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Communication Arts and Sciences

Title of your research project.

Sharing “The Music of My Soul:” Invitational Rhetoric in the Musical Memphis

Description of research. Please provide a few sentences that explain the question and the methods employed in this research project.

This rhetorical analysis applies Foss, Griffin, and Foss’ concept of invitational rhetoric to the Tony award-winning musical Memphis. The musical depicts multiple conceptualizations of 1950s Memphis through the eyes of a strong, independent Black woman, a rebellious and eccentric white disc jockey, a protective older brother, and a prejudiced mother. While Memphis utilizes the principles of equality, imminent value, and self-determination, and creates external conditions and an offering perspective in order to emphasize the importance of seeking understanding on an individual level to combat racism, it also prioritizes the role of individual responsibility over ending systemic racism. The invitational rhetoric in Memphis provides the audience with different perspectives as four characters tell their stories and create a safe environment in which the audience may feel comfortable reflecting on and sharing their own stories; however, the musical glosses over the impact of systemic racism on the characters’ lives in order to promote a positive, feel-good message. We suggest that while the invitational rhetoric in Memphis may encourage audience members to better understand issues related to race, providing one way of seeking understanding in a society fractured by injustices and polarization, its message is limited due to its lack of focus on the systems in place that contribute to the racism experienced by the characters in the musical.

Did this project include Penn State students as researchers?

Yes

If yes to the above question, please state where it was published.

This project is co-authored with Penn State student Sophia Bates. This is published in the Kentucky Journal of Communication.

What problem do you address with your research?

How invitational rhetoric is used in the musical Memphis as a way to combat racism at an individual level (we also critique the show for not doing enough to address systemic racism).

