



Resisting the System: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Racial Discrimination in Netflix's *Self Made*

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Abstract

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This study examines the portrayal of racial discrimination and its influence on identity formation and agency in the Netflix limited series *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker* (2020). Employing a qualitative descriptive methodology, the research investigates how protagonist Madam C.J. Walker navigates and resists systemic barriers within a racialized socioeconomic landscape. The analysis is grounded in Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and Mellor's (2004) framework of responses to racism. Findings indicate that racial discrimination is depicted as a normalized element of social interaction, manifested through interpersonal belittlement and intra-racial tensions. Furthermore, the study identifies the presence of "interest convergence," wherein dominant power structures support Walker's entrepreneurial efforts only when such support aligns with their own material or political interests. The study concludes that *Self Made* functions as a narrative of resilience, highlighting the necessity of multifaceted resistance strategies in the face of institutionalized racism.

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INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination remains a pervasive structural force that curtails fundamental human rights and enforces social stratification. This is particularly evident for marginalized groups such as African Americans, who consistently encounter disparate outcomes in education, employment, and healthcare (Clair & Denis, 2015). For instance, recent longitudinal data indicates that the median net worth of white households (\$187,300) remains significantly higher, nearly eight times, than that of Black households (\$24,100), illustrating a persistent racial wealth gap rooted in historical exclusion (Federal Reserve, 2020).

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), racial discrimination is not merely a series of isolated incidents but a systemic phenomenon embedded within societal infrastructures. Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a robust framework for deconstructing these power dynamics through three primary tenets:

Racism is viewed as an ordinary, everyday occurrence in society rather than an aberration, making it difficult to address through standard legal or social channels (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This principle posits that progress toward racial equity occurs only when it aligns with the self-interest or material gains of the dominant group (Bell, 1980). Race is seen as a product of social thought and relations, lacking a biological basis but carrying profound material consequences for those marginalized by its definitions (Omi & Winant, 2014).

In navigating these systemic injustices, individuals employ various psychological and social strategies. Mellor (2004) categorizes these into three distinct archetypes: defensive responses, characterized by avoidance; controlled responses, involving internal coping mechanisms without overt confrontation; and confrontational responses, which entail direct action and systemic challenge.

The Netflix miniseries *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker* (2020), directed by Kasi Lemmons, serves as a narrative microcosm for these theoretical constructs. Set during the Jim Crow era—a period defined by state-sanctioned segregation—the series chronicles the ascent of Sarah Breedlove (Madam C.J. Walker) from the "laundry lines" to the pinnacle of American entrepreneurship.

The production highlights the intersectionality of Walker's struggle, as she faces a "double jeopardy" of racial and gender discrimination. The narrative depicts how white male-dominated structures and intra-racial colorism, personified by the character Addie Munzel, function as gatekeepers to economic mobility. Walker's trajectory exemplifies Mellor's (2004) "confrontational response"; she does not merely seek inclusion in existing markets but creates an autonomous Black economic ecosystem. By fostering strategic alliances and promoting Black female entrepreneurship, Walker utilizes her business empire as a tool of resistance, ultimately challenging the "Interest Convergence" by forcing the market to recognize the economic power of the Black consumer (Walker, 2020).

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method, using the film *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker* (2020) as the primary research object. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth interpretation of social phenomena as represented through film dialogue, scenes, and narrative structures. As defined by Yilmaz (2013), qualitative research is an emergent, inductive, and interpretive method aimed at understanding meanings embedded in social contexts. This approach is therefore appropriate for examining racial discrimination as portrayed in the film.

Data were collected through several systematic steps. First, the film was watched repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative and thematic structure. Second, attention was given to narrative and cinematographic elements to identify scenes relevant to racial discrimination. Third, key scenes related to the research focus were selected and documented. These selected scenes served as the primary data for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted through qualitative literary and film analysis. The selected scenes were identified and classified according to types of racial discrimination based on Critical Race Theory proposed by Delgado and Stefancic (2001). Subsequently, the scenes were interpreted to examine how racial discrimination is represented in the film. Mellor's (2004) theory of responses to racism was also applied to analyze the main character's responses, which were categorized into defensive, controlled, and confrontational responses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Portrayal of Racial Discrimination in *Self Made* Film

The depiction of racial discrimination in *Sel Made* (2020) can be seen as follow:

1. Normal Racism

Racial discrimination in *Self Made* (2020) aligns with Delgado and Stefancic's (2001) concept of normal racism, also referred to as everyday racism. This form of racism is viewed as a routine and normalized practice within society, in which members of the dominant racial group habitually discriminate against people of color in everyday interactions. The following scene illustrates an instance of normal racism portrayed in the film.



Figure 1. Addie humorously mocks the protagonist's

(00:06:34)

This scene above tells about Addie's employee asking Addie what to say when customers complain about the sulfur smell. Addie suggests smiling and telling them that the product is working. Then, Sarah shares what she does when using Addie's product to avoid the smell. Addie says that a laundry worker like Sarah knows that, and there is no need to worry because they just need to reassure the customers. The evidence shows when Sarah asks if she can sell Addie's products, Addie responds dismissively, saying, "*Oh. I don't think sales is for you*" (00:06:34) but Addie laughs it off and thinks that Sarah is not suitable to sell her products, as Addie considers Sarah, a Black woman, just a laundress at her place.

This scene above, uses a medium close-up that focuses on the upper body of Addie, highlighting her sharp expression and cynical smile as she delivers a discriminatory line to

Sarah. The natural light from the window casts a warm glow on Addie, emphasising her dominant position, while the shadows in the background create a contrast that isolates Sarah, visually reinforcing the power imbalance between them. Addie's clothing, adorned with lace details and soft pastel colours, reflects her higher social status and the fashion of her time, which starkly contrasts with the simplicity associated with Sarah. The rustic wooden background further emphasises Addie's position within the upper class, adding another layer to the discrimination conveyed through her words and demeanor. All of these elements together create a visually cohesive and emotionally charged moment, highlighting the tension and prejudice in Addie's actions.

2. Interest Convergence

Interest Convergent or material determinism, is how the dominant race sees aspects of the race from material interest. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2001), material determinism is run into a dominant group(materially) and a working-class group (physically). The following scene is first event that show racial discrimination of interest convergence



Figure 2. Addie visited Sarah's house to poach her clients

(00:42:55)

In the scene above, Sarah is serving her customers inside her house, a loud explosion is heard, causing her house to catch fire. At the same time, Addie arrives and immediately takes over Sarah's customers, directing them to her salon. The evidence show Sarah sees Addie at the scene, she approaches her. Addie expresses her condolences for the fire that destroyed Sarah's house, but Sarah views this as crocodile tears, believing Addie came only to mock her. Addie then explains that she is simply offering free services to her clients. Sarah says to Addie, "*Please. Save the crocodile tears. You know you came to gloat*" (00:42:52). Addie responds, "*You're upset, so I won't take that personally. Uh, I just came to offer my services, free of charge, to all of your clients*" (00:42:55).

In this scene, the shot uses an eye-level angle with a medium close-up, focusing on the character's face from the chest up to highlight her expression, which looks calm and controlled despite the tension. The lighting technique used is natural lighting, which evenly lights her face without harsh shadows. This gives the character a soft and approachable look. Additionally, the subtle backlighting adds depth to the shot, framing the character with a soft glow around her hair. This technique helps separate the character from the background and gives a strong presence and warmth. The scene shows Addie's calm demeanor, even though Sarah appears hostile, reflecting Addie's control over the situation.

The Character's Response to Racial Discrimination in *Self Made* Film

The characters deal with the racial discrimination they face. The different types of responses are explained below.

1. Defensive Response

The defensive response, is a response to protect the oppressed themselves from the oppressor. According to Mellor (2004) explained that the oppressed actively avoid the situation or discriminatory act from the oppressor. They also avoid public places and government services, which appear racist. Moreover, the oppressed think that confronting racial discrimination would be fruitless. The following scene is first event that show the character's response to racial discrimination with defensive response.



Figure 3. Sarah apologized when she secretly sold Addie's products

(00:09:48)

In the scene above, Sarah approaches Addie with a bold idea. She tells Addie that she could sell some of Addie's products that she has taken secretly to prove to Addie that she can sell them. Sarah believes that they can make extra money together by selling those products. The evidence show when Addie responds angrily to Sarah's suggestion, firmly stating that she doesn't want her products associated with someone like Sarah. However, Addie immediately responds harshly, saying, "*Are you out of your mind? Even on your Sunday best, you look like you just stepped off the plantation. These are my products. And I will not have the likes of you associated with them*" (00:09:41). Addie belittles Sarah, and Sarah responds with an apology: "*Sorry for overstepping. It won't happen again*" (00:09:48) Sarah realizes her mistake and quickly apologizes for her actions. Showing submission and her desire to avoid further conflict. In this case, Sarah, feeling intimidated by Addie's harsh attitude, chooses to apologize rather than confront or argue against the insult. Sarah sees no benefit in opposing discriminatory behavior. Thus, Sarah's apologetic response is a clear example of the behavior exhibited by oppressed individuals. This dialogue relates to Mellor (2004) state that the oppressed actively avoid the situation or discriminatory act from the oppressor. They also avoid public places and government services, which appear racist. Moreover, the oppressed think that confronting racial discrimination would be fruitless.

The scene above uses an eye-level shot with a medium close-up, focusing on the subject from the shoulders up to emphasize the character's facial expression, which suggests concern or tension. The soft lighting, with key and fill lighting techniques, creates a gentle, even illumination across the face, highlighting the subject's features while minimizing harsh shadows. This lighting adds warmth and intimacy to the scene, making the character's

vulnerability more palpable. This technique enhances the dialogue, "*Sorry for overstepping*," by reinforcing the character's apologetic tone and emotional nuance, contributing to a deeper connection with the viewer.

2. Confrontational Response

The confrontational response refers to an active form of resistance in which oppressed individuals directly challenge their oppressors. According to Mellor (2004), this response involves payback actions that may take the form of verbal confrontation or, in some cases, physical resistance against racial discrimination. Through confrontational responses, oppressed individuals assert their agency by openly opposing discriminatory behavior rather than avoiding or enduring it. This form of response reflects a proactive effort to expose injustice, educate oppressors, and challenge racist assumptions through direct engagement. By standing up for their rights, individuals seek to disrupt discriminatory practices, alter oppressive behavior, and affirm their entitlement to respect and equal treatment. The following scene presents an instance in which the character responds to racial discrimination through a confrontational response.



Figure 4. Sarah is confident that Addie will be surprised by her success (00:23:01)

In the scene above, Addie meets Sarah during the meeting with Mr. Washington, Sarah hopes to gain his support because Washington has significant influence in the Black community and she wants to open salons worldwide. Addie greets Sarah and asks what did Sarah do here? And mocked Sarah's dream of opening a factory. Sarah responds to Addie's words by confronting her. In the scene, Addie greets Sarah and says, "*Sarah! Oh, Madam. [chuckles]. What brings you here? You're still running around, dreaming of opening a factory?*" (00:22:54). Sarah responds, "*Oh, Addie, you'd be surprised how many people want me to succeed. I'm in escrow on an old feed mill in Bucktown. I'll be open in a month*" (00:23:01). Addie belittles Sarah's ambitions by implying that her dream of opening a factory is unrealistic, reinforcing a position of dominance. Addie's words dismiss Sarah's aspirations, creating a sense of inferiority. Sarah's reply confronts Addie's dismissal directly, challenging her negativity with the assertion that many people are supportive of her efforts and providing concrete evidence of her progress. This dialogue relates to Mellor (2004), who states that the confrontational response is a reaction to fighting against the oppressor. This response entails payback activity to respond to racial discrimination with verbal or physical attacks.

The scene above, uses an eye-level shot with a medium close-up, focusing on the subject from the chest up to highlight the character's confident and warm facial expressions and emotions. The soft, natural lighting from a nearby window creates gentle shadows that add

depth and an intimate, realistic atmosphere. This technique supports the dialogue, which conveys the character's confidence, strengthens the emotional connection with the narrative, and creates a relaxed yet meaningful impression.

CONCLUSION

Self-Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker (2020) portrays racial discrimination through the interconnected dynamics of normal racism and interest convergence, as conceptualized by Delgado and Stefancic (2001, 2007). Normal racism is depicted as routine and socially normalized, while interest convergence is shown in moments where support from dominant groups emerges only when it serves their material interests. Confronted with entrenched beliefs that Black women are incapable of success, Madam C.J. Walker does not remain passive. Instead, she adopts both defensive responses, aimed at safeguarding herself and her business, and confrontational responses, through which she actively challenges racial oppression and asserts her agency (Mellor, 2004). Through these strategies, the film illustrates resistance as a catalyst for both personal empowerment and broader social transformation. Ultimately, *Self-Made* reflects the persistence of racial discrimination while affirming the necessity of active resistance in challenging systemic racism in contemporary society..

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