**'The Butler' Movie Review: New Film, Old Stereotypes**

By [Angel Evans](http://www.policymic.com/profiles/32905/angel-evans)  August 23, 2013

Though somewhat skeptical, I chose to see [*The Butler*](http://www.policymic.com/articles/59983/the-butler-movie-review-the-year-s-first-oscar-movie) in the spirit of optimism and curiosity. I'd heard positive reviews of the film from family and friends, many of whom are black.

But when my grandmother and I entered the theater of elderly white couples, I couldn't help but notice the few that stared at us as we walked to our seats. It didn't bode well; but I tried to put them out of my mind as the movie began. It opened with a scene of a young Cecil Gaines (the character based on real-life White House butler Eugene Allen) in the cotton fields of Georgia, and we watch as he gradually transitions from a forlorn child into a diligent young man. Cecil builds a family, receives his position at the White House, and forms a refreshingly complex relationship with his beautiful wife, played by Oprah Winfrey. Oprah, Forest Whitaker, Terrence Howard, Lenny Kravitz, and Cuba Gooding Jr. all give excellent performances; each demonstrates a humanity that extends the story of one man into a multi-dimensional account of black [consciousness](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-leon-roberts/lee-daniels-double-consci_b_3767252.html).

But the scene that made the strongest impression on me had less to do with the cinematography and more with the reaction from the audience. A little more than halfway through the film, Gloria Gaines (Winfrey) slaps her son for joining the [black power](http://www.hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/africanamerican/blackpower/) movement. A hushed buzz of approval ran through the audience at my screening. “Serves him right!” I even heard someone say.

A wave of anger surged through me. It soon gave way to disappointment; disappointment about how the critical black power movement was simplified in the film; disappointment about being one of the few black people scattered among the white audience; disappointment that the audience got so buzzed when Louis Gaines, wearing that funky black power beret, is slapped by his more reasonable, less militant mother.

In the racial discourses of past and present, white dominant culture finds certain black images of resistance more favorable than others — and rewards them accordingly. A black person wearing a white apron is received more easily than one in a black beret. Movies such as *The Help* and *The Butler* are produced every few years. They predictably receive Oscar nominations and are praised for their representations of black history; while films that stray outside the ethos of black servanthood and smiles are much harder to come by (unless the film is *Django Unchained*).

When the white audience scoffed at an image of black struggle that wasn't all smiles, I began to wonder how far *The Butler* pushed the comfort zone of a racist, if at all. The film's juxtaposition of honorable black servants alongside black freedom fighters, presumably intended to show the validity of both struggles for liberation, seemed to ultimately hold little weight. It seems we admire one side more than the other.

Ultimately this is a method of silencing people who choose to resist oppression in a capacity not readily understood. All parts of a story deserve to be heard — including the parts we want to ignore.

*The Butler* tells an important story; one that is crucial to the tapestry of black and American history. But to really pay homage to black history, a cultural memory is required on our part. True cultural memory exists for black people when we acknowledge the existence of all our ancestors, including the ones that lived *before* slavery. We must work to understand ourselves beyond a 500-year-span of servitude and ill-will. We should have more representations that support the many ways our ancestors existed outside white gaze and oppression.

*The Butler* is certainly educational in its own way. It offers a reminder of how far African Americans have come and of our history of perseverance in the face of difficulty. But extending the variety of voices would allow us to go deeper. As the proverb reminds us, “In a multitude of counselors, there is safety.” In embracing the message of *The Butler*, let us also remind ourselves to remain receptive to the multitude of variations, histories, voices, and images of black America.



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Angel writes about about culture, race, gender, identity, and anything else that catches her eye. Culture ain't just a "collection of art, clothing, and food" or some other generic classification that we all learned in middle school. ...

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