

What D.E.B.S. Reveal About Race In Queer Cinema

theq26.com/filmed-media/what-debs-reveal-about-race-in-queer-cinema

December 11,
2018



Though the 2004 comedy *D.E.B.S.* never made it to mainstream success, it reigns as a classic of LGBTQ cinema. Much like its fellow cult classic *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *D.E.B.S.* is cherished for its sapphic storyline, overtly campy script, and happy ending. The film appears to both parody and imitate *Charlie's Angels* as it chronicles the adventures of a spy who falls for the very villain she's assigned to take out. While *But I'm a Cheerleader* functioned as a comically blunt commentary on gender roles and conversion therapy, the social commentary in *D.E.B.S.* is far less overt.

In a blink-and-you-missed-it moment about halfway through the film, Max Brewer (portrayed by Meagan Good) pulls aside her best friend, Amy Bradshaw (played by Sara Foster) to explain her frustrations with Amy's promotion to Squad Captain. To recap: until this point, Max had led the squad, but Amy's survival of an encounter with villain (and secret

love interest) Lucy Diamond impresses the D.E.B.S. leadership so much that they decide strip Max of the title and hand it to Amy. All of this would be bearable, Max points out, if Amy even cared about advancing through the ranks, but she'd be just as happy moving to Barcelona and attending art school. "You don't even want it," Max asserts. Her anger crests as she continues, "I don't get why you have to take away the only thing I have going for me."

Amy is left speechless as she considers the facts: Max has dedicated herself to the D.E.B.S. and everything they stand for. She's worked hard to ascend to Squad Captain and dreams of one day topping the ranks. Amy, on the other hand, isn't sure that D.E.B.S. is the future she wants. As mentioned before, she's considering leaving for art school and wasn't forced to prove herself to her fellow D.E.B.S.: she achieved a perfect score on the entrance exam hidden in her SATS. This feat has landed her a position as the literal tall, thin, blond haired and blue-eyed poster child of the organization. All things considered, it's not a far reach to question if this conversation is a veiled discussion on race.



<https://www.syfy.com>

When *D.E.B.S.* was released in 2004, Sara Foster was relatively unknown as an actress. Her credits before the film include a brief stint as host of the *Entertainment Tonight* spin-off, *ET on MTV* and a career as a fashion model. Conversely, Meagan Good already had a sizable acting career, having landed roles in *Moesha*, *Touched by an Angel*, *Eve's Bayou*, and *My Wife and Kids*. She'd appeared in 52 episode across three seasons of *Cousin Skeeter*. Much like her on-screen counterpart Max, Good had put in the work, learned the ropes, and somehow been relegated to the role of supporting actress. Foster, much like Amy, stepped into a leadership position with little experience and by scoring perfectly on a test she wasn't even aware she was taking.

D.E.B.S. was conceived of, written and directed by Angela Robinson, a black filmmaker and open member of the LGBTQ community. Her filmography is littered with queer films and television shows that poke at racial tensions without explicitly exploring them. In six seasons, *The L Word*--which Robinson wrote, edited, and produced for--Bette only has one outburst regarding her race, despite the fact that she is raising a biracial child in an interracial relationship and fighting to get ahead in a industry dominated by heterosexual cisgendered white men. We flirt with discussions on race as Tina and Bette search for a sperm donor, Bette and sister Kit compare finances and upbrings, and as Bette's childhood is explained by her father. Yet each conversation stays relatively surface level, refusing to dive deeper into an obvious well of possible commentary.



<https://reelgood.com>

Robinson's LGBTQ film *Girltrash: All Night Long* takes race in a different direction, mirroring *D.E.B.S.* with the inclusion of an aggressive black supporting female character. Rose Rollins' Monique Shaniqua Jones comes across as a caricature of the angry black woman and feels embarrassing and uncomfortable instead of comical. To add insult to injury, Monique is the *only* woman of color in the main cast.

"Do people of color in Hollywood have a responsibility to cast POC, write roles for POC, and prominently present POC to their audiences?"

In a world where women of color often are handed the backseat to white women and their pursuit of success, Max's feelings towards Amy are likely feelings Robinson has endured before. Which is exactly why seeing Meagan Good play sidekick to Sara Foster begs the question of why Robinson allowed this status quo to manifest in films she created. It's possible that the production company pressured Robinson to cast two white women as her lead protagonists and it's just as plausible that Robinson assumed the casting would result in a more favorable response from her superiors and/or audiences. After all, *D.E.B.S.* was her first feature-length film.

However, ten years later in 2014 when *Girltrash: All Night Long* made a debut the film once again featured white women as the romantic leads, despite Robinson's expanded resume. It should be noted that POWER UP, the production company that backed *D.E.B.S.*, also backed *Girltrash*, which could be the answer to the casting question. Although it should also be noted that while Robinson distanced herself from *Girltrash* post-production claiming that POWER UP was releasing an unfinished project, Robinson created the web series and selected the cast upon which the film was founded--independently of POWER UP.

Do people of color in Hollywood have a responsibility to cast POC, write roles for POC, and prominently present POC to their audiences? Do writers and directors in marginalized identities have a responsibility to provide chances for their marginalized peers to gain exposure, prove their talents, and grow their careers? Over the last ten years, society has experienced a shift in thinking on the subject as individuals in marginalized groups exercise our ability to unite via new modes of technology like social media. Especially within the black community, a renaissance of the civil rights movement ignited with the creation of Black Lives Matter in 2013 and has renewed the call for entertainment to reflect stories from multiple perspectives through diverse casting.

Since *Girltrash* Robinson has produced and written for Shondaland titan *How to Get Away With Murder*. She also served as Executive Producer for *Passing*, a film starring Tessa Thompson and Ruth Negga revolving around the controversial racial practice. Whatever her

reasons for casting white leads in the past, Robinson is now working with studios that laud diversity and producing more stories with explicitly racial themes. Only time will tell if the next project she conceives finally breaks the white lead status quo. There's a hole in campy LGBTQ cinema waiting to be filled with a WOC love story, here's to hoping that Robinson is the one to fill it.