselves and about what it means to be black in a society

where whites possess hierarchical power along with financial and job security. For instance, Aibileen informs Skeeter about the dangers for black and mixed-black people under Mississippi law, which makes her subject to criminal punishment by helping Skeeter with her book. Skeeter appears oblivious to the racial implications, not to mention social taboo, of enlisting Aibileen, Minny and other black maids to interview, especially since Skeeter does not have to worry about financial security like the maids she secretly interviews. This class distinction becomes clearer when Aibileen loses her job for helping with *The help*, while Skeeter is offered a job in New York City for authoring the same novel. Thus, while Aibileen, a black woman, loses her job, Skeeter, a white woman, receives job advancement opportunities for her writing. Minny must also educate Celia about how white women are supposed to interact with the black help. Much to Minny's distress, Celia defies Minny by ignoring the Jim Crow "separate but equal" laws and instead treats Minny as an equal, and as a friend, rather than as her subordinate. In comparison, Cecil must educate Mr. Warner twice about the unequal job advancement opportunities and salary for black help compared to the white help, though he is scoffed at and mostly ignored in his first effort to secure equal treatment of blacks and whites. With persistence, Cecil returns to Mr. Warner's office nearly 20 years later with the same plea for equality and equal wages and enlists the help of President Ronald Reagan in order to acquire raises and advanced job opportunities for himself and other black butlers. Also acting as educators, Gamora and Finn become invaluable assets for their knowledge of the enemy. One could argue that Gamora and Finn are indispensable educational tools to their white counterparts in that Gamora's expertise allows the Guardians of the Galaxy to defeat Ronan, while Finn's knowledge facilitates the destruction of the First Order's base. Without Gamora and Finn becoming "traitors" and

choosing to help white characters (and non-human characters) in their respective films, it is evident that neither the Guardians of the Galaxy nor the Resistance would have possessed the knowledge and information of how power works in other worlds, which is needed in order to defeat their enemies.

In the introduction to this study, I wrote about the issues that gave rise to the #Oscarsowhite protest; however, the start of 2017 has proved to be a better year for Oscar-nominated films featuring black and mixed-black actors portrayed in lead roles. Some of the most positive examples include *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Fences* (2016) and *Moonlight* (2016), which won the Academy Award for “Best Picture” (Donnelly, 2017). *Moonlight* (2016) also took home the awards for “Best Actor in a Supporting Role,” won by Mahershala Ali, and “Best Writing for an Adapted Screenplay” (Donnelly, 2017). Notably, Viola Davis (*The help*, 2011) made Oscars history by becoming the first black actress to earn three Oscar nominations (Donnelly, 2017). Davis was nominated in 2009 for her supporting role in *Doubt* (2008) and in 2012 for her leading role in *The help* (2011), and she won the Oscar for “Best Actress in a Supporting Role” for *Fences* (2016) (Willis, 2017). After winning for *Fences* (2016), Davis also became the first black woman to earn an Oscar, Emmy and Tony award (Harris, 2017). Of her win, Davis said, “I grew up in poverty. I grew up in apartments that were condemned and rat-infested and I always sort of wanted to be somebody. I just wanted to be good at something. This is the miracle of God and dreaming big and hoping it sticks and it lands, and it did. I’m overwhelmed” (Harris, 2017). In 2017, Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*, a racially charged horror movie featuring a black lead male character who encounters “increasingly strange behavior” after coming home to meet his white girlfriend’s wealthy parents, received a perfect score on Rotten Tomatoes, which rarely gives out 100-percent

ratings, and critics are “hailing the film as trenchant, entertaining and frightening” (Gettell, 2017). In conclusion, my findings suggest that there is more complexity to be found in the roles given to black and mixed black actors/actresses than has been the case historically, while it is my hope that diversity among lead roles continues and opportunities that are not based on old stereotypes, as Bogle (2001) describes, persist and thrive at the box office.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Researchers**

Given the narrow scope of this study and my timeline of completion, I managed to analyze four films that were released between 2010 and 2015 in great depth. Though it is not possible to make generalizations about portrayals of lead characters played by blacks and mixed-blacks in contemporary film with a qualitative textual analysis approach, my findings represent one unique interpretation, while other interpretations could be discovered inductively by other researchers. Several films released in 2016 might interest researchers in terms of how black and mixed-black men and women were portrayed in lead and supporting roles, such as *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Moonlight* (2016), *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* (2016) and *Fences* (2016). While quantitative work in film has been quite effective in generating percentages in terms of racial and gender representations, more qualitative studies on lead characters portrayed by black and mixed-black men and women are needed to help broaden the depth of research on how blackness is portrayed on screen for both film and television. A mixed-methods approach might be able to address these questions with more breadth. Future research should examine a larger sample of films featuring lead roles played by black and mixed-black actors/actresses in sci-fi fantasy, action-adventure and other non-historically-based genres, where race does not appear to be a factor in why the actor or actress was chosen to play the lead role. Other studies could examine portrayals of

black and mixed-black women in comparison to white and other non-white races so as to have a better understanding of how blackness is portrayed in contrast to whiteness and other people of color.

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