

**Straight Outta Washington:  
The Black Filmmaking Renaissance and the Obama Era**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes that in the wake of President Obama's election victory, a new and distinct Black filmmaking renaissance emerged, with multiple Black directors producing films which primarily centre the lives, experiences and history of Black America, present and past, expressly telling those stories through the lens of African American characters. While the term 'radical' is rarely associated with the multi-billion dollar Hollywood industry, many Black filmmakers working in this way are, at the very least, producing art that works to shift the power dynamics in race-representational cultural politics in the industry – thus, in many ways, challenging the centrality of traditional Hollywood output, i.e. films which privilege Whiteness and a white-centred gaze. This thesis demonstrates that this is a socio/political/cultural act of resistance, and that these works amount to political cinema, in the face of the marginalisation of African Americans within not just mainstream cinema but mainstream politics. Hollywood has long placed white people at the centre its mass cultural product, something which also mirrors the political and social hegemony in America which has historically assigned Blackness itself to the margins. I excavate how these filmmakers recentre Blackness in an act of resistance, and further excavate how the films more widely contain themes of resistance. I also examine how these films dialogue with contemporary discourses, and seek to intervene in national narratives of identity.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Context



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At the New York premiere of Ava DuVernay's 2014 film *Selma*, the cast and crew mounted a striking protest for an otherwise glamorous, red-carpet event. With arms raised in surrender, they wore T-shirts declaring 'I CAN'T BREATHE', a reference to the words and killing of Eric Garner six months earlier, an African American man who died after being placed in a chokehold by New York police officers.<sup>1</sup> Mr Garner was one of multiple unarmed black people to die at the hands of law enforcement officers – 100 in the year *Selma* premiered, alone. His death, and particularly the killing of teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a month later, galvanized the already growing, revitalized African American protest movement in the US, under the banner 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM). DuVernay's film, focussing on Dr Martin Luther King and the civil rights activism that led to the guaranteed right to vote for African Americans in 1965, could hardly have found more relevance in the public arena in 2014 – serving as a timely reminder of past race relations persisting into the present.<sup>2</sup> As David Oyelowo, who played Dr King, remarked of the nightly news coverage of BLM protests: "[We were] flabbergasted that we were seeing images akin to what we had just filmed."<sup>3</sup>

The *Selma* team's red carpet protest was a cultural manifestation of the surge of Black activism that had taken place across the United States after the death of an unarmed African American teenager Trayvon Martin, and the subsequent acquittal of his killer, in 2013. Their physical

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<sup>1</sup> Eliana Dockterman, 'Selma Cast and Crew Wear 'I Can't Breathe' Shirts to New York Premiere', *Time* online (2014)

<<http://time.com/3633484/selma-movie-i-cant-breathe-shirts/>>

<sup>2</sup> While African Americans already had the right to vote, individual States could supersede those rights by passing the legislation that imposed excessive and irrelevant criteria to prevent Black Americans (and in Texas, Mexican Americans too) from doing so. For more on this see: Chandler Davidson, *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act 1965 – 1990* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Gary Younge, 'Ferguson, *Selma* and a Mood for Change', *The Guardian* (29 January 2015) <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/29/what-selma-means-now>> [accessed 1 December 2017].

motion of raised arms points to the ‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot’ chant of protestors at Ferguson and far beyond, represents all the unarmed Black victims of police shootings across the country. *Selma*’s soundtrack song, *Glory*, also pointed directly to the persistence of past racial struggles in the present, emphasizing the relevance to today of the state brutality inflicted on African Americans in the civil rights era, as well as their resolute determination to protest in the face of it. “Selma’s now, for every man, woman and child”, raps Common, the signifier ‘Selma’ synonymous with the brutal 1965 ‘Bloody Sunday’ attack by state troopers, on peaceful Black protestors in Selma, Alabama, and the protestors’ determined resistance to win their rights nevertheless.<sup>4</sup> While the *Selma* film premiere protest seems tame from the perspective of 2022, with several high-profile movements and celebrity supporters now familiar sights, in 2014 the protest was deemed radical and ‘troublesome’ enough to reportedly derail the chances for *Selma*, a film which was highly critically acclaimed, to win the coveted Best Film Oscar. Several voting members of the Academy of Motion Pictures, Arts and Sciences reportedly phoned the studio – furious with the protest and vowing to snub the film in response.<sup>5</sup>

The timing of this rise in the Black Lives Matter movement, exemplified in the *Selma* premiere protest, seemed to offer a significant social and political contradiction.<sup>6</sup> In 2008 African American politician Barack Obama was elected president, on the crest of a huge wave of hope for change, and for improvement in the lives of underprivileged Americans of all ethnicities. As Kevern Verney observes, “the inspirational ideas and rhetoric of the Obama campaign generated high expectations of change”, and “euphoric supporters” believed Obama’s election

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<sup>4</sup> John Legend and Common, *Glory* (Columbia Records, 2014).

For more on the Bloody Sunday march, and its continued relevance for African American struggle for equality, see:

Robert A Pratt, *Selma’s Bloody Sunday: Protest, Voting Rights, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Baltimore MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2017).

*Selma*’s theme tune is also discussed in this thesis in Chapter Two.

<sup>5</sup> The alleged Academy voters’ deliberate snub was discussed by Oyelowo in interview in 2020, with the Academy apparently confirming his claims in a tweet the following day. See:

Zoe Haylock, ‘David Oyelowo Says the Academy Punished *Selma* for the Cast’s Eric Garner Protest’, *Vulture*, 2020 <<https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/david-oyelowo-selma-academy-eric-garner-protest.html>> [accessed 3 May 2022].

With some exceptions, widespread celebrity and brand endorsement-activism for BLM became much more visible in the aftermath of global outrage at the murder of African American man George Floyd in 2020 (see Chapter One) by a Minneapolis police officer. For more on celebrity activism and BLM, see: Hannah Hamad, ‘Black Lives Matter 2014 – 2020: Celebrity Flashpoints and Iconic Images’, *Celebrity Studies*, 13.1 (2021), 123-129.

<sup>6</sup> I will be discussing *Selma*, and its function and relationship to activism protest in Chapters 1.

would mark a distinct change from the discredited policies of the previous administration.<sup>7</sup> In the run up to Obama's first presidency the concept of 'hope' became an indelible signifier through which the public could 'read' Obama, inscribed first through his 2006 autobiographical literary text *The Audacity of Hope*, and more prominently reinforced through the visual text of the iconic 'Hope' poster, a stylized stencil portrait of Obama which became a prominent national feature of the campaign.<sup>8</sup> This notion had huge resonance for Black America, with Obama's election representing a momentous moment in a nation where slavery had only been abolished in the nineteenth-century, and where the legal system of racial apartheid had flourished in living memory. On the face of it, Obama's win seemed to signify a hugely progressive step for America, and progress for the Black community in particular – making the emergence of Black Lives Matter a somewhat incongruous co-development.

Indeed, Obama's win even led some commentators to suggest that America had now reached a so-called 'post-racial era', when social relations and politics are no longer governed by racial hostility.<sup>9</sup> However, this fanciful notion is readily disproved by the bleak spectre of an alarming rise in both hate crimes and memberships of hate and anti-government groups, alongside the racially-inflected threats towards Obama and his family.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the huge disparities between white and Black communities in essential areas of equality signified that America was far from racially equal. Despite the 'post-racial' rhetoric, very significant disparities remained in measures of poverty, home ownership, health, education, and particularly the destructive effects of the criminal justice system.<sup>11</sup> While activists and scholars

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<sup>7</sup> Kevren Verney, 'Introduction: A Dream Deferred?', in *Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*, ed. by Mark Ledwidge, Kevren Verney and Inderjeet Parmar (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp.vii.

<sup>8</sup> The 'Hope' poster was created by street artist Shepherd Fairley from an Associated Press photograph, taken by freelance AP photographer Mannie Garcia. It became a prominent image both nationally and internationally.

<sup>9</sup> Several scholars discuss how the notion of 'post-racism' became a talking point around Obama's election – as well as pointing out why it was abjectly untrue. See for example: Kevren Verney, as above, pp.8 – 10.

<sup>10</sup> Heidi Beirich and Evelyn Schlatter, 'Backlash: Racism and the Presidency of Barack Obama', in Ledwidge, Verney, and Parmar, as above.

<sup>11</sup> Rogers M Smith and Desmond S King, 'Barack Obama and the Future of American Racial Politics', in Ledwidge, Verney and Parmar, as above, pp.102-105.

For more on racial inequalities across the criminal justice system, see the authoritative study: Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Revised edition (New York: The New Press, 2012).

had long pointed to the continued existence of these huge inequalities, most of White America believed racial equality had in fact been achieved several years ago.<sup>12</sup>

These tensions, the progress of Obama's election victory versus the continued racial disparities and structural racism faced by many Black Americans in everyday life, helped fuel the rise in resurgent demands for equal rights, particularly with respect to the massive over-representation of Black people incarcerated in what is often referred to as 'the prison industrial complex', and the devastating effects for their families and communities.<sup>13</sup> Especially egregious was (and continues to be) the apparently unremitting number of deaths of unarmed Black people at the hands of law enforcement (or their proxies) – officers who often went on to be acquitted, if indicted at all. In Obama's second term, the killing of a teenager Trayvon Martin, and the acquittal of the self-appointed neighbourhood watch volunteer who shot him, proved the spark which ignited the Black Lives Matter movement. The continued racial profiling of Black men as dangerous, as well as controversial 'Stand Your Ground' legislation – notably introduced in all the former states of the Confederacy – which essentially allows private citizens to kill others if they feel threatened rather than retreat to a safer place, was again thrust into the spotlight. Furthermore, the fact that over a century and a half after the end of the racial surveillance of slave patrols, the death of a young Black man could be so plainly linked to his identification as an alien presence in a demarcated, 'gated' community, by a self-appointed vigilante who was not Black, sparked a national conversation about how far America had truly progressed since the days of Jim Crow. If Obama's presidential candidacy had generated renewed public discussion about race in 2008, Trayvon Martin's death – someone who Obama memorably noted, would look like his son if he'd had one – ignited a surge in public debate on race relations in 2012, as Obama campaigned for his second term in office. As scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor points out, the acquittal of Martin's killer George Zimmerman resulted in both despair, and a rejuvenation of activism. Community organiser Alicia Garza in California reacted to the debate by posting the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, and was soon joined by two more activists, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors, together creating the activist organization which became not only a nationwide but a global phenomenon.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael C. Dawson and Lawrence D. Bobo, 'One Year Later and the Myth of a Post-Racial Society', *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 6.2 (2009), 247–49.

<sup>13</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

Other factors had also helped create a climate ripe for renewed activism which, once erupted, has continued to have a significant place in American culture and beyond, rejuvenated by later incidents and political developments. The devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina on Black communities in Louisiana and beyond, as a result of decades of policies which neglected to protect areas and communities extremely vulnerable to flooding - what scholar Manning Marable called "a profound and frightening example of the dynamics of domestic racial terrorism" - was one such factor which had a profound influence on public opinion.<sup>14</sup> Scholars also identify as a key moment the renewed social and political acceptance of racial profiling after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, as part of the 'War on Terror' in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, during Obama's presidency, the hope for more economic equality was not being delivered as quickly as some had hoped. In 2013, the year the #BlackLivesMatter movement began, the year *12 Years a Slave* and *Fruitvale Station* came out, the net median worth of white households in America was an astonishing 13 times greater than the median wealth of Black households. This was a disparity which had worsened since 2010, when it was already 10 times greater. Recovery from the Great Recession of 2008, the year Obama was elected, had begun. But as the respected Pew Research Center, a non-partisan fact tank, pointed out, in that recovery "not all households have benefited alike, and wealth inequality has widened along racial and ethnic lines."<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of Obama's presidency in 2016, the gap began to narrow, but white households' median wealth still outstripped Black households by a factor of 10.<sup>17</sup>

For many, the country's first Black president failed to deliver the social and racial progress that they had hoped. Obama often projected a 'colour-blind' approach and rhetoric, in what many had assumed had been the only viable strategy for election victory in a deeply racially-

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<sup>14</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p.251.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., Taylor p.188.

See Marable, above, pp.241-3, for more on how the circumstances around '9/11' rolled back progress on historic issues such as racial profiling, as renewed feelings of patriotism masked uglier instincts of xenophobia.

<sup>16</sup> Figures all from the same report, 2013 figures published in 2014: Rakesh Kochhar and Richard Fry, 'Wealth Inequality Has Widened along Racial, Ethnic Lines since End of Great Recession', *PEW Research Center* (Washington, 2014)

<<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/12/racial-wealth-gaps-great-recession/>>.

<sup>17</sup> Rakesh Kochhar and Anthony Cilluffo, 'How Wealth Inequality Has Changed in the U.S. since the Great Recession, by Race, Ethnicity and Income', *PEW Research Center* (Washington, 2017)

<<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/01/how-wealth-inequality-has-changed-in-the-u-s-since-the-great-recession-by-race-ethnicity-and-income/>>.

stratified America.<sup>18</sup> Scholars using a Critical Race Theory framework to assess Obama's presidency, however, argue that his race-neutral approach had the effect of reassuring white Americans that the pernicious effects of racism had now been neutralized, and no longer blocked advancement for Black Americans; something which was exacerbated by Obama's citing his own success to underline racial progress in America.<sup>19</sup> Robin D G Kelley also reflects many appraisals of Obama's presidency when he critiques Obama's often colour-blind approach, when in office, to public policy aimed at tackling social problems like health, housing and unemployment, arguing that these were always undermined by failing to address the barriers of institutional racism.<sup>20</sup> The disillusionment amongst young African Americans in particular at such failures, alongside Obama's persistent disinclination to engage with the racial disparities of the criminal justice system and other inequalities for much of his presidency, helped spark and invigorate protest movements for social and economic justice, such as Black Lives Matter.<sup>21</sup> As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor points out, Obama's response to mass movements of this kind was often to make appeals to law and order first – rather than engage fully with demonstrators' concerns.<sup>22</sup>

All of these circumstances and more helped to create the central contradiction of the Obama years. That is, the first Black presidency ushered in a genuine boost of hope for equality; yet it is the Obama period, rather than during the more conservative administrations of preceding years, when there was a rise in sustained and widespread protests against the persistence of

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<sup>18</sup> The term 'colour-blind' denotes an approach that is apparently 'race-neutral', in this context not favouring one ethnicity over another. One of the risks of such a seemingly egalitarian approach is that it may not take into account advantages already experienced and exercised by one ethnic group in the competition for resources. In that sense, what appears to be 'race-neutral' may, in its effects, be far from it.

<sup>19</sup> The Critical Race Theory analysis here derives from: Christopher J. Metzler, 'Barack Obama's Faustian Bargain and the Fight for America's Racial Soul', *Journal of Black Studies*, 40.3 (2009), pp.395-410.

For more on Obama's responses to public incidents centred on race and subsequent discourse, as well as his individualist [also exceptionalist] discourses, exemplified here, see:

Mădălina Stălniceanu, 'President Obama's response to the painfully familiar pattern of violence against Americans', *European Journal of American Culture*, 37.2 (2018), pp.107-125.

<sup>20</sup> Robin D G Kelley, 'He's Got the Whole World in His Hands', *Journal of American Studies*, 45.1 (2011), pp.185-200.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, as above, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Taylor.

destructive social and structural racism, the most extensive culture of anti-racist protest seen since the 1960s. Michael C Dawson sums this up succinctly in a way that points to the contradictory energizing effects of the disappointments described above:

The great service Obama did for both black people and a broader set of Americans is that he helped people once again think about the impossible. We should encourage people to retain the Obama campaign slogan, 'Yes we can,' even if 'no he won't.'<sup>23</sup>

This thesis argues that the resurgence in Black filmmaking circulating in the mainstream arena during the Obama period, also tends to echo such a contradiction. While, as I shall outline, the films often reflect such discourses of resistance and protest at historical and present-day racism, I posit that they also came about because of the social and creative 'uplift' of what industry figures and commentators termed 'the Obama effect'. This was something I also learned first-hand at the *Black Star Season*, a London film and television festival in 2016, celebrating the huge range of creative output from Black film and television directors since the inception of film, an event attended by many Black filmmakers. When Barry Jenkins, scriptwriter and director of *Moonlight* (2016) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), was asked why he thought we had seen an upsurge in Black film in recent years, he replied that the answer was simple – "Obama", by which it seemed clear that he referred to the galvanizing sense of relief and hope for possibilities that the election of the first Black president represented. This thesis interrogates the Black filmmaking renaissance, and how the constituent filmmakers interact with contemporary discourses on race and resistance – in short, how the renaissance intersects with Obama's America.

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<sup>23</sup> Michael C Dawson, *Blacks in and out of the Left* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013), p.192.

## ***Thesis Premise and Criteria***

Reflecting on Obama's 2008 election victory, African American scholar and public commentator Jelani Cobb noted how significantly Obama's win confounded so many people's expectations of seeing a Black president in this lifetime.<sup>24</sup> Survey figures from the Pew Research Center reflected the same view – with only a quarter of Black voters thinking it was likely.<sup>25</sup> Notably Cobb also remarked that, even if one could conceive of it, the expectation was that any such figure would not have been demonstrably connected to his Black identity; they would have expected it to be someone without an obvious “cultural relationship with the Black community”. While he notes that Obama's upbringing was uncommon, his unusual dual heritage and geographic background, he argues that nevertheless “idiomatically, and in terms of demeanour and persona, [Obama was] completely South Side Chicago Black – legible to Black people in that way.”<sup>26</sup> This is not to downplay the fact that Obama explicitly appealed to all voters for their endorsement, and specifically did not position himself primarily as a candidate for the Black community. Nevertheless, the surprise of Obama's victory, Cobb suggests, was that he did not have to marginalise his authentic African American identity *in order* to win.

Obama's tenure in presidential office also witnessed a renaissance in filmmaking circulating in mainstream arenas by Black directors, films centred on Black stories, a resurgence not seen since the 1990s Black movie boom – something which I term the ‘Black filmmaking renaissance’.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, in their breadth of subject matter and crucially in the fact that the renaissance has if anything accelerated since the Obama era, I argue that this renaissance eclipses any such comparisons. The films produced by the Black filmmakers of the renaissance are social documents, offering critical readings or reflecting tropes about the experiences of

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Kunhardt, *Obama: In Pursuit Of A More Perfect Union* [Jelani Cobb Interview], 2021 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_xy\\_OS6UTMM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xy_OS6UTMM)> [accessed 29 April 2022].

<sup>25</sup> PEW Research Center for the People & the Press, ‘Quadrennial Post-Election Survey’, 13 November 2008, <<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2008/11/13/section-2-the-president-elects-image-and-expectations/>> [accessed 1 May 2022].

<sup>26</sup> Cobb interview (*In Pursuit*, as above). Barack Obama's father was from Kenya and his mother from Kansas, and he was born away from the contiguous United States, in Hawaii. He also spent much of his childhood in Indonesia.

<sup>27</sup> For an interesting summary of the late 1980s and early 1990s Black movie boom, see: Steve Rose, ‘Black Films Matter – How African American Cinema Fought Back against Hollywood’, *The Guardian*, 13 October 2016, section Film <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/13/do-the-right-thing-how-black-cinema-rose-again>> [accessed 4 April 2022].

being Black in America in the contemporary period – and in each chapter I use critical readings of the films to examine the relationship between the film texts, and the context in which they are circulating.

The criteria I have drawn for this corpus of work are: films made by Black directors, with African American screenwriters, focussing on Black lives and told principally through African American viewpoints; and further, that they were substantially made during the Obama years. Thus Lee Daniels' *Precious*, which came out in 2009 (thus made beforehand), is excluded. I also focus on films that I have loosely termed 'mainstream' – designated to mean films which either circulated in traditional mass media outlets such as cinema chains, or were otherwise supported via distribution and promotion deals to attempt to reach large or mass market audiences, including streaming services.<sup>28</sup>

As this discussion suggests, decision-making for this corpus is complex. Film is also a collaborative business, making issues around 'authorship' at times contestable. Thus drawing up criteria for inclusion requires some careful judgement, and a case by case consideration. I have excluded Daniels' *The Butler* (2013), for instance, because the screenwriter Danny Strong is white. The scriptwriters for *Straight Outta Compton* which came out in 2015 were also white – but the film's producers Dr Dre and Ice Cube, particularly the latter, had a very heavy hand in creating the project, and the latter was involved in the script, as well as being an almost daily presence on set with the film's Black director, F Gary Gray. The film is also clearly told through the interior lives of the Black protagonists.<sup>29</sup>

Settling on the criteria outlined, the selection of key film texts which comprise the focus of my analysis are: Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013), Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014), Spike Lee's *Chi-raq* (2015), F Gary Gray's *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016), and DuVernay's *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016). During the Obama

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<sup>28</sup> There is no standard definition of what constitutes 'mainstream' and what constitutes 'independent' film. While scholars and critics have long adopted the labels, the terms remain ambiguous and overlap. Films are complex cultural products, and are produced and distributed via a multiple-layer system. Different budgeting, distribution and promotional activities, as well as editorial decisions, complicate monikers such as 'mainstream' and 'independent'. For more discussion of these descriptions, see:

Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg, *Bidding for the Mainstream? Black and Asian British Film Since the 1990s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> As a side note, it is noticeable that *Straight Outta Compton's* white screenwriting team was nominated for an Oscar, while not one of its Black actors or its director received such a nod – symptomatic of the bias which led to the #OscarsSoWhite protests in 2015, against racism at the Oscars and Hollywood generally.

period, investment in television writing and directing began to be more reflective of film made for cinema release, with traditional lines between the two blurring. Hence it is not appropriate to apply rigid criteria in this respect; *13<sup>th</sup>* for instance was released on the international streaming giant Netflix, rather than in the cinema. There are other film texts which could be included in the wider corpus, in particular Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station* (2013), Rick Famuyiwa's *Dope* (2015), and Justin Simien's *Dear White People* (2015). While I make reference to these, I have not included them as core texts – partly for reasons of space, and partly because they tip slightly more into the 'independent' rather than a 'mainstream' category. In addition, I had intended to include Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), a film with mass market engagement, which was made during the Obama era. But I have left it out primarily due to the limitations of space; *Get Out* is an extremely rich text, and given there is a logical priority to consider the films which landed during the Obama years, there is not enough room to do the necessary analysis of this film's role in the Black filmmaking renaissance. However, I consider it briefly in the Conclusion.

### ***Principal argument, critical contexts and chapter descriptions***

This thesis illuminates this hugely dynamic and evolving moment in Black filmmaking history, offering new perspectives on how these films intervene in, or interrogate the Obama era. These directors have produced films which primarily centre the lives, experiences and history of Black America, present and past, expressly telling those stories through the lens of African American characters. While the term 'radical' is rarely associated with the multi-billion dollar Hollywood industry, many Black filmmakers working in this way are, at the very least, producing art that works to shift the power dynamics in race-representational cultural politics in the industry – thus, in many ways, challenging the centrality of traditional Hollywood output, i.e. films which privilege Whiteness and a white-centred gaze.<sup>30</sup> As this thesis demonstrates, I further argue that this can be understood as a socio/political/cultural act of resistance, and that these works amount to political cinema, in the face of the marginalisation of African Americans within not just mainstream cinema but mainstream politics.

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<sup>30</sup> On Hollywood's failure to reflect and support African American perspectives, see for example: Mask, Mia ed., *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp4-5 and elsewhere.

This is not to argue that these filmmakers are producing films which are not, themselves, open to critique in different respects. For example, I also explore instances where some films critique American systems of racial oppression, but yet reproduce other problematic discourses around gender relations. However, as scholar Manthia Diawara has argued, the dominant film industry in the US has long placed white people at the centre of its mass cultural product, “leaving Black people with only one choice - to exist in relation to Whiteness.”<sup>31</sup> While this has long been the case in terms of racial representation on screen, Diawara’s observation also fits the political and social hegemony in America, which has historically assigned Blackness itself to the margins. This political framing of national identity is also something which Hollywood has reflected and reinforced through the dominant cultural product of film. In this context, I argue that films which set out to challenge that narrative and positioning are in many ways making a radical statement, and I illustrate how Black filmmakers of the renaissance embrace that role.

Further, mainstream cinema has not only tended to position African Americans and other people of colour at the periphery of American national consciousness, but has often depicted them in negative stereotypes and denigrating characterizations.<sup>32</sup> As with the marginalization of Black characters, such representations have helped propagate and reinforce racist views in wider society.<sup>33</sup> I argue that the filmmakers of the renaissance, centring their works in African American narratives and characters, conversely work to emancipate African American representation from its imprisonment in what Ed Guerrero calls “an ideological web of myths, stereotypes, and caricatures”.<sup>34</sup> Instead, in the renaissance we regularly see Black lives rendered with complexity and nuance, which works to challenge dominant discourses which often assign Black characters on screen to simplistic or narratively utilitarian roles. For example, the character Juan in Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* confounds expectations of the menacing drug dealer archetype, by his kind and nurturing attitude to the lonely child Chiron, the film’s main character. *Selma*’s Martin Luther King is far from the two-dimensional leader of peaceful protest that has been subsumed into popular culture and appropriated by

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<sup>31</sup> Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema*, AFI Film Readers (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.3.

<sup>32</sup> Many scholars focusing on race in film examine such representation. See for example: Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example: Susan Booker Morris, ‘Targeting Black Masculinity: An Analysis of the (mis)Representation of Black Men in the History of Early American Popular Culture’, *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, 28.2 (2011), pp77-87.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1993), p.9.

conservative forces in America. Instead several aspects of his personality are depicted - a firebrand when he politically necessary, radically critical of American capitalism and politics; and elsewhere we understand him as a person who experiences doubts, joy, foreboding, and disappointment at his own weakness. All of that is rendered for the audience alongside a visceral communication of the emotional, psychological and physical pain – as well as resolute radical opposition – felt by the larger African American community, in the face of destabilizing and violating racism. This thesis argues, in short, that the filmmakers of the renaissance display a drive to demand the right to portray richly drawn Black characters, without anxiety about satisfying Hollywood prescriptions about Black America’s relationship to Whiteness.

Some of these films use the bridge of historical events to speak to the continued struggle for black equality today. *Selma* explores the dynamics of civil rights activism, with clear resonances for Black Lives Matter and other protest movements, for example. More specifically the narrative engine of the film – the civil rights push towards the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – has proved to be remarkably prescient. Many present day US citizens – particularly African Americans and other communities of colour – have found their voting protection rights under threat over the last few years, as state after state takes advantage of a Supreme Court ruling in 2013 which overturned some of the protections provided by the 1965 Act.<sup>35</sup> Others expose the gap between the ‘post-racial’ myth, and the contemporary experience for many African Americans. Film historian Ed Guerrero argues that “the black movie boom of the 1990s...materialized out of a climate of long-muted black frustration and anger.”<sup>36</sup> This thesis explores what the current filmmaking renaissance tells us about the Black experience, particularly in relation to what Richard Wright called “the white problem”, in contemporary America.<sup>37</sup>

I further argue that, not only can the films of the renaissance be understood as acts of resistance, but they noticeably thematically reflect themes of resistance as well. As scholar Nell Irvin Painter and others have demonstrated, Black artists have long used the arts to articulate social commentary, as well as express resistance to social and structural racism.

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<sup>35</sup> Adam Liptak, ‘Supreme Court Invalidates Key Part of Voting Rights Act’, *The New York Times*, 25 June 2013  
< <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html> > [accessed 8 November 2018].

<sup>36</sup> Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, as above, p.159.

<sup>37</sup> See Raphael Tardon, ‘Richard Wright Tells Us: The White Problem in the United States’, in Kenneth Kinnamon and Michael Fabre eds., *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), p.99.

From the painters and sculptors of the Renaissance, to the mural artists of the 1960/70s Black Arts Movement, to multiple other visual art forms, Black artists have used visual cultures to engage with contemporary and historic issues facing their communities.<sup>38</sup> This thesis situates the directors of the Black filmmaking renaissance in a lineage of Black artists engaged in cultural protest and dynamically intersecting with the wider social and political currents.

Some of these filmmakers' commentary is focused less on wider anti-racist discourse, and more on challenging established precepts of behaviour, particularly with regard to masculine identity, within parts of the Black community. I argue that, not only does this reflect the group dynamic of encompassing themes of resistance, but such discourses specifically speak to the contemporary moment. The three activists who started the Black Lives Matter movement (Cullors, Tometi and Garza) are all queer activists, coming together from across the US. They broadened what would be recognized as traditional, 'mainstream' Black civil rights activism in the US, and deliberately took a more intersectional and inclusive approach - protesting bigotry against queer and other marginalized communities, within their wider call for racial, carceral and economic justice. They also challenged traditional civil rights activist hierarchies, seeking to implement a flatter structure with more grassroots control. Each of these aspirations are not necessarily new to civil rights activism. The Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) of the civil rights era – at the behest of movement veteran Ella Baker – also espoused a flatter organisation structure, for example (something which is reflected in DuVernay's *Selma*). Such an approach did not coalesce into such a huge and influential protest movement, however, until Black Lives Matter.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, while there are antecedents for Black filmmakers exploring Black queer narratives, these have tended to be independent, small-scale or arthouse films.<sup>40</sup> In Chapter Three, my thesis highlights how these currents are explored in the Black filmmaking renaissance, looking at how filmmakers such as Barry Jenkins embrace the fusing of narratives of liberation for Black and queer peoples, as *Moonlight* interrogates how queer Black masculinity is challenged and policed in sectors of the Black community.

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<sup>38</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> For further discussion about these points, see for example: Sarah J. Jackson, 'Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy J. Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41.4 ([n.d. but the conversation took place in late 2015]).

<sup>40</sup> I consider queer Black filmmaking and artists in Chapter Three. Prominent examples of independent but prominently influential queer Black filmmaking include the filmmaker poet Marlon Riggs (*Tongues Untied*, 1989), and the British artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (also 1989), focusing on Langston Hughes and other Black American queer artists from the Harlem Renaissance and beyond.

### ***Challenging power dynamics – conceptually and artistically***

In an era which has overturned established notions of ethnic hierarchies in the political arena, by electing an African American person who is also visibly ‘culturally Black’ as Cobb suggests, I argue in this thesis that the artists of the Black filmmaking renaissance reflect this aspect of the zeitgeist. That is in the use of film which was supported for mass market engagement, an arena more commonly aligned with messaging which reinforces dominant white hegemonic hierarchies, to offer challenge to those racialized power dynamics. And thereby, to an extent, subvert one of the most dominant cultural mediators for relaying hegemonic discourses.

Popular film is the very medium from which the voices and perspectives of Black and other minority groups are often excluded. Many of these films critique the white hegemonic structures which underpin wider US society – a viewing constituency which is accustomed to seeing white, rather than Black America, reflected back from the silver screen. As I describe in this thesis, the Black filmmaking renaissance is in many ways cinema of resistance – not just in its choice of engagement with mass audiences, but in themes, narrative, and visual cultures employed.

Further, it is not just in the cultural sphere that these filmmakers often challenge accepted views. They also contest an oft cited view amongst scholars as well as some practitioners, that privileges what we tend to think of as ‘independent’ cinema as the only legitimate medium for complex messaging which resists and challenges dominant, normative power structures. Over the last few decades, there has been much discussion in Black film scholarship, as well as amongst Black filmmakers, about the pursuit of a “Black aesthetic” – in counterpoint to the problematic imaginary of Hollywood, given its continued deficit in diversity of voices (on screen and off), and its anxiety over challenging white hegemonic discourses. Scholars such as Gladstone Yearwood and Ed Guerrero have favoured independent filmmaking as a route to a more political and authentic Black cinema, less susceptible to the economic, social and political pressures which can come with the big studios and their dominant distribution networks.<sup>41</sup> While this logic is sound and reasonable, it has sometimes led to implicit criticism of the Black

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<sup>41</sup> For example, see sections ‘Black film as oppositional aesthetic practice’ and ‘Resistance as empowerment in Black filmmaking’, in Gladstone Yearwood, *Black film as a signifying practice: Cinema, Narration and the African American Aesthetic Tradition* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), pp.104-112.

filmmakers who work in the mainstream, or are engaged in making what are sometimes termed ‘crossover’ films which appeal to white audiences as well as Black.<sup>42</sup> Such critics have sometimes pointed to movements such as the ‘LA Rebellion’, a group of Black filmmakers that includes Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, and Haile Gerima, which grew out of the civil rights and global revolutionary spirit of the late 1960s. Such artists experimented with the film form or otherwise sought to challenge traditional representation of Blackness and Black history.<sup>43</sup>

However, this critical approach fails to recognise the disruptive potential of mainstream cinema. Yearwood in particular is highly prescriptive, arguing that while “black cinema can be described as an act of resistance”, that it is only when “a black film refuses dominant social categories and undertakes a reformulation of cinematic languages.” I disagree, and argue that cinema engaging with mass markets and socially realist film language, particularly the work of filmmakers from Black and other marginalized communities, is fully capable of introducing subversion and political critique into the work – despite the capitalist and consumerist forces that govern the film industry. This thesis shows that many of these filmmakers demonstrate both boldness and subtlety in weaving strong political messaging into their films and indeed offer challenge to notions of what can be termed ‘activist cinema’. Ava DuVernay echoes Toni Morrison’s discomfort about the idea of art as primarily aesthetics disconnected from politics (what Morrison previously described as “all that art for art’s sake BS”), when DuVernay told one interviewer:<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See for example, Ed Guerrero’s criticism of Spike Lee, and Lee’s 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, as above, pp.147-8. Guerrero critiques Lee’s use of film craft techniques and audio-visual language common in the better-funded, Hollywood films. He suggest that using the “dominant” industry’s film aesthetics essentially helps to reinforce the overall political, as well as artistic, status quo:

“what is revealed in the ever-grander and slicker promenade of images in the trajectory of Lee’s films is that, unlike Antonioni, Jim Jarmusch, or Charles Burnett, Lee is diligently struggling to learn the conventions and clichés of market cinema language, instead of struggling to change the dominant system by creating a visionary language of his own.” (p.148).

As is clear from this book’s chapter and the next, Guerrero does however acknowledge the power and importance of Lee’s and other Black artists’ mainstream films, as well the fact that the boundaries between independent and mainstream filmmaking are not fixed.

<sup>43</sup> For more on the LA Rebellion, sometimes called the UCLA Movement, see: Allyson Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Toni Morrison spoke repeatedly, as in this interview with Kevin Nance, about her belief that “all good art is political”, and her dislike of the idea of art as solely an abstraction: Kevin Nance, ‘The Spirit and the Strength: A Profile of Toni Morrison’, *Poets & Writers*, 2008 <[https://www.pw.org/content/the\\_spirit\\_and\\_the\\_strength\\_a\\_profile\\_of\\_toni\\_morrison](https://www.pw.org/content/the_spirit_and_the_strength_a_profile_of_toni_morrison)> [accessed 12 November 2020].

I'm telling these stories to reach a mass audience... nothing else matters.

As filmmakers, what is our goal with film? For me, it's telling a story meant to be seen by many people, not just the ones who have a movie theater near them and can afford to go ... You couldn't watch *Straight Outta Compton* in Compton, because there's no movie theater there.

I'm trying to urge people to realize that their privilege-preferred presentation of cinema is outdated ... The more that you talk about how to uphold these old systems and methods of presentation that were already excluding so many different types of people ... the more you will lose when it all slips away.<sup>45</sup>

DuVernay has talked elsewhere about the influence of Toni Morrison and the public intellectual's interrogation of race and white supremacy in America.<sup>46</sup> As I outline in this thesis, this is reflected in DuVernay's own work. She is a filmmaker who also sees art as primarily political and, as an extension of that, as indicated above feels a duty to engage with wider audiences *because* the medium of film has a social and political purpose. Together with prolific filmmaker Spike Lee (primarily for this renaissance, I consider his 2015 film *Chi-Raq*), DuVernay is the most demonstrably activist filmmaker in this collection. In many ways she disrupts what is normally considered entertainment, the popular film form, to prompt audiences to question their own complicity in accepting – or at the very least failing to challenge – dominant white supremacist structures, such as those which criminalize Blackness.

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<sup>45</sup> Kyle Buchanan, 'Ava DuVernay: Real People Aren't Seeing Most Movies', *The New York Times*, 20 June 2019  
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/movies/ava-duvernay-movies.html>> [accessed 12 November 2020].

<sup>46</sup> See: Teresa Hagan, 'Don't Wait for Permission: Ava DuVernay as a Black Female Intellectual and Political Artist', *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, 19.1 (2022), pp.43-62.

## *Tentacles of the past*

I argue further that the critiques over mainstream film and aesthetic purity discussed here, are echoes of the 'gatekeeper' approach to Black representation which gave birth to the idea of respectability politics – a notion that has been active around Black cultural production and indeed many areas of Black life, since the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> Echoing the notion of the legitimacy of social and cultural arbiters, I also note that early Black film, popular film for mass Black audiences, was excluded from the formal celebration of art forms included in the Black arts renaissance a century ago, the Harlem Renaissance – despite the presence in Harlem, for at least some of that period, of the artist traditionally considered the greatest of the early Black filmmakers, Oscar Micheaux.<sup>48</sup> Scholar Charles Musser observes that Micheaux was regarded as “too plebeian, too crude...an autodictat”, while the Harlem Renaissance was concerned with “highly polished stuff, preferably about polished people, but certainly untainted by racial stereotypes or embarrassing vulgarity.”<sup>49</sup> Musser’s comment suggests that even in the very early days of the filmmaking craft, Black filmmakers who attempted to appeal to a popular audience could be disparaged by those who deemed such efforts outside of their strategic agendas for Black advancement. It is also noticeable, as Musser further points out, that filmmaking also tends to be excluded from the historiography of the Harlem Renaissance. More recently, scholars such as Davarian Baldwin have, however, been working to highlight the importance of Black filmmaking in the New Negro movement.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> For discussion on, for example, how hip hop and the ghetto-set films of the early 1990s Black Movie Boom came into conflict with notions of 'respectability' from African American cultural gatekeepers, see:

S Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

The phrase 'respectability politics', a concept commonly discussed in African American studies, was coined by scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, discussed in her influential study of African American women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period: *Righteous discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> Charles Musser, 'To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights', in Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser eds., *Oscar Micheaux & His Circle African American Filmmaking and Race cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 126-129.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12. NB Here Musser is quoting one of the scholars of the Harlem Renaissance, David Levering Lewis, whose work I later refer to, and is also included in the bibliography.

<sup>50</sup> Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

Through my research and as outlined in this thesis, I argue that the study of early Black filmmaking, and Oscar Micheaux in particular, is an important reference point for scholars examining Black film today. Not only does it add to our understanding of the evolution of Black filmmaking in the United States, it illustrates how some Black filmmakers used the visual culture of cinema to challenge and resist white supremacy, in many ways, from the medium's earliest days. As I outline in this thesis, Black filmmakers then as now often sought to fold social scripts into their films. In some cases, that was for the purposes of racial uplift, in keeping with the prevalent discourses of the period. In addition, as Alison Landsberg argues, they acted as repositories of collective memory for African Americans during the Great Migrations; at a time of immense turbulence for Black communities, Black film spoke to contemporaneous anxieties about identity and change.<sup>51</sup> With this in mind, where appropriate in this thesis I have used the frame of 'two renaissances', a hundred years apart. This method allows me to excavate how the Black filmmaking renaissance of the early twenty-first century can be better understood, through points of synergy with the renaissance that took place a century earlier. As I argue in Chapter Two, historical and cultural memory is an extremely important part of African American culture. My approach here thus fits with the predilection, evidenced in the work of the Black filmmaking renaissance as I outline, to understand how much the past influences the present.

Further, as referenced above, Manthia Diawara highlighted the generative racist influence of the work of a white, early twentieth-century filmmaker, D.W. Griffith. As Spike Lee points out, Griffith was a pioneer of early film, venerated by film schools who taught their students about the 'father of film', famous for such works as the hugely successful epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) – which also functioned as an extremely racist piece of white supremacist propaganda.<sup>52</sup> The "grammar" of *Birth*, to use Diawara's term, both reflected and projected white supremacist ideologies in a highly effective manner across the United States, during a volatile period of great change in the nation, and via a medium that was extraordinarily

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<sup>51</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Spike Lee has referenced Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in a few of his films, pointing to its racist influence and enduring relevance. He explicitly uses it in *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) for example, depicting a scene where it's played as a kind of induction tool for novice KKK members – something Lee had reportedly heard had been a KKK practice. This seems a credible claim, given the film's egregious characterization of African Americans. Lee's first major effort in film school, *The Answer*, also challenged the pedagogical place of the work in film schools, something which, he describes in the following interview, almost resulted in his expulsion from the course:

reelblack, *Spike Lee - First Works (The Answer/Joels Bed Stuy)*, 2017

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfxCcePNBw4>> [accessed 8 March 2022].

popular – what one scholar described as “the pre-eminent popular art form of the first half of the twentieth century”.<sup>53</sup> As a result, the effects of the film were extremely enduring. A full fifty years later, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP told the *New York Post*:

Since the film appeared fifty years ago...Negroes have made many a breakthrough. But all the Duke Ellingtons, Marian Andersons, Iris Aldridges, Jackie Robinsons, Bert Williamses, Fritz Pollards, the Olympic heroes, the heroes of the two World Wars, the scientists, scholars, technicians, political figures, poets, playwrights, entertainers, and diplomats have not succeeded in erasing the vicious image etched by the Griffith racial epic.”<sup>54</sup>

In common with multiple scholars focusing on race and film, I also situate Griffith’s *Birth* as a key text, and use it as a relational reference point for different arguments I make in this thesis. Given *The Birth of a Nation*’s important position in African American history (and not least because, as scholars have noted, it was the first major cultural target of resistance and protest, around which the nascent National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] galvanized), I use Griffith’s *Birth* to contextualise social, political, and cultural tropes which the Black filmmaking renaissance responds to in Obama era works. I further use it as an anchor point for exploring the importance of historical and cultural memory, another important trope apparent in the renaissance. Finally, responding to Nate Parker’s 2016 appropriation of the title of Griffith’s 1915 film, an important act of resistance, I consider the utility of the film as a white supremacist manifesto in relation to the mythologizing of American national identity, and its interwoven relationship with racist brutality and violence.

### ***My approach***

The importance of cinema as a tool for both engaging with and interrogating social scripts, and national and individual identity narratives, as well as codifying national narratives and communicating social and political messaging, is sometimes contested. However, this thesis echoes the work of scholars Patricia Hill Collins, Mia Mask, Manthia Diawara and many others

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<sup>53</sup> Quote from Jeffrey Richards in his preface to: James C. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action 1913-1972* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.vi.

<sup>54</sup>Quoted in: Stephen Weinberger, ‘*The Birth of a Nation* and the Making of the NAACP’, *Journal of American Studies*, 45.1 (2011), 77–93 (p.77).

in situating film as a key interpretive art form which projects important social and political messaging to audiences. Further I argue that film has the capacity to propagate, cohere or subvert national identity myths; as scholar Claude Taylor writes, “the movies are the place where the fundamental national ideals are set up.”<sup>55</sup>

From the early days of film in America, the mainstream film industry has been one of the primary vectors of national narrative myth-making, acting as a key tool in promoting myths of American exceptionalism. A doctrine which argues that America has a special status on the world stage, it also promotes the idea that America’s national identity narrative is synonymous with freedom, fairness and courage, a notion that is constantly evoked by presidents and presidential candidates as it feeds well into what American political scientist Stephen Walt calls “patriotic chest-thumping.”<sup>56</sup> Cinema has played a key part in soldering these ideas (and ideals) into the public consciousness, as well as, for many decades propagating the notion of America as inherently white. That is, Whiteness as not only central to the idea of American historical narrative, but central to its identity narrative. As Toni Morrison has described, for those coming to America from Europe, they “became American” via the “unifying stroke” of not being Black.<sup>57</sup> Historically that narrative has often promoted or fed into support for notions of whiteness as superior to any other ethnicity. Maryann Erigha argues that such notions have become embedded in the production structures of the film industry – reflective of the racial hegemony of the world surrounding it:

White Hollywood industry workers’ racial practices, beliefs, attitudes and production politics reflect a ‘possessive investment in whiteness’ that contributes to a racialized order.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted by Mia Mask 2012 (above), p.5.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen W. Malt, ‘The Myth of American Exceptionalism’, *Foreign Policy*, 189 (2011), 72–75 (p.72). Notably Obama was criticized in the 2012 election campaign as being unpatriotic, when he made the intellectual point that American exceptionalism was no better, and no worse, than other countries who generated their own narratives of exceptionalism.

<sup>57</sup> *Toni Morrison: What Racism Is*, The Charlie Rose Show, PBS c.1992  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EQcy361vB8>> [accessed 8 April 2022].

<sup>58</sup> Maryann Erigha, *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), p.6.

For more on Hollywood’s propagation of whiteness through its films and employment practices, as well as African Americans’ subversion of those strategies, see also: Eithne Quinn, *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

In the face of pervasive industry forces, on screen and off, I argue that the Black filmmaking renaissance represents, in some important ways, a challenge to myth-making about Whiteness as both a superior ethnicity, and central to the American narrative; as well as challenging the traditional Hollywood dynamic which has often underpinned these notions.

As part of the larger interdisciplinary approach of this thesis, these elements of my argument are drawn from a race-representational studies approach to cultural products. It is important to note that this remains an ever-evolving field of cultural studies, with some scholars critical of what they see as the limitations of former, or more traditional methodologies – such as a more binary appraisal of the racial politics of cultural products (i.e. white texts versus Black texts), and which consequently focus more narrowly and heavily on issues of racial visibility.

A relatively early voice critiquing a strategy which advocates the replacement of ‘white’ cultural products with ‘Black’ cultural products, as a means to resist the hegemonic Whiteness of cultural industries and, by extension, the racism of the overarching political hegemony, was the leading cultural critic Stuart Hall. Hall, writing about this topic in the 1990s but still influential today, warned that such a sharply binary strategy essentializes difference, and further does not reflect the experiences of Black people in the diaspora.<sup>59</sup> He also questioned concomitant essentialist notions of what constitutes Black creative work as an immutable entity, arguing that this fails to grasp the “dialogic strategies and hybrid forms essential to the diaspora aesthetic”. This has the effect of de-historicizing difference, argued Hall, containing the signifier ‘Black’ within a “biologically constituted racial category” – and separating it from its historical and political construction, or potential for political change.<sup>60</sup>

Later critics have built on Hall’s arguments. In his work on television, for example, Herman Gray has questioned a continued emphasis on increasing race visibility, in a twenty-first century where, he suggests, there is a comparative proliferation of images of Black people in popular culture compared to previous eras when such critiques arose. Such a narrow approach to race-representational cultural politics risks missing other important critiques which have become more relevant, he argues. Gray, in common with other critics such as Evelyn Alsultany, highlights the complexity of discourses on visibility – noting that the increased or prominent

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<sup>59</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘What Is This “Black” in Black Popular Culture’, *Social Justice*, 20.1/2 (1993), pp.104-114 (110).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p.111

visibility of Black figures across cultural forms has also been used by conservative forces to argue that the United States has reached a post-racial era, when that is far from the case.<sup>61</sup>

More recently, Anamik Saha draws on these and other scholars' arguments about the limitations of traditional race-representational critical approaches. Saha also argues that critiques based on racial visibility, and/or a narrow focus on textual analysis, are insufficient, often leading simply to a drive to "counter negative representations of minorities with more positive ones."<sup>62</sup> Instead he calls for "a production analysis of race and the media", which includes a consideration of both racial visibility and textual analysis, but where the emphasis shifts more broadly to understanding "how cultural industries *make* race." For the film business, that includes how the entire ecosystem of the industry and its practices work together in this endeavour, including labour structures, creative praxis, marketing and distribution; as well as how the history and legacy of colonialism, and importantly, capitalism, continue to shape the cultural industries, and "make race."<sup>63</sup>

While this thesis draws attention, where appropriate, to the oppositional praxis at work in the Black filmmaking renaissance, it does not assume or argue that the renaissance is simply seeking to replace white texts with Black texts. This project also points to aspects of the approaches outlined above (formally and informally), from scholars seeking to ask broader questions about how films become 'raced', as well as how these film cultural products look to challenge cultural and political hegemonies. (In Chapter One, for example, I consider how Ava DuVernay has responded to the barriers to opportunity and creative input for women and people of colour, by setting up her own distribution system alongside a host of other initiatives – in order to give a greater range of people access to creating film content, and promote more diverse perspectives on film.) This thesis also seeks to examine not just the renaissance's relationship to the socio-political contexts in which these films circulated in Obama's America, but how they dialogue with much wider historical, social and political discourses about race, and contest the national imaginary. A fuller analysis of the extent to which the filmmakers

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<sup>61</sup> Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

See also:

Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

Quoted in Saha [see below], Chapter One.

<sup>62</sup> Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), Preface.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* Chapter One.

tackled (or failed to tackle) the race-ing of their cultural products by industry ecosystems is beyond the scope of this project. However I highlight some aspects of where their praxis worked to alter both micro and macro industry norms – in awareness of, and challenge to, normative race-ing practices.

In summary, this thesis examines how the Black filmmaking renaissance, to varying degrees in individual films and grouped as a mass, represents a cultural politics which seeks a recalibration of power – echoing the strategy described by Stuart Hall when he originally argued for a “cultural positionality” approach in Black cultural production and critique, a methodology which “move[s] us into... a different logic of difference.” Such an approach, Hall argued, recognises that “cultural hegemony...is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture.”<sup>64</sup>

As I argue through each chapter, many of the films employ different strategies which question national identity myths, exploring themes which challenge entrenched ideas of American exceptionalism. The two films in this renaissance which focus on slavery for instance, Nate Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) and Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013), which I discuss in Chapter Four, insist on a re-examination of national narratives of fairness and freedom enshrined in the American flag, the national anthem, and the Pledge of Allegiance. I explore how they drill down into the antebellum era to highlight how the economic system of slavery engendered legacies of white supremacy and violence that remain highly discernible in today’s America, both in the apparatus of the state and in individual communities and attitudes. Other filmmakers in the renaissance interrogate how social systems fix and regulate individual behaviour, films which also question how masculinity is constructed and validated. As I touched on earlier, Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* explores the performance and policing of Black masculinity in Black communities run on heteronormative structures, and how a queer Black identity has been traditionally conceptualized – and regulated – as somehow threatening, and inauthentically Black. In Chapter Three I explore *Moonlight*; and, in an era when there was renewed cultural and critical debate about notions of Black masculinity, given the new leader of the free world was a Black man, I also examine how tropes of masculinity are explored in two other films of the renaissance, *Chi-Raq* and *Straight Outta Compton*.

If is noticeable that so many of the films of the Black filmmaking renaissance are historical narratives – *Selma*, *12 Years a Slave*, *The Birth of a Nation* and even *Straight Outta Compton*

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<sup>64</sup> Hall, pp.110-111.

(2015) are set in the past. In Chapter Two, I examine the use and purpose of historical and cultural memory for Black America and filmmakers, taking *Selma* as a key text. For a community whose ancestral past was erased, whose rights to be considered 'legitimate' Americans were, in practice, destabilized and contested by the apartheid laws of Jim Crow, and who continue to suffer the legacies of slavery in multiple areas of civic life, I argue that Black filmmakers are excavating the past for meaning and explanation. They are also reminding white audience that the election of a Black president does not equate to America having reached a post-racial status.<sup>65</sup>

This instinct also reflects the connection between the growing Black Lives Matter and other racial justice initiatives, and the work of these filmmakers. As discussed earlier, like the demonstrations of the Obama era, I argue that these works serve as vibrant artworks of resistance in conflict with larger social or political narratives of post-racialism. In Chapter One, I argue that they use mainstream film as activist practice, to challenge audiences to look again at the nation's history to understand more about structural inequalities which perpetuate far lower life chances for African Americans (and other people of colour), the practice of racial violence, an understanding of state-sanctioned violence, the tools of cultural racism, and how the past informs the present.

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This thesis examines Black mainstream film of the Obama era as a distinct renaissance. I have grouped, characterized and contextualized these films, and drawn out how the works coalesce around certain themes. My research further investigates how the filmmakers of the renaissance respond to and reflect contemporary and historical discourses connected to race, identity, politics and protest, in the Obama era. Importantly it also considers how they seek to engage with these discourses through a Black gaze; that is, a perspective not necessarily oppositional but positioned differently to the traditional normative Whiteness of mainstream Hollywood.

My thesis is situated in the tradition of intersectional analyses of film, culture, history, and social and political history. This approach is exemplified by works such as Ed Guerrero's

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<sup>65</sup> As discussed above, multiple scholars have challenged the myth of post-racialism, and provide evidence and analysis to illustrate the absurdity of the claim. See for example: Lawrence Dawson and Michael C. Bobo, 'One year later and the myth of a post-racial society', *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 6.2 (2009), pp.247-249.

*Framing Blackness*, which contextualizes Black film within the wider historical, social and political forces at play.<sup>66</sup>

The scholarship on which my research stands is highly interdisciplinary. It draws on cultural studies, media studies (including mass communication theory), sociology, psychology, criminal justice studies and legal history, art history, as well as American and African American history and political science. I use critical race theory, whiteness studies, and queer theory, alongside textual and discourse analysis.

The central guiding principle throughout has been the textual analysis of the films; this is the starting point and framework around which each chapter is built, and provides the blueprint for my arguments. Close textual analysis not only allows me to draw out thematic echoes between the films, but also to determine how they dialogue with, or comment on, wider historical, political and social discourses. Those discourses involve current (contemporaneous) events; but I also excavate the more profound meditations – and interventions – that many of the films make in American and African American history, the kinetic activism of cultural representation, and evolving questions about African American identity.

The Black filmmaking renaissance of the Obama years represents an important cultural moment. Given, as I have discussed, the traditionally marginalised or excluded position of Black representation on screen and off in mainstream film, it is vitally important to understand how these films contribute to recalibrating existing hierarchies, and reformulating the national imaginary, through one of its chief cultural products, mainstream film – in many ways aiming to make it a locus of nationhood that more closely reflects American history and society in its diversity. Since Obama's presidency, the national imaginary has become a volatile battleground of competing narratives of national identity, and claims around historical and collective memory. Trump's presidency proved to be the very moment when the Black filmmaking renaissance was needed most to engage and intervene in public discourses – which, I posit, they have done successfully, with films like *BlackKkKlansman*, *Black Panther*, *Sorry to Bother You* (all 2018) and many more. This thesis' work on charting the rise of the Black filmmaking renaissance thus contributes not only to our understanding of how Black filmmakers, in a lineage Black visual cultures of resistance, responded to the preoccupations of the Obama years; but also provides an excellent starting point for future research on how Black film and filmmakers have dealt with the rise in white nationalism during the Trump era.

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<sup>66</sup> Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

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## Chapter One: Black Filmmaking as Activist Practice

### Introduction

On May 26<sup>th</sup> 2020 a disturbing video, filmed on a mobile phone, began circulating on social media, and soon became a global phenomenon. The distressing footage showed an African American man, George Floyd, being slowly killed by a police officer, on the side of the road on a busy Minneapolis street in full view of horrified bystanders.<sup>67</sup> The act itself and the apparent brazenness of its execution by a white officer, purposefully kneeling on the victim's neck for almost nine minutes despite Floyd's protests that he could not breathe, recalled in startlingly vivid imagery the long history of deadly violence perpetrated against Black people in America by whites. As a result it was quickly dubbed a "modern day lynching" by many, and as the moving images circulated around the world, mass protests against racial injustice followed in the US and countries far beyond, on an unprecedented scale.<sup>68</sup> This event, coming at a time of the worldwide Coronavirus health pandemic which had highlighted the racial disparities in America, the figure of a white representative of the state meting out such violence on a Black body, seemed a horrifically apt reminder of the ongoing legacy of America's entrenched problem with anti-Blackness.<sup>69</sup> In response the Black activist, the Reverend Al Sharpton,

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<sup>67</sup> For a discussion about the term and its continued legacy, see:

Eliot McLaughlin, 'America's legacy of lynching isn't all history. Many say it's still happening today', *CNN* (3 June 2020)

< <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/03/us/lynching-america-george-floyd-ahmaud-arbery-breonna-taylor/index.html>>

George Floyd's brother, Philonise Floyd, also gave evidence to the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee, congressional hearing into racial injustice and police brutality following the death of Mr Floyd:

David Morgan and Richard Cowan, 'George Floyd's brother decries 'a modern-day lynching' in testimony to Congress', *Reuters* (10 June 2020)

<<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-minneapolis-police-protests-idUSKBN23H1NB>>

<sup>68</sup> See here for an example of news coverage of George Floyd's death, which includes an extract of the video.

WARNING: disturbing content.

<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2020/05/30/officer-charged-in-death-of-george-floyd.cnn>

Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, Jugag K. Patel, 'Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History', *New York Times* (3 July 2020)

< <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>>

<sup>69</sup> Several studies in the US and the UK have shown the disproportionate effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on people of colour. For example see: Dr Sherita Hill Golden, 'Coronavirus in African American and Other People of Colour', *John Hopkins University* website, 20 April 2020

succinctly employed the visual imagery of the mobile phone film to illustrate how the manner of George Floyd's death perfectly presented a metaphor for the historical Black experience in America, as he spoke at Floyd's memorial service:

George Floyd's story is the story of Black folks... The reason we could never be who we wanted and dreamed of being was, you kept your knee on our necks... It's time for us to stand up in George's name and say: Get your knee off our necks.<sup>70</sup>

The largely Black congregation loudly applauded Sharpton's speech, an emotional response to the vivid imagery blending Floyd's death with historical memory, and deep frustration at the ongoing threat posed to Black citizens by White America. Outside the church, millions of people across America and in countries beyond its borders also reacted with fury and protest at George Floyd's killing, as the video was shared on social media and replayed around the world. The anti-racism protest movement Black Lives Matter, started in 2013, resurged, as veteran demonstrators together with those adopting that slogan for the first time, marched through towns and cities, many of those in predominantly white areas.<sup>71</sup> All the while public discourse and even commercial companies turned to discussions of tackling structural inequalities at all levels of society.

The horrific video of George Floyd's ordeal perfectly illustrates how the moving image can be a powerful vector for political messaging, and provide the potential for intervening in, and galvanizing, public opinion. Whether it be via a tiny mobile screen, television or film drama broadcast through a screen at home, or films projected onto a giant screen at the cinema, the potential exists for moving image to convey political messages, raise consciousness about a topic, and provoke public debate.

In this chapter I will explore how the Black filmmaking renaissance sits in a lineage of Black artists using visual cultures as a form of resistance, and producing work which contains

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<<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities>>

<sup>70</sup> See: ' "Get your knee off our necks": Al Sharpton delivers eulogy at George Floyd memorial – video', *The Guardian* (5 June 2020)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2020/jun/05/get-your-knee-off-our-necks-al-sharpton-delivers-eulogy-at-floyd-memorial-video>> [accessed 6 January 2021].

<sup>71</sup> Courtenay W. Daum, 'White Complicity', *New Political Science*, 42.3 (2020), pp.443-449.

political messaging. Beginning with an appraisal of the relevant scholarship on media messaging in the context of film, I discuss how the film medium is increasingly being used in different contexts in a blurring of the lines between film, reportage, and activism. I argue that Black American activism has long used visual cultures, and that, in some ways subverting normative conventions on what is considered activist filmmaking, many of the Black filmmakers of the renaissance are using mainstream film to convey strong political messaging. Setting this in context of 'two renaissances', I contextualise the work of the present-day renaissance filmmakers with an analysis of the ways in which early Black filmmakers, specifically the director often referred to as the 'father of Black filmmaking' Oscar Micheaux, used his work to intervene in and resist prevailing white supremacist discourses, including those soldered in the nascent film industry by the influential racist epic of 1915, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*.

The middle turn of this chapter considers the motif of the American dream in relation to mythmaking about American exceptionalism in the wider cultural arena, a notion perpetually reinforced through Hollywood. Through this analysis I establish the importance of cinema, particularly mainstream film, for how it has the potential to be used as an interventionist tool to resist white supremacist political and cultural discourses, which have historically ensured Black Americans are relegated to the margins of notions of American identity.

Moving forward to the Black filmmaking renaissance, I focus on the work of Ava DuVernay (*13<sup>th</sup>* [2016], *Selma* [2014]) as the key filmmaker through which to explore this resistance, examining how she uses mainstream film to centre Black Americans in the American socio-political-cultural arena. This reflects the kind of "positional" strategy outlined by theorist Stuart Hall in his seminal 1993 essay which continues to influence scholars today, 'What is this "black" in black popular culture?' Here Hall argued that cultural strategies that seek to simply replace white cultural products with Black, "into two mutually opposed either/or's" are deficient. He argued instead that "cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination... it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about changing the dispositions and configurations of power."<sup>72</sup> Further, taking *Selma* as principal film text, a narrative drama about Dr Martin Luther King and the civil rights campaign to secure African American right to vote in the 1960s, I take a deep delve into selected scenes to examine how DuVernay uses narrative and film craft, to make political points which resonate with contemporary audiences.

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<sup>72</sup> Stuart Hall, 'What is this "black" in black popular culture?', *Social Justice*, 20.1/2, pp.104-111 (107-8).

### ***Film and political messaging – the scholarship context***

Although mobile phone video, and the kind of citizen reporting which saw the widespread dissemination of the film image in George Floyd's death, evokes an alternative "communication space" to cinematic film, an increasingly large pool of scholarship has sprung up in its own right on the use of mobile phones for recording and disseminating moving images, with film scholars pointing to how such mobile technology has "democratized and globalized access to motion picture making".<sup>73</sup> In any case, whether it be via a tiny mobile screen, television or film drama broadcast through a screen at home, or films projected onto a giant screen at the cinema, the potential exists for moving image to convey political messages, raise consciousness about a topic, and provoke public debate.

Whether such film messaging has an effect on audiences is more difficult to determine with certainty, and has long been the subject of scholarly debate. For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, research in this area was dominated by a 1960 milestone work by Joseph Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication*. Analysing available data to that date, Klapper coined the frequently-cited term "minimal effects" to sum up his conclusion about the effects of the media on audiences.<sup>74</sup> Despite some scholars countering Klapper's findings in the decades that followed, his view that "mass communication functions far more frequently as an agent of reinforcement than as an agent of change" largely prevailed in communications studies for many years.<sup>75</sup> In the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first century, however, other voices gained ground in this contested terrain. Scholars Bennet and Iyengar, for instance, note that "societies have changed so dramatically since the time of these

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<sup>73</sup> Scholar Roger Odin coined the term "communication spaces". For further discussion about the meaning of the term and about media consumption via mobile phones, see: Roger Odin, 'Spectator, Film, and the Mobile Phone,' in *Audiences*, ed. by Ian Christie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

Mia Mask, *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (Routledge: New York, 2012), p.2.

<sup>74</sup> Joseph Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Free Press, 1960).

<sup>75</sup> For more on the evolving scholarship on media effects referred to here, see: Lance W. Bennett, Shanto Iyengar, 'A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication', *Journal of Communication*, 58.4 (2008), pp.707-731 (pp.707-8).

The quote is from Klapper (p.15), but cited and discussed in Donald R. Kinder, 'Communication and Politics in the Age of Information', *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ed. by D Sears, L Huddy and R Jervis, p.357.

landmark contributions that one must question the continuing relevance of paradigms drawn from them.”<sup>76</sup>

While some critics still share Klapper’s view, others now suggest that communications media are highly capable of influencing audiences. Notably, this is the case across academic disciplines, from communications studies, to sociology and social science, to cultural and cinema studies.<sup>77</sup> Cultural studies critic Douglas Kellner, for instance, in *Film, Politics and Ideology: Reflections on Hollywood Film in the Age of Reagan*, makes the case that Hollywood film intervenes in the political struggles of the day.<sup>78</sup> In their work on the documentary-maker Michael Moore, media scholars Brian Snee and Thomas Benson argue that Moore’s work has “provoked a response [among conservative politicians] that led to a radical change in US election laws.”<sup>79</sup> The rise of scholarship on the importance of gender and race-based representation is in itself an indicator of the importance which parts of the academy (as well as public and activist communities) view the capacity of the moving image for delivering political and social messaging to audiences. Sociologist and African American Studies professor, Patricia Hill Collins, argues that “films and videos provide social scripts that show people appropriate gender ideology as well as how to behave toward one another.” She also notes that “despite the protests by defenders of the media that sounds and images have little effects on consumers, the billions spent on advertising dollars suggests otherwise.”<sup>80</sup> Film and cultural studies scholar Mia Mask continues with this theme when she argues that “cinema [is] a powerful political tool and artistic site of cultural production shaping the national imaginary”,

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Bennett and Iyengar, p.707.

<sup>77</sup> Several scholars focus on the political messaging in Hollywood films, such as Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), and Ernest Giglio, *Here’s Looking at You: Hollywood, Film and Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). A key text which argues for the importance of American popular films as containing important messaging is Elizabeth Haas, Terry Christensen, Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 2015). Dramas such as ‘soap operas’ have also been used by health professionals to raise awareness about specific health issues. Medical academics have also protested the influence of unrealistic storylines in films and TV shows. See for example: Sallie Baxendale, ‘Memories aren’t made of this: Amnesia at the movies’, *BMJ* (Dec 2004), pp.1480-3.

<sup>78</sup> Douglas Kellner, ‘Film politics and Ideology: Reflections on Hollywood Film in the Age of Reagan’, published on UCLA website: [www.pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/filmpoliticsideology.pdf](http://www.pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/filmpoliticsideology.pdf), p.1.

<sup>79</sup> Brian J. Snee, Thomas Benson, *Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary* (Carcondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2020), p.5.

<sup>80</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.18.

something which “motivates some film scholars to take seriously the history, ideology and aesthetics of cinema apparatus.”<sup>81</sup>

In alignment with these scholars, I posit that amongst the several reasons for the unprecedented response to George Floyd’s death across the globe, the shocking visual dramaturgy of the mobile phone film is a key component in sparking public and private discourse about attitudes towards race and structural racism. The young passer-by who shot the video, African American teenager Darnella Frazier, was later awarded a prize by the prestigious PEN America organization, which credited her video with sparking “a wave of community outrage, a major investigation, and [Police Officer] Chauvin’s arrest, as well as the dismissal of the other three officers.”<sup>82</sup> As this accolade suggests, the public perception reflects the notion that Frazier’s video made a highly effective intervention in public discourse. This chimes with film scholar Clive Nwonka’s more general point that: “the protests over George Floyd’s death show how film and culture can be tools of anti-racism.”<sup>83</sup>

Such videos sit at the intersection of surveillance and reportage, as well as moving image art. And the film also takes its place in a long, civil rights lineage of Black Americans employing visual culture, in a strategy of resistance to white oppression. It functions both to bear radical witness to and publicly expose anti-Black racism, as well as provoke a response in Black and white audiences. In this sense, the film showing the killing of George Floyd sits in a lineage with, for example, the insistence in 1955 by the mother of murdered Black teenager Emmett Till, that her mutilated son’s body be waked in an open casket. She thereby ensured that reporters could photograph him, and tens of thousands of mourners could join millions more across the US (and beyond) who saw the photos, and be confronted with the never-ending terrorization of Black bodies, in the mid-century American ‘land of the free’.<sup>84</sup> As scholars

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Mask, p.5.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted on the webpage for Darnella Frazier on the PEN America website:

< <https://pen.org/user/darnella-frazier/> >

PEN America describes itself as organization dedicated to literary culture and freedom of expression. It counts among its members and former members Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, and President Barack Obama – who received an honour in the same year as Darnella Frazier.

<sup>83</sup> Clive James Nwonka, ‘The protests over George Floyd’s death show how film and culture can be tools of anti-racism, but we must continue to value them beyond this moment’, *USA American Policy and Politics Blog*, 8 June 2020

<<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2020/06/08/the-protests-over-george-floyds-death-show-how-film-and-culture-can-be-tools-of-anti-racism-but-we-must-continue-to-value-them-beyond-this-moment/>>

<sup>84</sup> For further scholarship in respect of Emmett Till’s murder, and the activism of Mamie Till-Mobley, see: E.J. Gorn, *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca note, the widely shared image of the 14 year-old as he lay in a funeral parlour, proactively reversed the white supremacist political messaging of the Jim Crow era lynchings, tableaux of silent Black bodies hanging from trees, while white crowds gathered and celebrated. Instead, by putting Emmett Till's body on display, it:

“rhetorically transformed the lynched black body from a symbol of unmitigated white power to one illustrating the ugliness of racial violence and the aggregate power of the black community.”<sup>85</sup>

Mamie Till-Mobley's decision to wake her son in this way also reclaimed, for Emmett, the agency of his own body, affording him in death the power to protest the violence and iniquities of a white supremacist system, which led white men in Mississippi to feel it was their right to murder a Black child for an alleged fleeting interaction with a white woman.<sup>86</sup>

The same strategy was employed by the Civil Rights' activists of the 1950s and 60s, using media coverage - descriptions and images, including moving images – of the vicious state violence meted out to peaceful protestors, to expose the violent suppression of Black rights in America, and provoke political action to correct it. The powerful utilization of images has long been a mainstay of resistance activism, since the early days of photography when abolitionists recognized the usefulness of the new medium for their campaigns against slavery.<sup>87</sup>

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I also make these connections about visual cultures and activism in:

Teresa Hagan, 'Don't Wait for Permission: Ava DuVernay as a Black Female Intellectual and Political Artist', *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, 19.1 (2022), 43–62.

<sup>85</sup> Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca, 'Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 8.2 (Summer 2005), pp.263-286 (p.263).

<sup>86</sup> Hagan, as above, p.53.

<sup>87</sup> For more on political uses of photography and visual culture around the institution of slavery in America and abolitionism, see for example: Matthew Fox-Amato, *Photography, Human Bondage, and the Birth of Modern Visual Politics in America* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

I also write about this; see Hagan, as above, pp.49-51.

It is illustrative of how activist practice and ideologies shift, and worth noting that the use of such graphic images has become highly contentious in the twenty-first century, with some activists criticizing this strategy of using such dramaturgy, both across the media and in film, arguing that it is traumatizing for people of colour. This has led to criticism of some of the films of the black filmmaking renaissance, raising questions over intent and spectatorship. For example, accusations of “torture porn” were levelled at Steve McQueen's *12 years a Slave* (2015). See: Stephanie Li, '12 Years a Slave as a Neo-Slave Narrative', *American Literary History*, 26.2 (2014), pp.326-331.

In this chapter I argue that the artists of the Black filmmaking renaissance sit within this lineage of using visual cultures as activist praxis. This is not to suggest that they are all primarily focused on activism in their works; or to propose that all their work is free from reflecting any political or social discourses that, in other ways, support existing hegemonic codes. However, I nevertheless argue that many of these artists use the moving image medium of film to communicate various political and activist ideas through their work, whether that be through narrative, commercial filmmaking, or documentary. I also argue that traditional notions of what constitutes 'activist filmmaking' in the academy as well as the public sphere, such as independent films, and works sometimes referred to as 'useful cinema' in media studies, is incomplete, because it tends to exclude the world of activist filmmaking that circulates primarily in mainstream arenas, sometimes termed commercial film. While there is some blurring of definition, the films in the renaissance would also largely not be considered 'social issues' films (a genre usually associated with works such as 'kitchen sink' dramas, and the cinema of auteurs like Ken Loach), because the films of the renaissance are not set in the present day and explicitly pegged to a contemporary social issue.<sup>88</sup>

Further, I argue that the Black filmmaking renaissance is an example of African American artists refusing to be hemmed in by categorization of genre. Black American artists have long been agile in their approach to using their art as a form of resistance, a strategy I discuss in this chapter (and throughout this thesis). Such connections between Black film art and activism are emphasized by the fact that film scholar B Ruby Rich highlights that Darnella Frazier was dubbed both 'Filmmaker of the Year' by the Press, but also 'the Rosa Parks of her generation' by her lawyer, for her action in filming and ensuring the dissemination of the circumstances of George Floyd's death.<sup>89</sup> These combined labels point to the potential for alliances between the film medium and activism. Underlining this connection, Frazier was presented with her PEN award not by a journalist, but by acclaimed film director and activist Spike Lee.

Lee himself demonstrated the agility and interdisciplinarity of many Black filmmakers who display a drive to embrace activist practice in their work; for instance, using different genres within their films, or more generally working across genres rather than specializing only in one

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<sup>88</sup> The exception here might be Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station* (2013), focusing on Oscar Grant, who was killed by San Francisco transport police officer Johannes Mehserle. Even here, definition is blurry, since the film is mostly set in the 24 hours *before* Mr Grant died, rather than focusing on his death, the aftermath, and the fight for justice.

<sup>89</sup> B. Ruby Rich, 'The Screening Life, Once Removed', *Film Quarterly*, 74.1, pp.5-10.

type of filmmaking. In 1993 Lee prefaced his biopic of the famous civil rights leader Malcolm X with a long clip of another citizen-reportage film which, like the Frazier video, also documented police brutality towards Black Americans and resulted in mass protests: the video of Los Angeles Police beating civilian Rodney King by the side of the road in 1991.<sup>90</sup> In this example Lee used the footage of the notorious incident to set the political scene for his wider narrative about the assassinated civil rights leader Malcolm X, and to make scathing criticisms which illustrate to the audience the connections between the history of white, Western oppression of Black peoples across the globe, and the continued experience of profound levels of racism against African Americans in their own country. Film scholar Ed Guerrero noted that the “enduring accomplishment of *Malcolm X*” was that “Malcolm and his ideas, in large part due to the efforts of Spike Lee and company, are more alive today and available to a new generation than at any time in his life.”<sup>91</sup> As Guerrero indicates, *Malcolm X* was never purely a biopic, but had always also been a conduit for messaging which highlighted both white oppression, and Black pride combined with political ideologies.

### ***Black filmmaking and mass market engagement***

Building on the cultural analysis described above, and the bedrock of scholarship I have outlined which acknowledges the importance of film for intervening in public discourse, this chapter will explore works of the Black filmmaking renaissance as political films, specifically a subset of political films that can be defined as activist in nature. As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the notion of activist film tends to be associated with independent or arthouse filmmaking, as opposed to films which are financed by Hollywood studios, or otherwise seek to engage with mass audiences. However, this discourse ignores the capacity of filmmakers to be both bold and subtle in weaving political messaging into their films, and I argue that the Black filmmaking renaissance tends to reflect this agility.

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<sup>90</sup> In 1991, multiple Los Angeles police officers were filmed brutally beating Rodney King by the side of the road. The film was made by a local man, George Holliday, who could see the incident from his balcony.

For a media report and review of the case, see:  
Anjali Sastry and Karen Bates, ‘When LA Erupted In Anger: A Look Back At The Rodney King Riots’, *NPR* [online article] (26 April 2017)  
<<https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots>> [accessed 12 May 2022].

<sup>91</sup> Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p.204.

Some scholarship exists analysing political messaging in mass market filmmaking, much of that focusing on films which centre on political storylines.<sup>92</sup> However, scholarship analysing other commercial filmmaking for activist praxis largely remains a gap in the academy. This chapter seeks to fill that gap via my examination of the Black filmmaking renaissance, and to illustrate that this is an example of how Black artists in America have long used art as a form of resistance and protest.

Over two years after Obama had left office, Ava DuVernay described part of her motivation for filmmaking: “I’m telling these stories to reach a mass audience... nothing else matters.”<sup>93</sup> DuVernay was referring to her decision to debut her documentary feature film *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016), chronicling the foundational and perpetual racism inherent in the American criminal justice system, on the mass streaming platform Netflix, instead of opting for cinema release – a practice traditionally seen as more prestigious. DuVernay went on to say that *13<sup>th</sup>* had achieved four times the number of viewers on Netflix than her Oscar-nominated drama *Selma* (2015), released in cinemas, about Martin Luther King’s fight to protect voting rights for people of colour, amid several states’ efforts to suppress them.<sup>94</sup> DuVernay makes plain here and elsewhere that she intends her work to be seen by as many people as possible, and is willing to go against the traditional and accepted norms of cinema distribution, in order to achieve that aim.

DuVernay’s comments also highlight the flexibility of those Black filmmakers who seek to engage audiences with confronting the material realities of racism for African Americans, and/or the socio-political history of racism in America. Some of these such filmmakers are working across several arenas (theatrical release/online streaming, for example), across different genres, and with varied budgets, distribution deals, and industry support. Whatever the difference arising from such variation in origin or production, what their practice shares is a drive to engage audiences with discourses centred on race and racism; and/or otherwise arguing for what Stuart Hall calls “a different logic of difference”, a strategy of cultural

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<sup>92</sup> See for example:

Michelle C. Pautz, ‘*Argo and Zero Dark Thirty: Film, Government, and Audiences*’, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 48.1 (2015), pp.120–121.

<sup>93</sup> Kyle Buchanan, ‘Real People Aren’t Seeing Most Movies’, *The New York Times* (20 June 2019) < <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/movies/ava-duvernay-movies.html>>.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. Buchanan.

positioning which, applied in this context, bids for Blackness and Black experiences to be recognized as just as central to notions of American identity as Whiteness.<sup>95</sup>

I posit that with this type of engagement, Black filmmakers in the twenty-first century echo the approach of the first Black filmmakers one hundred years earlier, filmmakers such as Oscar Micheaux.<sup>96</sup> This analysis enriches our understanding of the work of the filmmakers of the Obama era (and beyond), revealing how the artistic-historical agency of these latter Black filmmakers is in a continuum with their filmmaking ancestors.<sup>97</sup> As a baseline, it also reveals that filmmaking activism through cultural (film) products engaging with mass audiences, was a founding tenet of Black cinema and the ‘race films’ of the silent era – films made by Black directors, with Black casts, centred on Black lives. This suggests several important elements about some African American approaches to art and activism – and points to the versatility of Black Americans, who have frequently been shut out of the corridors of political and media power, in their adoption of the arts as resistance to pervading racist orthodoxies.

Before moving to this analysis, it is important to briefly tackle issues over terminology used to describe early Black filmmaking. Several scholars in this field refer to the work of the early black filmmakers as “independent” filmmakers.<sup>98</sup> As I touched on above, distinctions between mainstream and independent descriptors are messy. The complexity is intensified when considering early Black filmmaking, since Hollywood as we know it had not yet been established when these filmmakers were working, and the nascent industry essentially comprised small independent filmmakers/companies.<sup>99</sup> Particularly given our present-day

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<sup>95</sup> Hall, 1993. See thesis Introduction for more discussion of Stuart Hall’s arguments for a cultural politics built on the idea of shifting the ‘positionality’ of cultural products, as a strategy to “shift the disposition of power.” (Hall, p.108).

<sup>96</sup> I am not claiming that other Black filmmakers have not made films with political messaging at other times. (Nor am I suggesting that all Black artists are seeking to be political with their work). But in this chapter I draw attention to the batching of films which are activist, noticeably made during the Obama era, and I explore whether this is a distinct echo of how Black filmmaking was birthed as a separate genre, a century earlier.

For more on Oscar Micheaux and other Black filmmakers of the early twentieth century, see: Pearl Bowser, Jaine Gaines, Charles Musser, eds., *Oscar Micheaux and his Circle: African American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016).

<sup>97</sup> See Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For more on African American visual artists using art as what she calls “historical agency”, p.xvi.

<sup>98</sup> For example, see: Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>99</sup> For more on the early American film landscape, see:

tendency to ascribe purposeful aesthetic difference alongside a mainstream/independent binary, I argue it is anachronistic to suggest that these early filmmakers were engaged in cultivating a Black aesthetic filmmaking form in a repudiation of commerciality/the Hollywood signifier, as has sometimes been suggested.

### ***Oscar Micheaux, the New Negro movement, and filmmaking art as interventionist resistance***

Years before the NAACP pressurized Hollywood into agreeing to even small shifts in race representation behind or in front of the screen, African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux already recognized the power of the moving image in 1920, when he declared:<sup>100</sup>

“Moving pictures have become one of the greatest vitalizing forces in race adjustment, and we are just beginning.”<sup>101</sup>

Micheaux, often termed the father of Black filmmaking, made his statement as he publicized his latest film, *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, as it was released in Chicago in December of that year.<sup>102</sup> *Symbol* is also, like all of Micheaux’s films of the silent period a ‘race film’, a film made by a Black director centred on Black lives, and reflecting the ideology of many Black leaders, artists and writers of the period. That is, encouraging ‘racial uplift’ – raising the social and economic status of African Americans, often through promoting the notion of ‘Black respectability’ among the African American population, and through narrative characterisation.<sup>103</sup>

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Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI, 2005).

<sup>100</sup> Quote from Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, p.6.

For more on the NAACP and Hollywood, see:  
Justin T. Lorts, ‘Hollywood, the NAACP, and the Cultural Politics of the Early Civil Rights Movement’, in *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. by Danielle McGuire and John Dittmer (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2011).

<sup>101</sup> Micheaux’s quote is contemporaneously reported in a newspaper review: ‘*The Symbol of the Unconquered*, New Play,’ *The Competitor*, December 1920, p.61. Compilation of *The Competitor* published by Negro Universities Press, 1969, and provided digitally through The Hathi Trust. See:  
<<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044014663413&view=1up&seq=373&q1=micheaux>>

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. *The Competitor*, p.61.

<sup>103</sup> For more on race films, and the concept of ‘racial uplift’, see for example: Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900 – 1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

As scholars of early Black filmmaking point out, though maintaining a strong “call for Race solidarity and self-reliance”, Micheaux and his early films in particular dealt with far more than racial uplift tropes.<sup>104</sup> In *Symbol* for instance, Micheaux also exposed the opportunistic, violent, and corrupt economic motives of racist forces such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), as he depicts them gathering at the behest of local criminals.<sup>105</sup> In this case the purpose is to frighten a Black prospector to sell his land when they discover it is the source of massive oil reserves. Micheaux also confronts the contemporary issue of ‘passing’. Two of the principal protagonists are ‘light-skinned’ enough to be taken for white, allowing Micheaux to provoke discussion around the broader issue of ‘passing’ in the Black community, exploring the relationships between such mixed-heritage individuals with both white and Black communities, as well as the deep complexities which the ability to ‘pass’ posed for African American self-identity when confronted with an overarching white society and social structure hostile to people of colour.<sup>106</sup>

Micheaux’s strident declaration about the “vitalizing forces in race adjustment”, illustrates that Black directors in the early days of film were acutely aware of the activist potential for the developing medium. *The Competitor’s* review of Micheaux’s *Symbol of the Unconquered* highlights the urgent relevance of the themes of ‘passing’ and, in exposing the actions of the KKK in his narrative, Micheaux’s provocation:

One of the most thrilling and realistic scenes is that of the Ku-Klux Klaners, who ride forth “on the stroke of twelve,” to pursue their orgy of destruction and terror. Coming

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Barbara Tupa Lupack, ed., *Early Race Filmmaking in America* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 1995).

<sup>104</sup> For this analysis and a much wider examination of this partially-restored film, its contemporaneous promotion, and its relationship to other of Micheaux’s works, see: Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, “Oscar Micheaux’s *The Symbol of the Unconquered*: Text and Context’, in *Oscar Micheaux and his Circle: African American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, ed. Pearl Bowser, Jaine Gaines, Charles Musser (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016). For the quote here, see p.81.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, Bowser and Spence.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

Like many of the early films by Black filmmakers surviving into the present day, the existing *Symbol* is incomplete. As Bowser and Spence outline, only one print of the film has been found, with less than half of the original reels intact.

at this time when there is an attempt to revive this post-civil war force of ignominy and barbarism, denounced by the leading people of both races, North and South, the effect of disgust and determination are heightened.<sup>107</sup>

Micheaux's spotlighting of the craven and deadly actions of the KKK in *Symbol* offered Black audiences a voice against, and was a sharply corrective narrative to, the romanticized myth-making around the KKK – the real-life “Ku-Klux Klaners” – heavily promoted by the hugely successful film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), directed by D.W. Griffith. Griffith's highly racist epic tale weaves a story around two white families, one from the North and one from the South, and takes in the antebellum South, the American civil war and Reconstruction. Promoting egregious negative stereotypes of African Americans along the way, its plot turns on the venal behaviour of mixed-heritage schemers and Black brutish figures, driving to the narrative conclusion that the Klan arose as a noble institution, its selfless motivation to protect White American womanhood against an invented Black sexual threat.<sup>108</sup> The film also depicted Black suffrage as a mistake, African Americans as inferior and incapable of self-governorship, and promoted a view that the antebellum South was a harmonious society, where enslaved people lived contentedly for wiser white masters. The Klan was even necessary to preserve the integrity of the American political system, Griffith's film suggested.<sup>109</sup> It further promoted the notion that, whatever the intentions of misguided Northern politicians, the bond of Whiteness between the North and South would forever trump imprudent and dangerous demands for racial equality.<sup>110</sup>

*Birth* itself is a clear example of film activism. It uses plot, characterization, music, effects, and a comprehensive advertising campaign, to deliver strong political messaging to its contemporary audience, under the purported guise of a historical narrative.<sup>111</sup> At a time of great financial and social turmoil and change in society, the film frame offered White America a framed villain – Black Americans. And it sought to re-solder the notion of American identity

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<sup>107</sup> *The Competitor*, p.61.

<sup>108</sup> See James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Vintage International, 2011), pp.47-52. [Originally published in 1967].

<sup>109</sup> See: Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's the Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> For more on the film's groundbreakingly expensive and multifaceted advertising campaign, as well as Griffith's spurious use of claims of historical accuracy and academics' approval, see Melvyn Stokes, as above.

as synonymous with White American identity. The film was also accompanied by a massive, varied and versatile publicity campaign, something which the KKK drew on for its revivalist recruitment activities.<sup>112</sup>

*Birth's* film activism had a potent and nefarious effect. The man credited with spearheading the revival of the Klan in 1915, William J Simmons, together with the consensus of scholarship, credits the film with having a very significant contribution in boosting interest in the Klan in the late teens and early 1920s – in turn contributing to its revival and huge expansion in numbers.<sup>113</sup>

Further, scholars have argued that the use of mixed-race characters as the principal narrative villains also spoke to the social and political shifts of the early twentieth century, and to white America's anxieties about power. Cedric Robinson has described how the mixed-heritage figure was a particularly hysterical focus for white supremacists like Thomas Dixon, Griffith's friend, whose book *The Clansman* is the basis for *The Birth of a Nation*.<sup>114</sup> Robinson identifies a "mulatto genre" of this period of which *Birth* is one example, a genre which coincided with the rise of strident Black leaders, those like W. E. B Du Bois who had formed the more "militant" anti-racism organizations like the NAACP – and also tended to be "light-complexioned" elites.<sup>115</sup>

*Birth* prompted the NAACP into its first major national activism – a multi-platformed campaign (politics, publicity, and direct protest), to protest the film and its racist depictions and messaging, with limited success.<sup>116</sup> It was not until 1926, however, that Du Bois, one of the leading intellectual figures of the NAACP and Black activism, embraced the political potential of the arts in general (if not film), and declared, in the NAACP's magazine and chief medium of

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<sup>112</sup> Katherine Lennard, 'Old Purpose, "New Body": *The Birth of a Nation* and the Revival of the Ku Klux Klan', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 14:4 (2015), pp.616-620 (p.618). See also Stokes, as above.

<sup>113</sup> Stokes, pp.231-235.

Also, for example:

Maxim Simcovitch, 'The Impact of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* on the Ku Klux Klan', *Journal of Popular Film*, Volume 1(1972), pp.45-54.

<sup>114</sup> See Cedric Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before WWII* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp.214-215.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, Robinson.

<sup>116</sup> Stephen Weinberger, '*The Birth of a Nation* and the Making of the NAACP', *Journal of American Studies*, 45:1 (2011), pp.77-93.

communication with Black America *The Crisis*, that “all art is propaganda” – and something that could be used to fight white supremacist claims of black inferiority. The arts were a route to promoting the truth about Blackness, he suggested, and he celebrated Black artistry across several forms – sculpture and painting, music, literature and theatre.<sup>117</sup> However, despite the fact that Black cinema was already long-established, Du Bois did not include the work of filmmakers.

Du Bois’ omission chimes with absence of the film art form, and film directors, from the Harlem Renaissance – the New York movement which promoted a flourishing in arts and letters, in order to reclaim Black identity from the control of white supremacy, and promote race consciousness through several art forms. The movement, which ran from 1920s into the early 1930s, was, in short, an artist-activist undertaking which saw the potential for art as a form of resistance. As David Levering Lewis explains when discussing one of the leading architects of the movement, the activist and poet James Weldon Johnson, they recognized that the arts was a parallel strategy to formal politics in the struggle for civil rights:

If the road to the ballot box and jobs was blocked, Johnson saw that the door to Carnegie Hall and New York publishers was ajar. Each book, play, poem, or canvas by an Afro-American would become a weapon against the old racial stereotypes.<sup>118</sup>

If the arts were established as form of resistance and activism by the early 1920s, the question arises why was cinema not accepted by the artist-activists of the Harlem renaissance, as a fellow mode of resistance-expression? As scholar Charles Musser points out, this goes too for scholarship of the Harlem Renaissance, which also tends to overlook film as an art form to be included in Black art-activism of the period.<sup>119</sup> Yet some of the most successful Black-made films, such as Oscar Micheaux’s *Within our Gates* (1920) and *Body and Soul* (1925), which debuted Paul Robeson on screen, had already been made and distributed.

I posit that this is down to cinema’s long enduring classification as ‘low art’ in many quarters, and a discomfort with the idea that a mass cultural product has the capacity to engage the

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<sup>117</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, ‘Criteria of Negro Art’, *The Crisis*, Vol.32 (October 1926), pp.290-297.

<sup>118</sup> For more on the strategy and purpose of the Harlem Renaissance, and this quote, see: David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997). Quote is from p.48.

<sup>119</sup> Charles Musser, *Oscar Micheaux and his Circle: African American Filmmaking and Race in the Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington, In: University of Indiana Press, 2001), endnote no.1 to Chapter 8, pp.301-2.

public with directed political messaging - particularly a product such as film, enmeshed with the commercial concerns inherent in its production and distribution. This chimes with scholars' assessment of the Harlem Renaissance as a principally elite undertaking. For example Charles Musser writes that the movement was a 'higher-culture' enterprise – celebrating its “Phi Beta Kappa scholars from prestigious schools.”<sup>120</sup> Oscar Micheaux was conversely “too plebeian, too crude, and even too propagandistic.”<sup>121</sup>

However, as Davarian L. Baldwin points out, the Harlem Renaissance was “only one small piece of a much larger New Negro sociocultural transformation” taking place beyond the particular cultural circle of these New York artists.<sup>122</sup> Baldwin's work, focusing on Chicago, suggests that looking beyond a more narrow cultural clique – out instead to the mass marketplace – one sees that “all of the realms and forms in which ideas are created, have force, and engage with others”, be those cinemas, churches, beauty salons or via street exchanges. Terming this the “marketplace intellectual life”, he argues that this was also a conduit for rising race consciousness, even radical change, and “arguably loom[ed] larger than the traditional mediums of pen, paint and paper.”<sup>123</sup>

It was in this milieu of “marketplace intellectual life” of the film experience, that Micheaux offered audiences what amounted to a scathing retort to counter Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*.<sup>124</sup> Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1919) undercuts *Birth's* white supremacist propaganda by, for example, depicting craven violence from whites – countering the claims about Black people made by *Birth*.<sup>125</sup> In a more accurate depiction of the material realities of racial dynamics and, importantly, current affairs, Micheaux shows white communities eager to lynch African Americans, even children. Countering *Birth's* central, maniacal claim about Black sexuality, Micheaux's film instead highlights the vulnerability of Black women to sexual violence in a

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. Musser, p.128.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Musser, p.128.

<sup>122</sup> Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., Davarian Baldwin, p.16.

<sup>124</sup> Several scholars discuss Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* as a reply/rebuke to Griffith. See for example, Jane Gaines, 'Within Our Gates: From Race Melodrama to Opportunity Narrative', in Bowser, Gaines and Musser [as above], pp.67-80.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., Gaines.

white supremacist society, as he features the opportunistic attempted rape of a Black woman by a white man.<sup>126</sup>

Beyond Micheaux's intellectual/activist approach to filmmaking as described here, his and fellow early Black filmmakers' distribution ingenuity also represents a pre-figuring model for at least one of the filmmakers of the Black filmmaking renaissance, Ava DuVernay. Micheaux and others used a semi-cottage industry approach, creating their own distribution networks, be it local meeting halls or other non-cinema venues, just to get their films to audiences when the segregated or whites-only cinemas wouldn't show them. A similar strategy was followed by DuVernay when she set up her network the African American Forward Releasing Movement (AFFRM, though now renamed ARRAY). As I shall highlight below, early in her filmmaking career DuVernay discovered the difficulties with finance and distribution when she tried to get her first feature film made, *I Will Follow* (2010). In response she set up a network to help promote not only her own work but the work of others.<sup>127</sup> DuVernay and other filmmakers of the new renaissance can claim more than one legacy from their filmmaking forefathers like Oscar Micheaux, who believed in the potential for film to offer interventions in racial socio-politics, a century earlier.

### ***Black filmmaking and the importance of Hollywood***

Soon after President Barack Obama left office in January 2017, African American filmmaker Ava DuVernay addressed a crowd of fellow filmmakers at Utah's Sundance Film Festival.<sup>128</sup> She wanted to share with them words spoken by the Black American author and public intellectual Toni Morrison, which she had transcribed from an old, rediscovered recording.<sup>129</sup> 'Racism was never the issue', Morrison had reasoned, 'power and money always was'. Racism was always a 'monumental fraud', designed above all to distract its victims from a focus on their own lives.

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<sup>126</sup> See Robinson, as above.

<sup>127</sup> See Hagan, as above, pp.44-45.

<sup>128</sup> This entire paragraph, and several sections in this half of the chapter, are taken from, or reflected in my journal article: Teresa Hagan, 'Don't Wait for Permission: Ava DuVernay as a Black Female Intellectual and Political Artist', *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, 19.1 (2022), pp.43-62 (p.43).

<sup>129</sup> reelblack.com, *Ava DuVernay - Reads Toni Morrison*, 2017  
<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhAyJQvoPhM&list=LLPDU6cDy5XpfZ4ejy0eCT2w&index=1045&ab\\_channel=reelblack](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhAyJQvoPhM&list=LLPDU6cDy5XpfZ4ejy0eCT2w&index=1045&ab_channel=reelblack)> [accessed 31 October 2020].

'It may very well be left to artists to grapple with this fact', said Morrison, 'for art focuses on ... the names of people enslaved on ships, and not only the number' (as quoted by DuVernay, Reelblack). It is significant that DuVernay chose to share Morrison's powerful anatomisation of racism the day after Donald Trump was inaugurated as 45th president of the United States – a man known for divisive and race-baiting rhetoric, who was publicly supported by former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke.<sup>130</sup> It is particularly significant that DuVernay chose a festival of cinema, a meeting of fellow filmmakers, to reiterate Morrison's belief that the artist is uniquely placed to confront and expose the political and social purpose of racial bigotry, together with its devastating effects on the lives of human beings – to 'focus on the names ... not only the number'. DuVernay added her own exhortation: 'Maybe it'll inspire you like it inspires me'. Coming just after Trump's inauguration, it was a call to cinematic arms.

More than any other of the directors of the Black filmmaking renaissance, Ava DuVernay embodies the artist-intellectual-activist which Morrison alluded to. She stands in a continuum with Morrison and other Black artists in promoting Black stories in America. From the totality of her interviews, articles, and other projects to promote marginalized voices in the industry and on-screen, it is clearly discernible that DuVernay sees herself as both an artist and an artist/activist.<sup>131</sup> -In that sense her work can often be described as a political act – a bid to help correct a collective whitewashing of American history and culture, and to challenge the stereotyping or denigration of African American representation in the film medium, with an intention to raise awareness or provoke social or political change about issues highlighted.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Camila Domonoske, 'Former KKK Leader David Duke Says "Of Course" Trump Voters Are His Voters', *NPR*, 5 August 2016, <<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/08/05/488802494/former-kkk-leader-david-duke-says-of-course-trump-voters-are-his-voters>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>131</sup> For one example of many, see DuVernay quoted in an article for *Forbes* magazine, discussing her drama mini-series *When They See Us*, about the so-called 'Central Park Five' (five Black boys convicted of a brutal attack on a white woman whose convictions were later vacated):

Dana Feldman, 'Ava DuVernay On *When They See Us*: 'What Kind Of People Are We If We Turn Our Eyes To This?''', *Forbes* [online], 19 June 2019  
< <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danafeldman/2019/06/19/ava-duvernay-on-when-they-see-us-what-kind-of-people-are-we-if-we-turn-our-eyes-to-this/>>

<sup>132</sup> For an example of how DuVernay sees her work as potentially intervening in public discourse, with respect to the inequalities of the criminal justice system, see:  
'Ava DuVernay on Telling the Story of the Central Park Five in *When They See Us* – Kent Jones and Ava DuVernay in Conversation', *Film at the Lincoln Center* YouTube Channel, 29 May 2019  
<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxxMOTzXwtE&ab\\_channel=FilmatLincolnCenter](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxxMOTzXwtE&ab_channel=FilmatLincolnCenter)>

The manifestation and expression of anti-Black racism outlined by Morrison, which DuVernay's work has often sought to challenge has, to varying extents, been a sustained feature of American public life, education, and the hugely influential cultural industry of film.<sup>133</sup> Writing his survey of how African Americans have been characterized in mainstream filmmaking in 1993 (just as another renaissance in Black filmmaking seemed to be underway), scholar Ed Guerrero argued:<sup>134</sup>

As evidence of the incessant need to control Black folks' dreams, commercial cinema in the United States, from its inception in Thomas Edison's 1890s 'peepshows' to the megabudget entertainment packages of present day Hollywood, has pretty consistently devalued the image of African Americans and other racial minorities by confining their representations within an ideological web of myths, stereotypes, and caricatures.<sup>135</sup>

Guerrero neatly summarizes the systematic misrepresentation of African Americans in cinema since its birth, and I would add the frequent absence of their presence in mainstream film, reflecting a recurrent erasure of much of their political or social history within the United States. Given the pervasiveness of cinema and the importance of the film image as I have described, this is important in terms of racial representation, but has political implications for the nation in acknowledging the legitimacy of Black citizens (and other peoples of colour) as full US citizens.

In highlighting the drive to stifle and distort representations of people of colour in the [white] mainstream film industry, Guerrero's reference to "Black folks' dreams" foreshadows Al Sharpton's words at George Floyd's memorial service, which I discussed at the start of this

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<sup>133</sup> For the importance and influence of film on society, bolstered by linked systems of racist and anti-racist depictions of African Americans, see:

Mask, Mia ed., *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film : A Critical Introduction*, Bloomsbury Film Genres Series (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Matthew W. Hughey, 'Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in "Magical Negro" Films', *Social Problems*, 56(3), pp.543-577.

<sup>134</sup> Guerrero's "movie boom" of the late 1980s and early 1990s includes such works as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *She's Gotta Have It* (1986); *Do the Right Thing* (1989); *New Jack City* (1991), *Jungle Fever* (1991), and *Malcolm X* (1993).

<sup>135</sup> Edward Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1993), p.9.

chapter. Taken together these observations, both by Black commentators, point to the bittersweet symbolism for African Americans and other people of colour signified by the term 'dreaming' in American cultural and political discourse. These commentators' references point to the suffocating effects of racism, perpetuating a continuum of Black frustration and suffering in America; and they highlight the similarly stifling effect on aspiration. More profoundly, the term points to an individual's sense of legitimacy that is bound up in the notion of 'dreaming' in America. It is a concept epitomized by the DREAM Act, the name of the legislation passed to allow undocumented people brought to the US as children to eventually reach full American citizenship, with those hoping to become Americans referred to 'Dreamers'.<sup>136</sup> The word 'dream' in these public discourses signifies the right to dream without restriction or fear, as well as to fulfil 'the American dream' narrative, a major trope of national identity. And since the early days of cinema, this self-determining narrative has been reflected and perpetuated in Hollywood film, appropriately known as the 'dream factory'.

However, the notion of the American dream is essentially a myth, based around another myth of American exceptionalism, and on the idea of a meritocratic nation free from the shackles of the old European empires. As a nation-myth it has proved tremendously useful to hegemonic forces of American capitalism intent on maintaining wealth and power, since it serves to divert the gaze of the masses away from the architects of the iniquities which maintain the status quo. Instead, according to this logic, Americans should look first to their own perceived failings to explain why they cannot afford health insurance or why they are not yet millionaires, as the dream narrative insists they can be.<sup>137</sup> Importantly for the purposes of my analysis, the American dream has also been a consistent trope of Hollywood, reinforcing these normative hierarchies and bolstering the narrative of self-determination. However, given the fundamental inequalities baked into the political, social and economic systems in America – most obviously, inequalities predicated on racism and the racist treatment of people of colour – for African Americans the notion of dreaming, also connected to the idea of aspiration, is

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<sup>136</sup> The DREAM Act stands for: Development, Relief, and Education of Alien Minors Act. Notably the vast majority of these 'Dreamers' are Mexican and other people of colour, and the Act was an initiative of Obama's administration. It is further notable that the Trump administration which followed attempted to repeal the legislation. See: 'Fact Sheet: The Dream Act, DACA, and Other Policies Designed to Protect Dreamers', *American Immigration Council*, August 2020, <<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/dream-act-daca-and-other-policies-designed-protect-dreamers>>

<sup>137</sup> For a useful study on why swathes of America act against their own best interests in voting for policies and politicians that reduce their rights, and how that links to both gun ownership and racism, see: Jonathan M. Metzler, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* (New York: Hachette, 2019).

more complicated. It follows that the African American relationship to Hollywood mainstream film, perhaps the primary cultural expression of the American dream and certainly an institution which tends to bolster the status quo, is also more complex.

I posit that this concept of 'dreaming' for Black America is indelibly interwoven with a more fundamental underpinning of what it means to be Black in America, the historical experience of slavery and the connected notion of dreaming as freedom to think, dream and aspire without bounds. 'Dreaming' in all its generic and African American-specific meanings, thus provides a site and resource of resistance – something established from slavery onwards. One of the most iconic figures of Black resistance, the Victorian abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who had escaped slavery in Maryland, talked from experience about slavery as not only an institution of the body, but also of the mind, writing that it took him some time after he had successfully escaped bondage before he realized he had to afford himself mental freedom, in order to be truly free.<sup>138</sup> In choosing which extracts of Toni Morrison's Oregon speech to share with the Sundance filmmakers, DuVernay reflected that same concept, "The artist knows that we are free... Life is short, freedom is in the mind – that's where one is free."<sup>139</sup>

The concepts of dreaming, self-determination, the American dream, and identity are thus inherently political – for white and audiences of colour – and frequently coalesce in the moving image of mainstream cinema in America. With this understood, the implications for Black Americans and other people of colour for exclusion, marginalization or distortion through this same medium, when controlled by those who reflect the hegemonic racial biases, should not be underestimated given that, as I have argued, such representations also tend to delegitimize them as fully American.<sup>140</sup> As a consequence, what is incessantly propagated in the film space can thus become acceptable in the public space.<sup>141</sup> Film messaging can serve as a tool of racism, making it easier for white America to envisage that these non-white groups are 'naturally' to be excluded not only from a collective sense of national identity, but also

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<sup>138</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1849).

<sup>139</sup> reelblack.com, *Ava DuVernay - Reads Toni Morrison*, 2017  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhAyJQv>

<sup>140</sup> Notably the Birther movement in the US also reflected efforts to de-legitimize President Obama's presidency, with claims that he was not fully American, insisting he publish his birth certificate and casting doubt that he was a 'legitimate American.'

<sup>141</sup> As I outlined at the start of this chapter, political messaging in films can play an important contribution to accepted social codes and have the potential to influence attitudes.

from the levers of power. It is also quite possible that, given the predominance of such political messaging, these same codes work to instil a sense of inferiority or self-limitation in Black viewers. The moving image on film is hardly the only mechanism by which this political and cultural imperialism is maintained, but it is nevertheless important. As scholar Michelle Pautz notes, even if viewers are unaware of it “film is likely to influence their attitude and perception about numerous topics,” and “several studies have documented that narrative forms, including film, can shape our perceptions.”<sup>142</sup>

### ***Ava DuVernay as a filmmaker-activist***

In his recent work investigating how cultural products such as film become ‘race-ed’ by the ecosystem of the industry that produces them, scholar Anamik Saha argues for the vital necessity of acknowledging the film medium’s potential to produce effects on audiences, including those from both marginalized and dominant communities, when he describes “the powerful psychosocial effects of racist discourses produced through the popular cultural texts circulated by the cultural industries.”<sup>143</sup>

As I have described above, such psychological effects are partly achieved through film narratives which erase or marginalize Blackness on screen. In this thesis I argue that the Black filmmaking renaissance is, in many ways, contributing to the work of disestablishing these common racial dynamics of representation. As discussed earlier, with reference to Stuart Hall’s advocacy for “shifting the disposition of power” by a new “kind of positionality” in how creatives use or create their cultural products, I argue that this strategy is commonly reflected in the Black filmmaking renaissance. It is not the only aspect of the works which makes them, to greater or lesser extents, films of resistance. However, when the filmmakers of the renaissance seek to centre the experiences and interior lives of Black people, especially in films which present alternative perspectives on historical people and events than we are used to seeing through a more hegemonic cultural lens, it is not simply a question of replacing white texts with black texts. The effect, to reflect Hall’s cultural theory, is to tend to move us “into a new kind of cultural positionality, a different logic of [racial] difference.”

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<sup>142</sup> Michelle C. Pautz, ‘*Argo and Zero Dark Thirty: Film, Government, and Audiences*’, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 48.1 (2015), pp.120–121.

<sup>143</sup> Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), Chapter One.

This approach is reflected, for example, in films such as *12 Years a Slave* and Nate Parker's *Birth of a Nation*, where audiences are engaged with the ante-bellum past through the interior lives and perspectives of enslaved people. *Moonlight* features no white characters at all, Black people inhabit all the different classes and strata of society in the film, and the narrative focuses on the complexities of the Black characters. We learn about an array of Black characters through their own eyes at the centre of *Chi-Raq*, Lee's film about gun violence. *Straight Outta Compton*, a biopic, is also told through the lens of the protagonists.

Ava DuVernay has sought to shift the racial dynamics of films aimed at engaging with mass audiences more than any of the other filmmakers of the renaissance, through her filmmaking craft, but also through industry interventions. Her initiatives reflect an acknowledgement of the importance of how the cultural industries themselves "make race". Calling for a "new theory of race and ethnicity in cultural production" which goes beyond textual analysis, Anamik Saha argues that the macro and micro ecosystems of the industries which produce cultural products, also contribute to "how representations of race take the shape they do."<sup>144</sup> This would seem to be an area that DuVernay, who worked for years as a film industry publicist before switching to becoming a creative, has also identified as an important area that contributes to the race-ing of film cultural products – and can be harnessed in a bid to also alter race representation on screen.

DuVernay has set up non-profit production structures and distribution networks, among a host of industry initiatives, with her organisation ARRAY and its sister entities. These initiatives' stated aims are to support creatives of colour (as well as women filmmakers more generally), in being able to make and show their films. The purpose, as described in interviews, is to support these filmmakers to get their voices and perspectives into wider public arenas, and engage audiences – something filmmakers from these groups often struggle to do due to the financial and industry power of Hollywood dominance.<sup>145</sup> Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*, DuVernay described her intentions:

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<sup>144</sup> Saha, 2018, Chapter One.

<sup>145</sup> The points made in this paragraph reflect my article, referenced above: Hagan, 2022.

Several scholars have examined racial and gender inequalities in the Hollywood film industry. For example:

Eithne Quinn, 'Closing Doors: Hollywood, Affirmative Action, and the Revitalization of Conservative Racial Politics', *Journal of American History*, 99.2 (2012), pp.466-491.

Though each unit does something different, DuVernay says they share an overarching mission to push for social justice and to challenge the entrenched Hollywood systems.

The idea was to be disruptive in every system within which artists, especially artists of color and women, have to work in this industry, she said. Every system has roadblocks for people like us, whether it is in acquisition, production, distribution, exhibition, marketing, crewing up.... So what we were looking to do was disrupt those systems so that we create normalcy and momentum.<sup>146</sup>

More recently, DuVernay has set up an organization to help raise awareness about police brutality, LEAP (Law Enforcement Accountability Project). In interviews she has outlined the purpose of LEAP as specifically to draw attention to police crimes against Black people, and further, highlight the officers involved.<sup>147</sup> Her role here is illustrative of her positioning at the intersection of art and activism, as LEAP funds artist-activists to make short films and a host of other creative arts forms, a mechanism literalizing the concept of art as resistance.<sup>148</sup>

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Nancy Yuen, *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

Maryann Erigha, *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

UCLA'S annual *Hollywood Diversity Report*, analysing the representation of women and people of colour – both in front of, and behind the camera – for the top-grossing films, illustrates the lack of diversity in the industry. For 2011, for example, the year after DuVernay made her debut feature film *I Will Follow* (2010), the report shows that in film director roles, 'minorities... were underrepresented by a factor of about 3 to 1', directing just 12.2% of the 172 top grossing films. 'Women faced even tougher odds at directing a top film', said the report – underrepresented by a factor of over 12 to 1, women directed just 4.1% of films examined.

See: D Hunt, A.-C. Ramón, and Z. Price, *2014 Hollywood Diversity Report: Making Sense of the Disconnect* (Los Angeles: Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA, 2014).

Subsequent years' analysis shows some meaningful improvements in representation. However, the last pre-Covid pandemic figures (2018 and 2019) reveal that both women and people of colour still 'remain underrepresented on every industry employment front'. Just 15.1% of the top 200 films were directed by people of colour, compared to a population share of 40%. Women, who account for just over half the population, also directed just 15.1% of the top films (Hunt and Ramon [2020](#), 3).

See: Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramon, *Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods Part 1: Film* (Los Angeles: UCLA College Division of Social Sciences, 2020).

<sup>146</sup> Ryan Faughnder, 'Ava DuVernay's Array [sic] is a place for women and filmmakers of color in L.A.', *Los Angeles Times*, 1 October 2019  
<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2019-10-01/array-alliance-ava-duvernay>

<sup>147</sup> 'Ava DuVernay Aims to Hold Police Accountable for their Actions with the "LEAP" Initiative', *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, CBS YouTube Channel, 24 July 2020  
< [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-0HIFss9w4&ab\\_channel=TheLateShowwithStephenColbert](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-0HIFss9w4&ab_channel=TheLateShowwithStephenColbert)>

<sup>148</sup> See Hagan, 2022.

Given her stated aims on strategies of diversity, and the fact that she has, as indicated earlier, explicitly sought to engage with mass audiences, in the next section I will explore DuVernay's positioning strategy to centre African American lives and identity in mass market film, as well as how she incorporates themes of resistance into the work at the same time.

### ***Changing the (Pre-)Script***

When DuVernay and the other directors of the Black filmmaking renaissance seek to alter the normative Hollywood dynamic by positioning Black lives centrally, in many ways this is an act of resistance in a historic line with other Black artists. It offers a direct challenge to the tendencies of mainstream film, where, as scholar Manthia Diawara describes, "white people must occupy the center, leaving Black people with only one choice – to exist in relation to Whiteness."<sup>149</sup> And as I have outlined earlier, such a repositioning also offers a challenge, to some extent to the much larger, established political and social paradigm in America, often reflected – and reinforced – by dominant cinema. As Diawara has argued: "Hollywood's blacks exist primarily for white spectators whose comfort and understanding the films must seek, whether they thematize exotic images dancing and singing on screen, or images constructed to narrate a racial drama, or images of pimps and muggers."<sup>150</sup>

A typical example of Diawara's "racial drama" here is a so-called 'white saviour' film narrative, where the story is subtly or explicitly focused around a white character who, as the hero, rescues imperilled Black characters from harm, or protects their rights from injustice – at the same time overlooking (or even erasing) the actions and agency of African Americans and other people of colour who have been central to the story. (The term can also imply a specifically selfish/self-aggrandizing approach by the white 'saviour', rather than a simply benign or misguided paternalistic motivation). The civil rights drama *Mississippi Burning* (1988) is often cited by critics within and outside the Academy as a typical example of the 'White Saviour' trope at work. The film depicts white FBI agents relentlessly pursuing the case of missing (murdered) civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner, in Mississippi in 1964. Although the film is based on a historical event, it expressly

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<sup>149</sup> *Black American Cinema*, ed. by Manthia Diawara, AFI Film Readers (New York ; London : Routledge, 1993, 1993), p.3.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* Diawara, p.3.

focuses, exaggerates and distorts the role of the FBI agents as the angels of justice and protectors of the terrorized Black community – who in turn are depicted as almost entirely passive in the face of de jure racial violence. It also invents key protagonists and storylines which distort the role of other white people in bringing the murderers to justice, and almost completely ignores the work of local Black (and white) activists.<sup>151</sup> As a result, the NAACP and many others heavily criticized the film upon release – with many concerned about the effect on audiences of mangling this important event in the nation’s racial history. Recognizing a missed opportunity for cinema to educate [white] American audiences on social justice, scholar Howard Sitkoff complained: “rather than helping lessen this nation’s woeful ignorance of its racial past, this film does such injustice to the events with which it deals that its ultimate lynching is of history itself.”<sup>152</sup>

The whitewashing of significant events during the period in Black civil rights history portrayed by *Mississippi Burning*, and the exemplar of Hollywood’s historical approach to what we saw Diawara refer to as “racial drama” evidenced by the film, coalesce around the white saviour trope. For my purposes of examining the films of the Black renaissance, the myriad ways of tackling the white saviour trope and the political and social meanings that can be derived from those interventions, also coalesce to illustrate aspects of the activist practice of the work of these filmmakers.

### ***No more white saviours***

Scholar Matthey Hughey argues that the white saviour film originated as a response to the 1980s era in which it emerged, and was a mechanism by which white America could feel more secure about its place in an “unsettled and racially charged time, [via]...inter-racial depictions of friendly and cooperative race relations [which] eschew any blatant message of White supremacy while they rely on an implicit message of White paternalism and anti-Black stereotypes of contented servitude, obedience, and acquiescence.”<sup>153</sup> Often proving a hit at

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<sup>151</sup> The criticisms aimed at *Mississippi Burning* (and other ‘white saviour’ narratives) are outlined by numerous critics. See for example Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, 2nd edn. (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>152</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, ‘*Mississippi Burning*’ [Movie Reviews], *Journal of American History*, 76(3) (1989), pp.1019-1020.

<sup>153</sup> Hughey, p.761.

It is worth noting that while Hughey and other scholars discussing the paternalistic white narrative importantly highlight a socio-political trend and over-arching messaging in these films, they do not tend

the box-office, the 'white saviour' narrative has thus unsurprisingly become a commercial cinema product which attracted repeated studio funding. Hughey argues that the trend for such narratives endured well beyond the 1980s.<sup>154</sup>

The trope of the white saviour pre-dates the 1980s however, and has long jarred. It has always reassured white audiences that white people can be heroic in facing down racism (even though the victims of racism are Black), and that despite objections from Black critics and a mountain of evidence that anti-Black racism remains prevalent in America, scholars point out that the white saviour narrative indicates that the proponents of such racism as 'a few bad apples,' more exception than the rule. On a much more basic level, it continues to reinforce white experience as the dominant narrative of American life, even when the subject is a story about Black civil rights history or struggle, such as *Mississippi Burning*.

### ***Selma***

DuVernay's 2014 film *Selma*, however, takes a civil rights story of the same era, and disrupts that narrative, rejecting white heroism as the central story of Black advancement. Given Martin Luther King's significance as a major historical figure of the twentieth century, it seems remarkable that *Selma* is the first mainstream motion picture focused on the civil rights leader, despite his having been assassinated almost fifty years prior. This in itself is an act of reclaiming Black history in a deliberate way – an act of resistance to a Hollywood which often tends to tell Black stories through the white gaze. DuVernay has discussed how one of her first tasks was to overhaul the existing filmscript which was attached to the project (inherited from British writer Paul Webb), and alter the story from one where the Selma battle was the backdrop to a primary struggle between Martin Luther King and President Lyndon B Johnson.<sup>155</sup> Instead the "most powerful man in the world" remains a very important figure in

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to consider diverse audiences, or interrogate how Black audiences, in all their diversity, have responded to such narratives.

<sup>154</sup> Examples include: *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Monster's Ball* (2000), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *The Help* (2011).

<sup>155</sup> DuVernay's rewriting of the *Selma* script has been widely reported, and she has discussed it several times. One *Vulture* article, for example, reports that DuVernay made her rewrite a condition of taking the job (Yuan, 2014). The white British screenwriter Paul Webb, who wrote the original script in 2007 and retained his writing credit on the film, contests DuVernay's claim. Yet in an article for the BBC, he also makes reference to some key differences between his script and the film (Dowd, 2015). In any case, director DuVernay has overall authorial control; for example choosing which scenes to shoot, how to shoot them, and which scenes to edit, or cut completely.

the narrative, but is ultimately one of a host of secondary figures; Black history and experience claim the centre, and the narrative circles outwards from that point.

Defending against accusations that she had mischaracterized LBJ in the film, DuVernay answered that she had no intention of creating another 'white saviour' narrative.<sup>156</sup> The term white saviour is itself pertinent imagery in the context of films depicting African American stories or civil rights narratives. The highly visual signifier is a variation on the term 'white knight' which, as well as evoking European colonialism, also evokes Crusades iconography endowing Whiteness as synonymous with romanticized notions of chivalry, and domination - largely over Muslim people of colour in the middle ages. For the medium of film, the same iconography was employed by DW Griffith for *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, connecting notions of white supremacy, Christian godliness, and righteous violence against African Americans – as well as a subservient racial other.<sup>157</sup> Analysed from this perspective, DuVernay's rejection of the white saviour narrative, a common trope of cinema, gains resonance. It can be understood as a repudiation not just of a harmful cinematic trope of the centrality of Whiteness, but of the white supremacist cultural memory that was established in the visual culture of cinema from early in its development. And it is thus symbolic that she rejects the trope in *Selma*. DuVernay

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Jada Yuan, 'With her MLK drama *Selma*, Ava DuVernay is directing history', *Vulture*, 2 December 2014 <<https://www.vulture.com/2014/12/ava-duvernay-on-the-long-road-to-selma.html>>

Vincent Dowd, 'Oscars: *Selma* writer tells his side of row with director', *BBC News* [online] <<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-31539526>>

<sup>156</sup> DuVernay was accused of distorting President Lyndon Johnson's actions and attitude, depicting it as unsupportive towards Martin Luther King and the cause of Black voting rights, and directing J Edgar Hoover to undermine the civil rights leader by covert means – charges which historian David Kaiser and others dispute. DuVernay countered that she was not making a documentary but telling a story as she saw it, as an artist. The dispute is a very clear example of the perils, uses, and curation of history in historical drama that I address in Chapter Two. In addition, the episode once again demonstrates that both the academy and the public regard filmmaking as an important and effective means of asserting influence on the public.

David Kaiser, 'Why You Should Care That *Selma* Gets LBJ Wrong', *Time* [online] (9 January 2015).

For DuVernay's response generally to such criticism, and specifically on the white saviour issue, see: 'Director Ava DuVernay on sharing the story of *Selma* and deconstructing American heroes', *PBS News Hour*, PBS, 8 January 2015, <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/selma>>

Kevin Jagernauth, 'I Wasn't Interested In Making A White-Savior Movie: Ava DuVernay Talks *Selma*', *IndieWire* (7 January 2015).

<sup>157</sup> Griffith perfected the theatrical costume ideas proposed by Thomas Dixon's source novel *The Clansman*, also employing them for publicity material. In a startling and chilling demonstration of audience effects, the costume was mimicked by thousands of KKK supporters, who joined the organization in the years following the film. See: Katherine Lennard, 'Old Purpose, "New Body": The *Birth of a Nation* and the Revival of the Ku Klux Klan', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (14:4) (October 2015), pp.616-620.

rewrote the script – figuratively as well as literally – to reposition, to centre the story of Martin Luther King as a power broker, but also to centre the success of Black activism, Black agency, the role of Blackness in the overarching American narrative, and in doing so makes an activist intervention to correct the predominant narrative. *Selma* shifts the greater American audience gaze, directing it to see an alternative to the established hierarchy of power.

The film depicts a story of how Blackness – Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement – challenges the venerated office of ‘The President of the United States’, and with that, is capable of symbolically challenging the mythic narrative of the American democratic exceptionalism which the institution of the presidency represents. This is underlined in a scene where King visits Johnson in the White House for a second time, to force him to introduce the legislation needed to protect voting rights with federal protections. The second meeting shows King in a more demanding mode than their previous engagement in the oval office, and this time they stand facing each other – like combatants – under a portrait of George Washington.

***King: We need your involvement here Mr President – we deserve your help as citizens of this country, citizens under attack!***

...

***“I came here hoping to talk to you about *people*. People are dying in the street for this – it *cannot* wait, sir.”***

*[Johnson pushes back on King’s demand for immediate action:]*

***Johnson: You’re an activist, I’m a politician.***

***You’ve got one big issue – I’ve got a hundred and one.***

DuVernay’s mise-en-scène here is part of the political messaging of the film. Johnson stands as a direct political descendent of the embodiment of the Republic, its first president, Washington, in the portrait above his head. Yet this figure of democratic authority is here assailed by an African American demanding indisputable human rights who – at the time of the Republic’s establishment – was only designated three-fifths of a white American.<sup>158</sup> The resonance for African Americans is strong; there is a hint of ironic justice that the architect of the very instrument which failed to address slavery in 1776, *The Constitution*, has to ‘bear

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<sup>158</sup> Article 1, Section 2, *Constitution of the United States of America*.

witness' to the president's hand being forced by, as King points out [full] citizens of America. Washington's portrait is situated above but between them, emphasizing the point that a historical gulf exists between the two advocates. Nevertheless, their physical closeness and candid speech with one another suggests that the contemporary political dynamics are moving in a very different direction to Washington's America – even if they cannot agree this time. The idea that the most powerful political decision-maker in America, an office which continues to be venerated, can be assailed in this way, suggests to the audience that despite an entrenched history of racism, activism can alter the political conversation and – to use King's own phrase in the film – move the dial.

This scene takes place almost exactly half-way through the film, and acts as a pivot to the plot, since it solidifies King's resolve to go ahead with the Selma to Montgomery march, a move which is full of risk – as both he and Johnson are fully aware. It also follows two other important scenes where DuVernay speaks simultaneously to, and connects, historical racism in America, the events of 1965, and the present day.

The first of these sees King preside over the funeral of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a civil rights activist who we earlier saw brutally killed by an Alabama state trooper at a peaceful night march. *Selma* was not granted the rights to use King's speeches, so they were rewritten, as with the Jackson funeral scene.<sup>159</sup> DuVernay shows King with a scathing political activist side, something present day audiences are likely unaccustomed to connect with the figure who has been popularized worldwide for the harmonious vision of his 'I have a dream' speech, at 1963's March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Several industry and mainstream articles discuss the fact that *Selma* was made without the rights or official approval of the King family, reporting that the rights had already been sold to Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks studio for a future project. See for example, an interview with Ava DuVernay who discusses it, in:

Mike Fleming Jr., 'Hard Road to Oscar: *Selma*'s Ava DuVernay on Why it Took Fifty Years to Make a Major MLK Movie', *Deadline* (4 January 2015).

And also:

Tim Appelo, 'Oscars: How *Selma* Filmmakers Made a Move about MLK Without Using His Words,' *The Hollywood Reporter* (16 December 2014).

<sup>160</sup> As James Cone points out, when people think of Dr King, they tend to focus on his philosophy of love, "a dream of blacks and whites, and other Americans living and working together." James H. Cone, 'Demystifying Martin and Malcolm', *Theology Today*, 51(1) (April 1994), p.27.

The speech at Jackson’s funeral however, reinforces the picture of a much more radical activist King.<sup>161</sup> *Selma*’s King uses the eulogy to interpret the activist’s death in terms of the overarching social and political narrative of the struggle for Black civil rights. King aligns Jackson’s death in a triumvirate with Malcolm X (who had also recently been shot) and President Kennedy who was assassinated a few months earlier. The symbolic use of a trio here from a Christian pastor connects the killings to the concept of the Holy Trinity and the ultimate sacrifice of Christ on the cross – as King emphasizes the martyrdom and righteousness of these men who, King implies, have been murdered (sacrificed) for the righteousness of the civil rights cause.<sup>162</sup> Aligning leaders and activists of highly varying public statures emphasizes a non-hierarchical reverence for the sacrifices these men have made – and implies the same goes for all civil rights activists. The work of activism, the scene and film as a whole suggests, is the work of everyone – ordinary citizens with sincere convictions. Further, just as we can all be implicated in the work of activism, the individuals who terrorize Black people are underpinned by everyone who props up a racist system – as well as those who stand by, too cowardly or indifferent to stop it. King’s oratory at the funeral makes this clear:

**“Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?**

**We know a state trooper acting under the orders of George Wallace pointed the gun and pulled the trigger.**

**But how many other fingers were on that trigger?**

**Who murdered Jimmy Lee Jackson?**

- **EVERY white lawman who abuses the law to terrorize.**
- **EVERY white politician who feeds on prejudice and hatred.**
- **EVERY white preacher, who preaches the Bible but stays silent before his white congregation.**

**Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?**

- **EVERY negro man and woman who stands by without joining this fight, as their brothers and sisters are humiliated, brutalized, and ripped from this earth.**

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<sup>161</sup> The following sections also appear in my journal article. See above, Hagan, 2022.

<sup>162</sup> While Christianity is a monotheistic religion, God is at once a singular concept, but also the Godhead of the Holy Trinity – God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit. The number three, and a host of other references, blend with David Oyelowo’s performance in *Selma* to draw distinct connections between Martin Luther King and the figure of Jesus Christ.

This is a radical Martin Luther King. Brown's church scene feels akin to a court of law, and King to a prosecutor delivering an opening speech to a jury. Aided by Oyelowo's mesmerizing performance, DuVernay's script compels the audience to join the scene's congregation in confronting their role in perpetuating or dismantling what is clearly shown to be the moral abomination of racism. She also highlights the moral bankruptcy and hypocrisy of politicians committing to fight wars abroad to defend principles of freedom, without first addressing the violent and deadly oppression of people of colour in the 'Land of the Free':

**We will not let your sacrifice pass in vain, dear brother.**

*[And as the soundtrack music begins to rise:]*

**We will not let it go.**

**We will finish what you were after.**

**We will GET what you were denied.**

**We WILL vote.**

**We will put these men out of office. We will take their power.**

**We will WIN what you were slaughtered for.**

**We're going back to Washington. We're gonna demand to see the president and I'm gonna tell him – that Jimmie, was murdered by an administration, that spends MILLIONS OF DOLLARS, EVERY DAY, to sacrifice LIFE in the name of LIBERTY in Vietnam. Yet lacks the moral will and the moral courage, to defend the lives of its own people – here, in America.**

Both these extracts also illustrate DuVernay's activism through her filmmaking art. The scene is designed so that King is speaking to us, the audience – the 'congregation' – who watch King at work here, often with the camera angle looking upward towards the civil rights leader as if we were sitting in the aisles. These are political and social exhortations about the moral responsibility of society, and the intertwining of the personal and the collective – specifically one's duty to examine one's conscience, and take action to ensure the public good.

Equally, I argue these scenes illustrate activist/resistance practice in filmmaking. DuVernay creates these key scenes in Brown Chapel, an iconic site in Selma for the civil rights struggle. But even without the audience knowing the significance of the specific church building, locating these speeches within the both literal and symbolic space of the Black Church, with its own weight as a historical site of Black solidarity, helps imbue the scenes with a context of resistance to historical white supremacy. In addition, DuVernay's choice to have King refer to wider global politics (the Vietnam War) points to the international brotherhood of Black

resistance to white, Western oppression across the globe – something that has also been an important part of the African American resistance movement.<sup>163</sup>

This radical King is established from the start, as is the radical nature of non-violence as practiced by the Civil Rights activists following the lead of the Southern Christian Leadership Committee (SCLC), led by King. In the first speech King makes at Brown Church, *Selma's* King makes clear that their movement is aggressive and unrelenting, while Oyelowo's electrifying delivery is infectiously inspirational for the audience. Evoking the spirits of the children killed in the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, the shocking and notorious event which we have witnessed near the beginning of the film, King declares that their spirits urge all people to take action:

**They say to us, that the local white leadership USE their power, to keep us away from the ballot box – and keep us VOICELESS.**

**As long as I am unable to exercise my constitutional right to vote, I do not have command of my own life. I cannot determine my own destiny – but it's determined for me by people who would rather see me suffer than succeed.**

**THOSE that have gone before us say – NO MORE!**

*[Audience replies]: NO MORE!*

...

**That means Protest, that means March, that means Disturb the Peace, that means Jail, that means Risk – and that is hard!**

**We will not wait any longer – GIVE US THE VOTE!**

*[Audience replies]: GIVE US THE VOTE!*

**We're not asking, we're demanding – GIVE US THE VOTE!**

*[Audience replies]: GIVE US THE VOTE!*

As we switch to a long shot at the back of the church, while the buoyed congregation claps, as if to mirror the viewpoint of someone observing the scene DuVernay superimposes an FBI-esque surveillance report of the event over the centre of the screen, reading: "King and the SCLC incite local Negroes in Selma".<sup>164</sup> This is a civil rights leader, the surveillance suggests, who deeply alarmed the state. And the state was deeply alarmed by the spectacle of Black

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<sup>163</sup> Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together African Americans and Apartheid, 1945–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

<sup>164</sup> On close inspection this is a 'mock-up' of an FBI logo.

people demanding their civil rights – something which resonates with present day audiences. It also illustrates that the ‘bad apples’ narrative about racism in America, that hysterical racism was confined to backward Southern States, is also a myth.<sup>165</sup>

Like most historical dramas, the factual accuracy of DuVernay’s narrative is open to question. In his tracing of African American history after WWII *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, the scholar Manning Marable describes a more “compromised and contradictory” King.<sup>166</sup> A King who appealed to white liberals precisely because he extolled non-violence, a more law-abiding and seemingly less revolutionary approach to securing Black rights in America. A King who worked with an administration run by Johnson, a president formerly in favour of segregation, to deliver the Black vote for his election in 1964; and who continued to make concessions to him – most notably on the second day of the marching campaign in Selma, when King turned the marchers back en route, rather than have a confrontation with Alabama state police. The summer before the Selma campaign saw Black uprisings in several American urban centres such as Philadelphia and Harlem. The result of “decades of economic exploitation and federal government apathy”, Marable writes that King nevertheless told people to abandon lawlessness and return to their homes, “to the popular acclaim of white politicians and police.”<sup>167</sup>

However, other scholars disagree this assessment, and conclude that he was a much more radical figure – a distinct departure from the less-threatening figure that the American Right has often co-opted for its own ends, obscuring King’s radicalism and his severe critiques of America along with him. For decades the conservative establishment in the US has appropriated King’s voice, selectively quoting him to suggest that racism, and the response to racism, is a problem of individuals, rather than a systemic issue and responsibility.<sup>168</sup> They have focused on the non-violence of the campaign he headed, using it as a convenient soundbite, and passing over the radical civil disobedience and far reaching condemnation of American society’s tolerance of racism and inequality, which were also an integral part of King’s activism.

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<sup>165</sup> For more on the aggressive surveillance of King and the civil rights movement, see Athan Theoharis, *From the Secret Files of J Edgar Hoover* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc), 1993. For references on King in particular, see Chapter 7, ‘“Subversive” Activities.’

<sup>166</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945 – 2006* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn.) (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), pp.75-79.

<sup>167</sup> Marable, p.77.

<sup>168</sup> Thomas F Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Whether it be President Ronald Reagan using King's reference to a dream of being judged on the "content of their character" rather than skin tone, to resist affirmative action initiatives in 1985; or commentators evoking King's campaign to chastise demonstrators in Ferguson protesting against the killing of Michael Brown in 2014, King has been reinvented, sanitized as an acceptable face of Black revolt.<sup>169</sup> As scholar and activist Cornel West noted on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King's death:

"We now expect the depressing spectacle every January of King's "fans" giving us the sanitized versions of his life [on the Martin Luther King national holiday]. We now come to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his assassination and we once again are met with sterilized versions of his legacy. A radical man, deeply hated and held in contempt is recast as if he was universally loved moderate."<sup>170</sup>

The discrepancy of viewpoints on King points to the difficulties and limitations of dealing with, as well as dramatizing, the historical record. It also highlights the fact that historians can also curate history, presenting some facts and not others, giving prominence to certain aspects of events rather than others – just as filmmakers do. As scholar Robert Rosenstone argues, "all history... is a construction, not a reflection."<sup>171</sup> This is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Two, but the point is made here not as a criticism of the academy, but to point out that DuVernay portrays her King here to reflect the truth as she sees it about Martin Luther King. For instance, she does not shy away from making King's alleged marital infidelity a significant part of the narrative, exemplifying her intention to render King with all the complexities of being a human being. DuVernay also emphasizes, as we have seen, that King was a radical activist and advocate for Black rights in America, who unsettled the establishment. *Selma* reflects a time when King was growing increasingly frustrated, and he became more 'radicalized' as the 1960s wore on.

DuVernay blends aspects of the King who was already radical, into her script, as well as aspects of the later King, supporting the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, in 1968. Though he became better known for his economic justice, anti-Vietnam war activism and post-colonial

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<sup>169</sup> See for example:

Gary Younge, 'Martin Luther King: How a rebel leader was lost to history', *The Guardian* (4 April 2018).  
John Blake, 'Why Conservatives Call MLK their hero', *CNN* [online] (20 January 2013).

<sup>170</sup> Cornel West, 'Martin Luther King Jr was a radical. We must not sterilize his legacy', *The Guardian* (4 April 2018).

<sup>171</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.11.

critique after 1965, by this time King was already talking actively about these issues – exemplified in *Selma* in his speeches in Brown Church; and at the end of the film in front of the Montgomery capital (discussed below), where he assesses the deadly racial distortions that have resulted from how “powerful white men rule the world”. In a quieter, private conversation with Ralph Abernathy in a Selma jail cell, where King clearly feels the weight of responsibility for the struggle and a moment of doubt, he discusses the wider context of Black suffering in the US. While Abernathy comforts him, urging to see past this moment and focus on the struggle’s aim, the “prize”, King points out that their campaign for racial legal and electoral equality is only one part a much larger mass of economic inequality which has become ingrained in African American communities over centuries:

*King: But what is the prize, friend?*

**We fight to have a seat at whatever table we want – that doesn’t help a Black man to be able to eat at a lunch counter, if he doesn’t earn enough to be able to buy the burger.**

**Or worse yet, can’t even – can’t even read the menu, ‘cos there was no Negro school where he’s from.**

**What is that – is that equality?**

*Abernathy: Amen*

*King: What about in our minds, equality in the Black psyche. Look at these men – beaten and broken down for generations. Deciding to demand more?*

King’s discussion with Ralph Abernathy together with other aspects of the film, prompts the audience to consider the wider social and political context which conspired to hinder Black advancement.<sup>172</sup> The social and political obstacles faced by Black people attempting to register and vote in 1965 focused a specific campaign for legislation to federally protect voters’ rights. But that campaign emerged out of a much larger set of endemic, historic inequalities. Just as today, a campaign over one specific area of injustice often points to a much larger slough of deeper and sustained problems, which have led to the current situation.

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<sup>172</sup> For example, DuVernay shows the control over the financial stability of poor African Americans, which could be wielded by the white middle class. Attempting to register to vote in one of the opening scenes of the film, Annie Lee Cooper is unsubtly warned by the county registrar about how her employer, a care-home owner, would react: “I wonder what old Dunne will say when I tell him one of his gals is down here stirring a fuss.” It is yet another small scale but collectively significant act of courageous activism, that Cooper presses on regardless.

In this sense, *Selma* is in conversation with contemporary activism in several ways. It also achieves this through two other areas: the police brutality we see in the film, particularly against the peaceful protestors on the march, 'Bloody Sunday' (discussed in Chapter Two); and the recent erosion of voting rights.

When Ava DuVernay was re-writing the script for *Selma*, the Supreme Court had recently (2013) struck down the very federal protections which the activists are fighting so hard for in the film. The ruling argued that racial discrimination no longer existed to the extent that required certain provisions of the Act to be in force, effectively allowing states to introduce extra requirements in registering voters – the precise issue which had prevented millions of Black voters registering in the South.<sup>173</sup> DuVernay has discussed the shock of finding out about removal of voting protections while she was re-writing the script for *Selma*, describing how she felt “punched... in the gut” by the ruling.<sup>174</sup> And she has also discussed her surprise at how present-day audiences seem to know so little about the voting rights campaign, or even the history of the wider movement over voting and civil rights:

Some of the questions that I have heard, some of the statements that I have heard as we have taken the film across the country, jaw-dropping at what people don't know... Selma doesn't resonate with people in the way that it should, as being just such a cornerstone for democracy, in terms of what it's done for voting rights and equality.

People don't even know what that is. We open the film with the scene of four little girls and the Birmingham bombing. And this is just a quintessential, pivotal point of departure for everything that happened after in the movement. And yet I have people walking up to me saying, is that real? Did that — did that really happen?<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Dan Roberts, 'Supreme court's voting rights decision 'deeply disappointing', Obama says, *The Guardian* [online], 25 June 2013.  
< <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2013/jun/25/supreme-court-voting-rights-act-obama>>

<sup>174</sup> Alex Suskind, 'How Ava DuVernay struck a chord with *Selma*', *The Guardian* [online], 17 December 2014.  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/dec/17/ava-duvernay-film-director-selma>>

<sup>175</sup> 'Director Ava DuVernay on sharing the story of *Selma* and deconstructing American heroes', *PBS News Hour*, 8 January 2015.  
< <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/selma>>

DuVernay was clearly keen to bring back the Black civil rights movement to the big screen as a storyteller, but I posit that her filmmaking is also very much in line with African American artists resisting the normative forces of racism and white hegemonic control, that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. As we saw earlier, DuVernay looked to inspire fellow filmmakers to tackle racism as she recited the words of Toni Morrison at Sundance in 2017. With *Selma*, she seeks something similar, as her interview with journalist Gwen Ifill suggests:

I'm not a librarian. I'm not selling a book... I'm trying to imbue the film and invite people into the spirit of the movement. And that was my intention. That's what I believe we have done. And I invite people to come and check it out for themselves.<sup>176</sup>

As DuVernay's description of her "intention" suggests, *Selma* is a call to embrace, or at the very least engage with, the work to demand equal rights. As I have argued, she does that partly through seeking to challenge and overturn traditional tropes of cinema which prop up the hegemonic status quo – such as the white saviour, reclaiming the narrative of African American resistance from refraction through a whitewashed lens. She also reclaims Black heroes, particularly Martin Luther King but by implication, the entire non-violent resistance civil rights movement, from their appropriation by political forces often antithetical to Black equality. She emphasizes King's radicalism, something which has been largely lost on the public, and his critique of the larger American capitalist system.

DuVernay also makes this an activist film through the storytelling itself, in how she "imbues the film". The subject of the film – the campaign for voting rights – is itself a heroic story of resistance and activism. It exposes the brutality of unchecked racism flourishing in society, state-sponsored violence, and the poisonous discrimination of Jim Crow – but also stresses the enormous strength of collective action and determination.

DuVernay further addresses the mechanics of activism. Almost halfway through the film, before King meets the President a second time, the civil rights leader has a strategy meeting with the other SCLC leaders, where they argue out the best ways to tackle the voting issues. One suggests that they must first address the fact that names and addresses of Black people intending to register to vote are published in the newspaper – for any racist to see, locate and intimidate them. Another says that the perverse poll tax laws must be fixed first, where the prospective Black voter is expected to pay for every year they were legally allowed to register

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

but didn't – before they can legally register now. Another points out that voters need to be vouched for by another voter – and yet there may be no Black person registered to vote for a hundred miles. DuVernay is demonstrating just how iniquitous the system was, how it seemed rigged at every turn against Black enfranchisement. But she is also demonstrating the need for activists to have a clear strategy, as Bayard Rustin's character explains to the group at the end of the meeting:

**We need a new plan. I can't take him [King] back to Washington...with a list of empty demands! Tactics my friends!**

**We must break down this institution, into the tangible tactics that it takes to dismantle it.**

I posit these scenes are deliberately included to share messages on activism. In answer to an interview question about the film's contemporary relevance, DuVernay described what she saw in the civil rights activist practice:

When one thing didn't work, they pivoted to something else. When that didn't work, they added on something else. When they were marching in Selma and they weren't getting movement, they did a call to the world and said, "Hey white people, come join us." When they did that and that didn't work, they couldn't get across the bridge, they took it to court. It was always moving, it was always morphing, and I think that's what really needs to be done now. The base tactics need to mature and they need to morph and they need to grow. I mean, we're just going to still doing the same thing over and over. And so what I really think is smart people need to come together and try to figure out what's next, and that's what King was always about, trying to figure out what's next.<sup>177</sup>

DuVernay is not only "invit[ing] people into the spirit" as an intellectual endeavour unmoored from their contemporary experience. Rather she creates a film which is in such sharp dialogue with present-day events, that she builds a figurative bridge for audiences in 2014 and beyond.

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<sup>177</sup> Mike Fleming Jr, 'Hard Road To Oscar: 'Selma's Ava DuVernay On Why It Took 50 Years To Make A Major MLK Movie', *Deadline*, 4 January 2015.  
< <https://deadline.com/2015/01/selma-ava-duvernay-martin-luther-king-interview-1201340457/> >

*Selma* also reflects other experiences of civil rights activism relevant to today's protestors. Its premiere in 2014 came at the same time that the Black Lives Matter protest movement was gathering pace across the country, demanding political action in response to the killing of unarmed African Americans by law enforcement, as well as an end to the racial inequalities of the criminal justice system, and systemic racism more widely. While the film emphasises the powerful nature of non-violent protest, as well as the courage and determination of previous generations of African American protestors, it also illustrates that activism can be a fractured endeavour, which needs to weather disagreements over strategy, as well as generational and other conflicts. In *Selma*, when King and his companions arrive at the town for the first time, they are met with wariness by the local branch of the SNCC, the youth-orientated campaign organisation, who are sceptical about King's strategy of marching, and 'drama' in front of the media. Drama here refers to the violent response of the police and other state agencies towards peaceful African American protestors, which King and the movement's other leaders hope will be recorded by news outlets, and disseminated across the nation. DuVernay shows this was a key lever for King and the non-violent movement he led, and King persuasively argues that it is a potent and effective strategy. 'What we do is NEGOTIATE, DEMONSTRATE, RESIST', he tells the SNCC, and goes on to argue that African Americans marching in the public arena is a purposeful exercise of agency, with effects way beyond the local arena where a demonstration is held. This strategic tussle between activist groups, featured several times in the film, is highly resonant with generational arguments that have also occurred between constituencies of activists under the Black Lives Matter banner.<sup>178</sup> DuVernay's film outlines the messy realpolitik of the struggle for justice and equal rights. However, while their different viewpoints remain somewhat unresolved, the students join the march. The message is clear: *Selma* demonstrates that activists coming together makes them a far more effective force united, than divided.<sup>179</sup>

This intergenerational disagreement, as well as debates on tactics, is picked up in *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016). DuVernay's feature documentary examines the iniquities of the criminal justice system, weaved into a historical primer on how the system became the behemoth 'prison-industrial complex' of today, disproportionately incarcerating people of colour. DuVernay also provides

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<sup>178</sup> For more on intergenerational arguments during the early Black Lives Matter campaigns, see: Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

<sup>179</sup> To note, this paragraph is largely reproduced from my article: Hagan, 2022.

compelling intellectual commentary on how Blackness itself came to be associated with criminality.

In a further nod to the utility of visual media cultures for activism, DuVernay repeatedly emphasises the importance of photographic and video images, and their media dissemination, as part of the armoury of Black activism, in both films. She returns to the theme at the end of *13th*, where she also meditates on contemporary questions over the use of such images. As she draws the documentary towards conclusion, she features a long sequence on how visual and media technologies are effective and historic tools for civil rights activism (*13th* T.C: 1:28:34 – 1:32:55). The sequence becomes a meditation on the use of imagery in Black civil rights activism throughout history. As a trope, it also directly speaks to the work of earlier Black activists throughout the long civil rights movement, figures such as Mamie Till-Mobley, using such images to bear witness to vicious white oppression of African Americans, and provoke political action to correct it.

## **CONCLUSION**

When DuVernay highlights visual images used in the service of resistance in her documentary *13th* or folds their utility into the visual-narrative structure of *Selma*, she is inadvertently highlighting her own praxis here as a filmmaker and activist. She is joined by Spike Lee, Nate Parker, Steve McQueen and other artists of the Black filmmaking renaissance in employing visual cultures in the service of activism. They take their place in a lineage not just of prior filmmakers and visual artists like photographer and filmmaker Gordon Parks, and painter and muralist Aaron Douglas. They are also in a line with Mamie Till-Mobley and many others, who use visual cultures as a form of protest and activism.

In this chapter I have argued that, to varying levels, Black filmmakers of the renaissance are making cultural film products which have circulated in 'mainstream' or mass market arenas, that in several ways challenge normative Hollywood film culture, and act as a vector for political messaging. I further outline how Black directors using film for activist practice – to offer challenge, in some ways, to white, normative social-political discourses – was also established in the work of early Black filmmakers, as exemplified by at least two films from Oscar Micheaux.

This chapter also argues that to understand the importance of cinema (and by extension the messaging it delivers), it is important to consider the vital role Hollywood has long played in propping up myths of American exceptionalism, and white superiority or supremacy. Hollywood's distortion and erasure of people of colour for many years has had, this chapter argues, real-world impacts. However, my analysis suggests that the renaissance shows Black filmmakers not simply seeking to replace white hegemonic film texts with Black ones, but instead to engage in what Stuart Hall calls "wars of position". That is, looking to alter the tendency towards whiteness (and all it stands for) as a central, navigational anchor in Hollywood cultural product. And to agitate for Black identity, in its multifarious forms, to be fully recognized as a legitimate part of the wider script of American nationhood, expressed through one of its key cultural products, film.

In the next chapter I consider the importance of narratives of identity, and the role of Black historical, cultural and collective memory in the Black filmmaking renaissance.

## Chapter Two: Historical, Cultural And Collective Memory – The Vital Past

### INTRODUCTION

In “Glory”, the soundtrack song to Ava DuVernay’s drama *Selma* (2014), about the 1965 civil rights campaign led by Martin Luther King, the rapper Common tells us that “Selma is now, for every man, woman and child.”<sup>180</sup> Evoking Berber Bevernage’s idea of ‘past - present’ – that the experiences of the past are not detached from the present, rather that they persist into the here and now, the line expresses one of the key tropes of the film.<sup>181</sup> That is, the battle for voting rights in the 1950s and 60s, and the brutal and violent repression of Black protest by police as exhibited at Selma, together represent a “sacred site” of African American collective memory.<sup>182</sup> The song highlights the historical nexus which connects the ongoing injustices suffered by African Americans today with the long history of the Black freedom struggle dating back centuries. “Resistance is us...”, continues Common, “That’s why Rosa sat on the bus. That’s why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up.”<sup>183</sup> The rap refers to the collective African American experience – but the lyrics also demand that White America understands this sacred site is part of *their* historical memory too; and that the oppression and iniquities experienced by African Americans today are part of a continuum, one which White America remains implicated in perpetuating.

In this way *Selma* and its soundtrack song speaks to a higher target - the American construct of its national historical narrative, particularly given its relatively new chapter of electing a Black man to the presidency. Obama’s historic election victory in 2008 saw claims swirl through public and media discourse that America had reached a ‘post-racial’ status, a notion which

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<sup>180</sup> *Glory*, John Legend and Common, 2014, Columbia Records.

<sup>181</sup> Berber Bevernage, *History, Memory and State-Sponsored Violence: Time and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp.xi-x.

<sup>3</sup> Theon E. Hill, ‘Sanitizing the Struggle: Barack Obama, Selma, and Civil Rights Memory.’, *Communication Quarterly*, 65.3 (2017), 354–76. The phrase “sacred site” is quoted with reference to Brown Chapel in Selma (on p.356), another of the “holy places” of the Civil Rights campaign; I think it applies equally to Selma – historically and conceptually.

<sup>183</sup> Ferguson, Missouri was the site of large and ongoing protests, following the killing of African American teenager Mike Brown by a white police officer, and decision to leave Brown’s body for several hours at the centre of a public highway. Further protests followed the heavy-handed actions of the police towards protestors, and particularly the subsequent Grand Jury decision not to prosecute the officer.

chimed well with a self-reflective national conception of a country driven by progress.<sup>184</sup> It added misplaced heft to the long established views of many white Americans that, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, racial equality had already been achieved years, even decades earlier, during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.<sup>185</sup> *Selma* ruptures this political and social narrative, and sounds the alarm on the claims being made for American history over Obama's presidential victory.

In this chapter I will examine how the Black filmmaking renaissance engages with the central issues of historical and cultural memory, and how the filmmakers explore their use for understanding and reflecting collective memory. I will also consider how the Obama era renaissance refracts current political and social issues through historical dramas, and how they use collective memory to discuss African American identity. Further I will show how they use historical dramas as a tool of resistance, and as a bridge to speak directly to audiences today.

Memory studies is a vibrant area of scholarship, and particularly useful for seeking to understand identity in the context of a racially fractious America, built on a history of the erasure of Black identity through the system of slavery. It is also a useful field of study for addressing the visual culture of historical film. Using approaches from memory studies, which in itself is interdisciplinary, I also blend sociology, philosophy, history, and film studies to consider the importance of historical and cultural memory for Black filmmakers depicting stories about African American history.

In order to examine how these narratives of memory intersect for filmmakers of the new filmmaking renaissance, as with Chapter One I have found it useful to employ the frame of 'two renaissances', drawing from a previous period of rising cultural and political Black consciousness a hundred years ago – the first renaissance of the New Negro Movement – in order to better contextualize today's Black renaissance. This period is also pertinent as it coincided with the emergence of film in the wider American context as a major cultural product, and the recognition that the new artform could further provide a locus for

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<sup>184</sup> For more on the 'progress narrative', see: Westenley Alcenat, 'The Gift of Black Folk and the Emancipation of American History', <<http://www.aaihs.org/the-gift-of-Black-folk-and-the-emancipation-of-american-history/>>

<sup>185</sup> For analysis on attitudes, see: Michael C. Dawson and Lawrence D. Bobo, 'One year later and the myth of a post-racial society', *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 6.2 (2009), 247-249.

For various stats and other evidence of racial inequalities in America, see: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

propagation of historical and political narratives – in short, it set something of a blueprint for cinema. In this period intellectuals and artists of the New Negro period also established the vital importance of historical memory for Black Americans, and that art was a key conduit to develop and engage with such narratives, as well as propagate messages about collective memory. In the post-Reconstruction and early twentieth century, competing national narratives were arising against a backdrop of much upheaval, socially, economically and geographically, and the figures of the New Negro movement understood the political significance of the battle over raced identity narratives. I examine how early filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux particularly grasped the usefulness of film in this political respect, and how he embraced the vital importance of telling Black stories on screen.

For the first time in a hundred years, against the momentous backdrop of the first Black presidency, Black filmmakers in the Obama years began producing film cultural products centred on Black lives, for a mainstream audience, in a numbers not seen since the early days of film. Turning to this second renaissance, also a period of renewed race consciousness and political protest with the rise of Black Lives Matter and other social justice protest movements, I explore why there is such a tendency among the filmmakers of the new renaissance to focus on the past, and on historical film. Building on the ideas of mainstream Black film as activist, discussed in Chapter One, I also explore how the new renaissance engages in competing national narratives, and how historical and cultural memory are weaved into the Black filmmaking renaissance works as acts of resistance.

This chapter will take Ava DuVernay's *Selma* as its primary text. Aside from the fact that the film is a rich text from which to mount this analysis, it was the first major historical drama to focus on the Black icon of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, which itself adds a layer of commemoration and memorialization to the story of the film. The meta-narrative of the film further lends itself to this chapter, given the messaging of the film seemed to bounce into the present at the very moment it was being made. This was not only due to the Supreme Court's decision to strike down the Voting Rights Act, the very Act which the film is centred on. As I outlined in this thesis Introduction, during the making of the film the cast and crew, watching reports of the Ferguson protests against racism in the police, were struck by how the past and the present seemed to be coalescing: "[We were] flabbergasted that we were seeing images akin to what we had just filmed," said David Oyelowo, who plays Dr King.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Gary Younge, 'Ferguson, *Selma* and a Mood for Change', *The Guardian*, 29 January 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/29/what-selma-means-now>> [accessed 1 December 2017].

DuVernay's first major screen outing serves as a comprehensive study of why history, and particularly historical, cultural and collective memory, inhabit a major space in the work of so many Black filmmakers of the current renaissance. As this chapter will demonstrate, her work illustrates why history is interrogated by so many of these filmmakers; and how Black historical film dialogues with our current moment in history – the commemoration of protest for instance, just at a time when a renewed Black protest movement in 2014 was taking off in America. It also signposts to other moments in the past, enshrined in the memory of Black America. Along the way it demonstrates how the past is malleable – used, interpreted and reinterpreted, in the service of the present. In short, while *Selma* speaks ostensibly to the past, it uses historical memory to speak about race, and the progress of race relations, in America today.

### ***History and film at the vanguard of the Renaissance***

*Selma* is one of many historical dramas in the Black filmmaking renaissance, and it is noticeable that historical film takes such a central place in it. Alongside *Selma* (2014), centred on the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery which precipitated the Voting Rights Act of 1965, there are stories of the enslaved *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Birth of a Nation* (2016). *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), the story of how rap band N.W.A. came to success in the 1980s/90s, is also a historical narrative, even if less obviously a period piece. Of the other films in the renaissance, many also exploit history directly in their narratives to show how the past bleeds into, or is echoed in, the present. *Chi-raq* (2015) for example, a tragi-comedy drama about gun violence, employs the framing of an ancient Greek drama to tell a contemporary story, thereby connecting present day Chicago-Southside life with enduring historical tropes about human relations, society, politics, and particularly masculinity.<sup>187</sup> Even *Moonlight* (2016), the life story of a Black, gay man growing up in housing projects in Miami, displays a fascination with the past. The narrative arc of the film is mostly located in the early

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When an unarmed African American teenager, Michael Brown, was killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014, it sparked mass protests in a city where Black people had long been harassed by police, and where a later Department of Justice report found the city guilty of racialised policing processes. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>187</sup> See Chapter 3 for an exploration of masculinity and gender in the films of the renaissance, focusing particularly on *Chi-raq*, *Moonlight* and *Straight Outta Compton*.

and teenage life of its main protagonist Chiron, examining how he came to be the adult nicknamed Black.

In this chapter I consider why history, biography and the past apparently hold such an attraction for African American filmmakers, at a time when Barack Obama 'made history' by becoming the first Black president; and specifically what these directors are attempting to say, or what ideas emerge in their work, through imagining and depicting narratives located in the past. Scholar Alessandro Portelli argues that "history-telling... is an attempt to *reconstruct* memory"<sup>188</sup>, and historian David Blight explains that the process of constructing [and reconstructing] memory is achieved "in all the various cultural forms."<sup>189</sup> I posit that the cultural form of filmmaking, its visual dramaturgy and narrative force, make it a particularly potent medium for the transmission of memory and history.

In combination with its massive reach through cinema, television, DVD and streaming services, film remains a highly effective means of communicating social, political and cultural messages and influence as we saw in Chapter One. Until 1950, film was the "pre-eminent popular art form", and even with the emergence of television and later the internet, film remains "one of the dominant cultural forms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."<sup>190</sup> Historical film in particular is a highly popular and successful cultural product. As scholar Jonathan Stubbs describes in *Historical Film*, this type of drama "has been a mainstay of American film production for over a hundred years and has consistently driven a large proportion of Hollywood's profits."<sup>191</sup>

However, historical film occupies a highly contested place in scholarship. Academics across history, film, literature and cultural studies, and within these disciplines themselves, have long

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<sup>188</sup> Alessandro Potelli, 'History Telling and Time: An Example from Kentucky', in *History and memory in African-American culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre, and Robert G. O'Meally (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.164.

<sup>189</sup> David Blight, 'W.E.B Du Bois and the Struggle for American Memory', in *History and memory in African-American culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre, and Robert G. O'Meally (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1994, p.52.

<sup>190</sup> Jeffrey Richards, quoted in James Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action 1913-1972* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Sian Barber, *Using Film as a Source* (Manchester University Press, 2015), p.1.

<sup>191</sup> Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film : A Critical Introduction* (New York : Bloomsbury, 2013). Stubbs's volume surveys recent and contemporary approaches to historical film scholarship and sums up discussions over genre.

disagreed about how historical film ought to be defined, and its place in historiography.<sup>192</sup> Agreeing parameters for the genre is problematic because it “tends to cut across existing genre categories and establishes an intimidatingly large group of films”, says Stubbs. Some scholars include films which strive for ‘accurate’ representation of perceived facts about an event, or evidence-based visual depictions such as period dramas. Others believe that it applies not just to content, but to films which use devices such as prologues and epilogues to relate the story to, or situate it in, the past. Or films which employ “extra-textual engagements” – such as using claims for the historical research underpinning a film, to promote it or answer critics.<sup>193</sup>

It is worth noting that many Black filmmakers of this renaissance should choose such a contested space in which to communicate what they want to say. Working in a contested field mirrors the wider social and political arena that Black and other people of colour find themselves in, when they question or challenge the ‘legitimized’ normative American narrative – be that history, art, or social and political structures. In this light, I posit that the choice of the contested space of historical film is reflective of the Black historical experience in America, and further, that these films are acts of protest. As discussed in Chapter One, the overwhelming majority of Hollywood historical films (and many other cultural products) concern white histories and privilege white storylines.<sup>194</sup> To stride into a lineage of white normative historical storytelling and instead privilege Black history, telling history from an African American point of view, is itself resistance. It exposes not just the more openly racist, but also the subtly prejudicial, underpinning of national discourses. It also reveals the hidden power of normative whiteness, where whiteness becomes shorthand for representing humanity in general, and thus anyone not white can be relegated to representing the ‘lesser’ category of their ‘race’.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., Stubbs

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., Stubbs, Introduction and throughout the book.

I also explore the use of research in both the marketing of historical film, and in the bid for authenticity, in Chapter One.

<sup>194</sup> For discussion on the ubiquity of white representation, see Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.3.

“Research – into books, museums, the press, advertising, films, television, software – repeatedly shows that in Western representation, whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard.”

<sup>195</sup> See the work of Richard Dyer and Robert Burgoyne for much fuller discussions about this:

Ibid., Dyer

and

Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood looks at US History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

Film Scholar Robert Burgoyne makes a persuasive argument for recognizing the importance of historical filmmaking to these frameworks of individual and national identity:

The history film has played an exceptionally powerful role in shaping our culture's understanding of the past, an influence that derives not simply from the cinema's unequalled ability to re-create the past in sensual, mimetic form, but also from its striking tendency to arouse critical and popular controversy that resonates throughout the public sphere.<sup>196</sup>

Given that historical film is such a popular cultural product, the influence Burgoyne describes should not be underestimated. This was something understood by cultural commentator and author James Baldwin, who wrote about his experience of film throughout his life, and was acutely attuned to the sometimes catastrophic, but potentially liberating, power of narrative. Baldwin knew that African Americans (and people of colour the world over) had suffered at the hands of a narrative of history told through a white hegemonic gaze. He saw that, once this was recognized by those who were oppressed, they would be emancipated to resurrect their own, displaced versions of history, with transformative consequences. Visiting England in the late 1960s, an earlier period of renaissance in Black consciousness, Baldwin said:

When you try to stand up and look the world in the face like you had a right to be here, when you do that – without knowing that this is the result of it – you have attacked the entire power structure of the western world. If I...discover that I have been lied to all the years of my life, and my mother and my father were lied to... If I discover that in fact, though I was bred and bought and sold like a mule, I never really was a mule. If I discover that I was never really happy picking all that cotton... and I discover that all those songs the darkies sang – and sing – were not the innocent expressions of a primitive people, but the extremely subtle, difficult, dangerous and tragic expressions of what it felt like to be in chains. Then by one's presence simply...you have begun to frighten the White World.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden, MA: Blackwell publishing, 2008), p.1.

<sup>197</sup> *Baldwin's N\_\_\_\_\_*, Dir. Horace Ove (London 1969). Short documentary made by Horace Ové, who filmed James Baldwin addressing a group of West Indian students in London, 1969.

Ava DuVernay has emphasized that she is telling the story of *Selma* through her perspective; and that, in the climate of the time, she found herself free to express her “vision as a filmmaker... amplified without the permission of the privileged few who have held marginalized creators at arm’s distance for decades.”<sup>198</sup> In this chapter I shall illustrate how Black filmmakers simply telling stories of African American history *from their perspective*, exposes the racial assumptions which underpin many cultural and historical, social and political norms in America. As Baldwin suggests, for Black artists, intellectuals, historians and others, their use of Black history, and importantly of Black historical memory, are political acts of resistance with far reaching consequences – particularly, as I shall outline, since the stakes have always been high.

### ***Historical memory and race in America***

In this chapter I explore how the inheritors of Baldwin’s vision – the filmmakers of the renaissance – interpret American history through historical memory. The relationship between history and memory has long been an active field of scholarship. As far back as 1925 in his seminal study *The Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs wrote that “individuals depend on other members of their own groups for independent confirmation of the content of their memories”.<sup>199</sup>

I posit that a sense of collective memory has a particular importance and complexity for Black America, one which is distinct from White America, and the many migrant ethnicities which come under that umbrella. Several factors are particular to the African American collective experience, from which a historic sense of both individual and group identity are also derived. It is a fractured and violated history – where African ancestors were forcibly removed from their familiar loci of memory and their cultural spaces; where enslaved forefathers and mothers were denied the ownership of their own bodies by white masters; where an essentially apartheid state and other legacies of the American system of slavery ensured that a sense of independent Black selfhood remained under attack for generations that followed Reconstruction. African American artists have often used this splintered experience as a

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<sup>198</sup> Ava DuVernay, ‘Ava DuVernay on what gives her hope’, *Time* [online], 8 January 2018.

<sup>199</sup> Quoted in Blight, p.52.

driving force to repeatedly and actively engage with and reinforce collective memory, and collective identity.

Pierre Nora, one of the founding scholars of historical memory criticism, describes just such a context in his description of how 'sites of memory' or "lieux de mémoire", are formed:

where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.<sup>200</sup>

The construction of our memories works hand in hand with the construction of our identities, and sites of memory are particularly important for that assembling of elements to take place.<sup>201</sup> Further, it is a heavily dynamic process. As David Blight notes, "we create and recreate narratives in response to ever-changing political and social circumstances."<sup>202</sup> I argue that in response to the historically and culturally momentous event of Obama's election, it is thus not surprising that Black filmmakers have tended to historical narratives as "lieux de mémoire", as a way of exploring both the event itself, and its relationship to a constantly reconstructed past. As suggested by Common's lyrics in *Selma's* theme tune, it can also be a way to explore – and offer commentary on – the present.

'Lieux de mémoire' include objects, scenes or physical artefacts, but also forms of cultural expression of many kinds, story-telling, and autobiography. Nellie McKay describes how this latter trend towards looking at history and biography as sites of memory arose in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. It emerged as a rising Black consciousness demanded a more active reappraisal of the dominant narratives which left out so much of Black history.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', in *History and memory in African-American culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre, and Robert G. O'Meally (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>201</sup> For more on this see: Vijay Agnew, ed., *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). For instance, particularly pertinent for African American historical memory, Agnew notes "memories play a role in the individual's struggle to construct a social and personal identity in a world in which subjectivity is both fragmented and fractured." (Introduction, p.7)

<sup>202</sup> Blight, p.52.

<sup>203</sup> Nellie McKay, 'The Journals of Charlotte M Forten-Grimke: Les Lieux de Mémoire in African-American Women's Autobiography', in *History and memory in African-American culture*, eds. Genevieve Fabre, and Robert G. O'Meally (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.262.

However, the importance of historical memory, lieux de memoire (even if not termed as such), and collective cultural identity were already identified as vital for African Americans as individuals, and for political and social group identity, long before the mid-sixties. As I shall discuss in this chapter, Black intellectuals and scholars, most prominently W.E.B. Du Bois but others too, were sounding the alarm about the emerging revisionist history of Reconstruction and Black history from the late nineteenth century onwards.<sup>204</sup>

This historical period, post-Reconstruction and into the early twentieth century, provides a particularly important context for, and relevance to, the Black filmmaking renaissance one hundred years later, especially when considering the predilection for artists to explore historical memory and its significance for African American film. The scholar Angela Landsberg argues that the medium of cinema transmits what she terms “prosthetic memory” to the audience – so that those who have not directly experienced something themselves, or had experiences directly communicated to them through individuals or their community, can absorb collective memory through the experience of film.<sup>205</sup> Landsberg also notes that a century ago, the emergence of mass culture (a phenomenon heavily facilitated by the arrival of cinema) coincided with mass migrations into and across America. Then as now, watching a film in a cinema can feel like a private activity, but it can also be a collective experience, providing an exchange that “facilitates... the formation of progressive political alliances and possibilities.”<sup>206</sup> When we consider that these circumstances were all interacting at the same time a century ago, we can see that in terms of historical memory, cinema from its inception was able to intervene in novel and profound ways:

With these movements of peoples came the rupture of generational ties, rendering the traditional modes for the transmission of cultural, ethnic and racial memory – both

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<sup>204</sup> For example, see works from W.E.B. Du Bois, such as *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1903 and 1935 respectively), CG Woodson *The Negro in our History* (1922), and the work of Lorenzo Johnston Greene, Anna Julia Cooper, Charles H Wesley to name a few, who were engaged in refuting revisionist or white supremacist accounts of history which marginalized or denigrated Black people – either addressing these myths directly, or by reflecting more accurate Black histories and contemporary society. This issue is explored in more depth later in this chapter.

<sup>205</sup> Alison Landsberg discusses the convergence of the technological advances which created cinema and mass culture, together with the effects of modernization and industrialization producing mass migrations in: Alison Landsberg, ‘Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Popular Culture’, in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. by Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 146-7.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.* Landsberg, p.146

those passed from parent to child and those disseminated through community life – increasingly inadequate. At the same time the cinema, and the technologized mass culture that it helped inaugurate informed memory by making possible an unprecedented circulation of images and narratives about the past.... the kinds of memories that one has intimate, even experiential access to, would no longer be limited to the memories of events through which one has actually lived.<sup>207</sup>

A hundred years ago film was already a popular and widespread medium, and effective repository, conduit, and framework for constructing, memory – cultural, historical and “racial” memory as Landsberg describes. This was a period of huge upheaval in America, when questions over identity and what made a person ‘an American’ permeated social and political discourses.<sup>208</sup> The identification of, and either construction or consolidation of, “racial memory” became a vital means of making sense of the changing social political and cultural landscape of early twentieth century America – racial memory for the white population, but particularly for Black and ethnic minority citizens and groups, who had suffered the rupture of cultural and historical memory in their recent past, and geographical upheaval.

At the same time this mass cultural experience, film, became available, Black intellectuals were sounding the alarm on revisionist American historical memory being propagated throughout the country by white supremacist historians.<sup>209</sup> A century later, as an African American took the presidency in a historically momentous win, soon accompanied by a period of renewed Black consciousness with the Black Lives Matter movement which situated itself in a lineage of Black protest, it is not surprising that Black film should experience a renaissance of its own. Nor is it surprising that one of the key tropes that renaissance should draw on, connecting African American experience from slavery onwards, is historical memory.

### ***Historical memory and active dialogue with the Black filmmaking renaissance***

*Selma*'s historical narrative presents a highly active dialogue with history and with the present day. It takes a key moment in civil rights history, and looks at the principal Black figure of the

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., Landsberg, p.146.

<sup>208</sup> Sarah Churchwell, *Behold America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

<sup>209</sup> For example, the Dunning School – explained in greater detail in the section that follows.

movement almost fifty years after the passing of the Voting Rights Act. It identifies key white protagonists (eg. Lyndon Johnson) rather than an amorphous white community, and thus contests a specific historical moment. It also leaves room for how this moment relates to and challenges the longer political and hegemonic narrative in America, particularly its characterization as one of progress. Notably *Selma* celebrates and dramatizes the work of a major African American political leader, Dr King, during the tenure of the first Black president. It further explores the most publicly familiar period of Black protest, the Civil Rights Movement, at the same time that today's cinemagoers are attuned to the rise of a renewed Black protest movement, Black Lives Matter, and its sister movements.

*Selma* also warns that when it comes to historical narrative – whether depicted by artists or constructed by a political hegemony – ‘the stakes are high’, particularly for a Black population who have often been airbrushed out of the principal American history, and whose past has been largely marginalized in mainstream politics, culture and historical memory.<sup>210</sup> *Selma*, a major cinematic presentation of the nexus of historical memory I have described (the Civil Rights Movement, King and everything they represent), disrupts romantic notions of the American doctrine of progress and American exceptionalism. Bringing this story to the big screen at this moment challenges the prevailing national narrative – a narrative which downplays the historical and ongoing racial inequalities and violence suffered by Black and other minority non-white groups, and in particular diminishes the role of the state in both underpinning and perpetuating the racial status quo. Using historical memory as a device, *Selma* dialogues clearly with contemporary America, where unarmed Black people are killed in disproportionate numbers at the hands of the state. In so doing it undercuts a neat narrative of racial progress with Obama as the pinnacle.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Further into the chapter I discuss the recognition by Martin Luther King (from whom the highlighted phrase is borrowed) and W.E.B. Du Bois of the seriousness and urgency for African Americans of controlling historical narrative and historical memory.

<sup>211</sup> Many press interviews illustrate how the history of violence towards Black people depicted in *Selma* resonated acutely for DuVernay and several members of the cast and crew, with the stories of with African Americans killed by police in present day America, such as Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, and many others.

For example, see Gary Younge, ‘Ferguson, *Selma* and a Mood for Change’, *The Guardian*, 29 January 2015

<<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/29/what-selma-means-now>>

AND

Sam Flynn, ‘Director DuVernay Discusses the Politics of Filmmaking’, *The Chautauquan Daily*, 29 July 2015

<<https://chqdaily.wordpress.com/2015/07/29/director-duvernay-discusses-the-politics-of-filmmaking/>>

At this period of rising protest, importantly the film also reminds – or re-educates – audiences of Martin Luther King’s radicalism, reclaiming the historical memory of a potent and challenging civil rights movement and Black leader, and refuting the ‘whitewashed’, passive version of King’s story – a version long co-opted by an American political system as a tool with which to disempower subsequent Black protest.<sup>212</sup> In this way, DuVernay’s use of historical memory is at once a political act, and also an act of resistance. DuVernay follows Black storytellers and other artists throughout American history, such as fugitive slaves Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, who escaped the antebellum South and wrote or dictated their own histories, and who have exercised their agency through their art to create repositories of historical memory, and express protest.<sup>213</sup> It also puts her in a tradition of the writers, artists and filmmakers of the twentieth century, particularly those of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s, who were awake to the importance of history and memory, in carving out a distinct and powerful place for African Americans in the wider US society. However, before Black Power, before Harlem, there was the circle of African American activists, artists and intellectuals at the dawn of Black consciousness in the twentieth century, the ‘first renaissance’.

### ***“The Stakes were High” - The rehabilitation of Black historical and cultural memory in the early twentieth century***

To properly understand historical and cultural memory in the work of Ava DuVernay and other Black filmmakers, it is important to consider African American artists and thinkers who came before, particularly those working in earlier periods of renewed Black consciousness. When

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<sup>212</sup> More on the co-option of Martin Luther King to the forces of conservatism are discussed later in the chapter. Ava DuVernay discusses her own gaps in knowledge about King, but more particularly her astonishment at how little people at screenings of her film seemed to know about the civil rights leader. See for example: Ava DuVernay, "Director Ava DuVernay on sharing the story of *'Selma'* and deconstructing American Heroes", 2015, *PBS Newshour* <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/selma>>.

Commentators and politicians have also used the memory of Martin Luther King to criticize protestors at Ferguson and elsewhere. For example, Cal Thomas, 'Ferguson Unrest: Make Protesters Pay for Riot Damage', *Fox News*, 2015 <<https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/ferguson-unrest-make-protesters-pay-for-riot-damage>>.

<sup>213</sup> For example, escaped slaves such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Solomon Northup, and several others not only fled slavery to the North, but published their accounts – ‘slave narratives’ – to illustrate the brutal experiences of enslaved people in the South. Used extensively by abolitionists, such accounts refuted the South’s propaganda on slavery as a benign institution and built support for the abolitionist movement.

we examine the work of such African American forefathers and mothers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the 'first renaissance', we much better comprehend the stakes for African Americans during that pivotal period, as well as the consequent political and social role which 'remembering' has come to take in African American culture. This was a time when a dominant white narrative of race, identity, racial identity, and nationhood, took on new significance and had serious real world impacts, particularly for people of colour and Black people in particular. Exploring this earlier context, we understand why it was so important that Black artists and thinkers of the day identified the significance of the white hegemonic narrative being spun around them. We also appreciate why they rightly saw it as imperative to counter the white myths of American nationhood being soldered in the public consciousness, with African American narratives of history and identity. This period saw the beginning of the intense dual between competing narratives of race and identity, which has played out in American society ever since. For my purposes in understanding the hugely important part which historical, cultural and collective memory play in the work of today's Black filmmakers in America, it is imperative to examine how these elements have come to be so significant today. Exploring the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries period of awakening, a time when Black thinkers were rebutting the more accommodationist stance of leaders like Booker T Washington, when competing narratives of nationhood were taking root, and when Black filmmakers were taking their place in the new medium of cinema, is vital to this work.<sup>214</sup>

Political scholar Rebecca Kook notes that, "The process of writing the past, in the formal framework of history books, is, perhaps, the most direct way of constructing a national memory."<sup>215</sup> This was something understood well by turn of the twentieth century historian, intellectual and leading Black figure W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois identified as early as the post-Reconstruction period that who gets to inscribe – and by extension, own – national memory (the predominant national history), wields enormous political and social power. As David Blight describes in 'Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory', Martin Luther King's later observation that the "stakes were high" in the manipulation of history, was prefigured fifty years earlier by Du Bois.<sup>216</sup> Du Bois identified that the prevailing notion of Reconstruction as 'a mistake' was one promoted by influential late nineteenth century historians such as John

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<sup>214</sup> For more on the shift in attitudes at this time, see Mark Bauerlein, 'Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois: The Origins of a Bitter Intellectual Battle', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2004), p.106.

<sup>215</sup> Rebecca Kook, 'The Shifting Status of African Americans in the American Collective Identity', *Journal of Black Studies* (1998), p.154.

<sup>216</sup> Blight, as above, p.45.

Burgess and William Dunning (an influence that is evident well into the twentieth century).<sup>217</sup> At the same time, he realised that African Americans were being edited out of their own history; not only their own cultural history and African origin stories, but also their agency and role they played in the United States in gaining their freedom, campaigning for equality, and their part in American politics during Reconstruction. This was a version of history rapidly being promoted throughout academia and popular culture, and adhered itself to long standing public notions of Black inferiority. Burgess, Blight tells us, was a history professor at Columbia who “used unabashed theories of white supremacy and Anglo-Saxonism, along with an overt defence of authority, to condemn Reconstruction as an attempt to overthrow the natural order.”<sup>218</sup> Du Bois recognised the pernicious implications, as well as the real world impacts which such a framing of history promoted nationwide, at a time when the white hegemony (particularly in the South) had been reacting against the progress of Reconstruction.

To say ‘the stakes were high’ is almost understatement, and it did not just apply to the cultural, historical, social and intellectual place of African Americans in the nation’s past and future – important though that was for Black identity and progress in America. This was a dangerous and volatile time for Black Americans.<sup>219</sup> The severe retraction of many rights gained by African Americans during Reconstruction, ushering in the social and political order of Jim Crow, had combined with huge economic and social upheavals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>220</sup> This had disempowering and dangerous consequences for Black citizens, who found themselves the objects of discrimination and violence not just in the South but the North too.<sup>221</sup> As discussed earlier, it was a time of mass migrations and huge social change.<sup>222</sup> This destabilized arena is one ripe for promoting and soldering national narratives of identity and nationhood into the public consciousness; in this case, the national narrative of America saw that identity as white.<sup>223</sup> This narrative – a construction of cultural and historical

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., as above, p.62.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., Blight, pp.62-3.

<sup>219</sup> Cedric J Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>220</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, third edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., Marable.

<sup>222</sup> See Landsberg, ‘Prosthetic Memory’, pp.146-7

<sup>223</sup> I base my ideas here on Richard Dyer’s arguments, referenced earlier, on how white people have tended to see themselves as representing all humanity, with people of colour relegated to racialized sub divisions of the population.

memory – dictated an ideology of American history and nationhood based on self-determination and a belief that America was a land of equal opportunity. It also had plenty of room for revisionist ideas about contemporary America, and how it came to be. This was a period when the Star Spangled Banner – including its powerful iconic line describing America as ‘the land of the free and home of the brave’, but also lyrics about vanquishing rebel slaves – became the national anthem (1916). It was further the period when statues to Confederate leaders were being erected, notably decades after the Civil War and well into the twentieth century – acts of commemoration which bolstered the myth of the ‘Lost Cause’ and the repudiation of racial equality.<sup>224</sup> These narratives, emphasizing the primacy of a fictitious White America, underpinned white supremacy and the discrimination and violence meted out to countless African Americans across the country. Between 1885 and 1921 alone, around 3,200 Black people were lynched, with countless others mutilated, often with the local white community in attendance to watch and cheer the public torture of Black victims or, in case they missed it, gruesome details of the lynching itself would be published in local newspapers.<sup>225</sup> The lack of political will to halt these atrocities and prosecute the perpetrators, chimed with a state apparatus which was tilted against African Americans. Underneath it all sat a national narrative, one that had constructed collective historical memory to decry Reconstruction and the progressive ideals it represented, and supported the construction of racial hierarchies.

Du Bois understood the high stakes game which Black America found itself in.<sup>226</sup> Through his most famous works such as *The Souls of Black Folk* and his landmark *Black Reconstruction*, but also numerous other works, speeches, correspondence, and editorship of the journal *Crisis*, he dedicated much of his career to correcting this historical/political narrative.<sup>227</sup> One of the

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See Dyer, *White*.

<sup>224</sup> The ‘Lost Cause’ myth emerged in the wake of the Civil War, gained particular currency in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, and has persisted even to the present day. It seeks to paint the South’s role in the American Civil War as noble and unjustifiably maligned. In this romanticized take on history, honourable Southern men defended a benign Southern way of life (including slavery) against northern aggressors.

See: Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>225</sup> Anthony E. O. King, ‘Understanding Violence among Young African American Males: An Afrocentric Perspective’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 28.1 (1997), 79–96.

<sup>226</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An essay toward the part which Black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935).

<sup>227</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903).

founding fathers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Du Bois can also be seen as one of the key intellectuals of post-bellum African American nationhood, and of pan-Africanism<sup>228</sup>. Along with others, his recognition of history specifically as political and cultural weaponry sounded a klaxon for Black intellectuals, historians and artists.<sup>229</sup> Du Bois made the case for the vital importance of recording Black history and customs, including those taken from Africa; preserving cultural and historical memory – as armoury against the prevailing revisionist history. He understood the importance of establishing as a counternarrative – and in the process, a ‘counter-memory’ - the long African/African American presence in the US, their experience of the terrors of slavery and their history of agency in resisting oppression.

This is already evident in some of Du Bois’ earliest published work, such as in this excerpt from *The Souls of Black Folk*:

They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine...

The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words, and in it we can trace here signs of development. My grandfather’s grandmother was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago; and coming to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, Black, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees.... The child sang it to his children and they to their children’s children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us...knowing well the meaning of its music.

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Ibid. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*

<sup>228</sup> Patrick Anderson, ‘Pan-Africanism and Economic Nationalism: W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* and the Failings of the “Black Marxism” Thesis’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 48.8 (2017), 732–57.

<sup>229</sup> For example, Black History Month grew out of the work of Du Bois contemporary working in the same field, historian and journalist C G Woodson (referred to as ‘The Father of Black History’ by the NAACP). Woodson was also involved in the NAACP, and he started the *Journal of Black* [formerly ‘*Negro*’] *History*. Together with other academics and activists, he also founded The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed, we were here... our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people? <sup>230</sup>

In this 1903 work Du Bois discusses 'sorrow songs' (spirituals), here highlighting the importance of these songs as cultural and social repositories of memory. He notes that these songs, emanating from the Black slave experiences and the Southern states, resonate with personal and collective memory for him, both historical and cultural – despite his being raised in a northern urban environment, and being born after the Civil War had already ended. And he uses that memory to puncture the heroic narrative of progress, which white America was content to believe about itself.

Establishing and representing Black history in this way was also armoury against a daily onslaught of cultural artillery, which permeated US society alongside the revisionist historians' narratives. During Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century, cultural products (household items, newspaper articles, food packaging, and on and on), were used across educational, social and commercial environments to solder the image of Black people as stupid and scientifically inferior. Imagery such as the repeated tropes of 'Aunt Jemima' to 'Sambo' promoted a view of a docile, childish people.<sup>231</sup> Along with other stereotypes, according to cultural historian Jan Pieterse, the 'Sambo' figure in particular was in a continuum from much earlier imagery of enslaved Black Africans and Americans, conjuring them as immature in intellect and emotion, and reassuringly dependent on their white 'masters'.<sup>232</sup> Such a conjuring was a "key figure in the theatre of accommodation", says Pieterse. In the ante-bellum South (and beyond), this social imagery of enslaved men and women as 'big children' with no use for their own agency was constructed by those terrified of the risks presented by the slave society they had created – providing a reassuring "antidote to [slave rebel leaders] Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner".<sup>233</sup> Once established in the minds of a portion of white America, such imagery persisted through Reconstruction and beyond.

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<sup>230</sup> Du Bois, *Souls*, Chapter 14.

<sup>231</sup> Susan Booker Morris, 'Targeting Black Masculinity: An Analysis of the (Mis)Representation of Black Men in the History of Early American Popular Culture', *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, 28.2 (2011), pp.77–87.

<sup>232</sup> Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black : Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>233</sup> All quotes from Pieterse, *White on Black*, p.153.

Black people were no longer enslaved, but exaggerated versions of their images were now bought and sold at the service of American consumerism. What had been widespread imagery across existing cultural artefacts (from ashtrays to pancake mix), unsurprisingly found its way into the next major object of popular consumption to enter the American mainstream – cinema. During the early twentieth century film was fast becoming the dominant cultural product, rapidly rising in popularity from the early part of the century. From the earliest days of filmmaking in America, insulting stereotypes of Black people were a constant presence in films for mainstream audiences, as depictions from the theatre and vaudeville migrated to the new popular entertainment. Where racist imagery on cultural artefacts and everyday objects (ashtrays, merchandising, funfair games, pancake mix, etc) had previously created a cultural bedrock to underpin wider racist attitudes, the wide reach and success of cinema promoted degrading stereotypes via ‘living’ characters on screen.<sup>234</sup> With the ante ‘upped’ through the highly effective medium of historical film, the battle over representation had developed into a war.

Historical and cultural tropes contribute to wider cultural currency, serving national narratives of history and identity. As we saw earlier, these pernicious images of African Americans fed into a white, hegemonic narrative concerning American identity, ultimately put Black citizens at risk, then and now. I posit that the relentless imagery of Black Americans as lesser forms of human beings, and inferior citizens, was (and remains) the psychological platform on which acts of racial violence are given legitimacy and impunity. In *Selma*, for instance, DuVernay illustrates this point through the ubiquity, brutality and remorselessness of the violence she shows perpetrated against African Americans – particularly the opening scene, where children attending an Alabama church are murdered, the result of an indiscriminate bombing attack.

The most notable proponent of such negative cinematic imagery of African Americans was pioneering filmmaker D W Griffith, and most notoriously his collaboration with white supremacist author Thomas Dixon – the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). As we saw in Chapter One, more than any other of the early cultural products of film, *Birth* was successful at propagating a view of the cultural and historical DNA of Black people as a lower order than that of white people. As such, they had been happier, the film argued, in their natural, childlike and subservient position as enslaved people. However, the figure of the mixed

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., Morris, pp.77-87.

heritage “mulatto” in the film, as cultural critic Cedric Robinson argues (and as discussed in Chapter One), was there to denote and denounce the “chaos” of “miscegenation”.<sup>235</sup>

Once again, a revisionist version of American history, a complete distortion of African American historical memory, was being conjured; and once again it was at the service of a white hegemony. The child-like enslaved person of the plantation genre appears in movies at this time – serving to reassure whites that the rising numbers of African Americans all around them in cities, following the Great Migration, don’t hold a grudge against centuries of white supremacy.<sup>236</sup> The mixed heritage figures depicted in *Birth* also had a distinct political and social utility. As discussed in Chapter One, many of the Black middle class agitators and campaigners of the period were of mixed heritage, notes Robinson. By depicting mixed heritage figures in the film as cunning and conniving characters, challenging whites and the white-controlled social order, Griffith (and Thomas Dixon) sought to “deface the Black middle-class”.<sup>237</sup> By promoting a false cultural history of such figures to whites across the United States, they sought to specifically undermine the progressive politics of the contemporary middle-class Black activists, and subdue the militant campaigners such as Du Bois, who “disrupted the white supremacist manifesto of the new nationalist history and the racial conceits embedded at birth in anthropology and sociology.”<sup>238</sup>

The film had direct and deadly consequences – the resurgence of a near-defunct Ku Klux Klan and ensuing terrorizing and lynching of African Americans.<sup>239</sup> The negative cultural representation of African Americans also did enormous damage to the way they were viewed by the much larger white population for decades to come.<sup>240</sup> Its cultural force and the revisionist history it promoted helped to underpin the justification for Jim Crow, and further

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<sup>235</sup> Cedric J Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp.205-225. The quotes here are from p.215.

<sup>236</sup> See Edward Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1993). For a comprehensive analysis of depictions of Black people in the plantation genre, and how they served contemporary political ends, see Chapter One, ‘From *Birth* to Blaxploitation: Hollywood’s Inscription of Slavery’.

<sup>237</sup> Robinson, p.205

<sup>238</sup> Robinson, p.215

<sup>239</sup> Melvyn Stokes, *DW Griffith’s Birth of a Nation: The Most Controversial Film of All Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>240</sup> Manthia Diawara ed., *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.3.

damage race relations at a time when the Great Migration was seeing an unprecedented number of Black people moving to parts of the nation where few had lived before. Along the way, it normalized the assault on Black character, intellect and morality which became a lasting legacy.<sup>241</sup>

In writing about the post-Reconstruction period, scholar Bruce Becker points out that there was a vigorous effort to repudiate the success or legitimacy of the period when Black people held even limited political power, in a bid to entrench the white supremacist impression in the American narrative, and make it “as close to hegemonic as any part of American historical memory had ever been.”<sup>242</sup> Griffith’s project can be seen very much in this vein - propagating pernicious and contrived historical memory in the minds of white audiences, the myth of the ‘Lost Cause’ and the ‘error’ of Reconstruction; as well as, more subtly, to emphasize to audiences the historical and cultural bonds which joined the White South with the White North, and rejecting people of colour.<sup>243</sup>

Griffith, and the success of his film, was a provocation. The need to contest this emerging American historical narrative – and in the context of film as cultural product, the historical and cultural memory being promoted through the medium – was pressing. *Birth* was not the first film the NAACP had protested, but their campaign against it was widespread, and shows that though in its relative infancy, the artform of film was understood to have the potential to be a powerful tool by both hegemonic white forces, and by Black communities - a cultural product with huge social and political, as well as cultural influence.<sup>244</sup> As we have seen in Chapter One,

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<sup>241</sup> This paragraph reflects the work of several scholars who have written about the effects of *Birth of a Nation* on American race relations, and its underpinning of Jim Crow and other discriminatory practices. See for example Stephen Weinberger, Thomas Cripps, Ed Guerrero, Melvyn Stokes.

<sup>242</sup> Taken from Julie Saville’s review of Bruce E. Baker’s *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* published in, *The American Historical Review*, 115(4), pp. 1156-1157.

<sup>243</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* p.26.

Griffith wasn’t the only proponent of these kinds of representations (but perhaps the most effective). In the period running up to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Civil War, “intersectional reconciliation became a national theme, and accordingly, Black roles in the cinema that focused on the Civil War necessarily retraced old ruts. The acceptable Negro became a loyal slave, a sacrificial goat in the ritual of the reunion of the sections, a wistful icon of old ways, steadfast in defence of his master’s home and family, obligated by the logic of the situation to reject Yankee promises of freedom, and finally, resolute in rejecting Black brothers in blue uniforms and those who had fled from farm to town.”

<sup>244</sup> For example, see Stokes, pp.155-6.

Stephen Weinberger, ‘*The Birth of a Nation* and the Making of the NAACP’, *Journal of American Studies*, 2011, Vol.45:1, pp.77-93.

Weinberger also notes the lasting damage which the NAACP ascribed to the effects of Griffith’s film well into the twentieth century. See above, p.77.

the film resulted in mass protests from the Black community, and for the first time in their young history, the NAACP were prompted into organizing national action.<sup>245</sup> The NAACP were acutely attuned to the pernicious effects of the racialized history and stereotypes propagated by *Birth*, and were highly active on a local and state level, not just using protests but also legal action and political pressure to get the film banned in individual states or towns, or failing that, to get the most offensively racist scenes cut. Although many of the bans they secured were overturned, they successfully petitioned the governors of Kansas and Ohio to prohibit the showing of the film in their states.<sup>246</sup> As Stokes points out, the mass migrations of African Americans to the North and West had multiplied the Black vote, something which Republican lawmakers were sensitive to.

It is important to note that as far back as a century ago, the film medium was already understood to wield such influential currency – particularly on a nation in a state of demographic and geographic upheaval (the Great Migration), and where the contest for historical memory between White and Black America was intensifying. Film in America was coming of age against a backdrop of World War I and socialist unrest in Europe, the rise of Nordicism, and anxiety about what it meant to be so-called authentically American at home – exemplified by the ‘American first’ ideology popularized by Woodrow Wilson in the nineteen-teens.<sup>247</sup> Even without the legacy of slavery, this is fertile environment for a frenzy of notions about identity, and competition over who controls the national (historical) narrative. When combined with the legacy of slavery, the control of historical narrative through film could take on urgent and noxious real world consequences, as I have already discussed. As Du Bois noted in a memo to the head of the NAACP, in 1915 – the year *Birth* debuted on screens across the country – the number of African Americans lynched jumped to 99. That was roughly a two-thirds leap in victims compared with the previous, or subsequent, years – and those figures still only represented those lynchings that were officially recorded.<sup>248</sup>

In a bid to fight fire with fire, the NAACP raised money three years later for a Black-themed riposte to the film, *Birth of a Race*. For several reasons, particularly financial, the film did not

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., Weinberger.

<sup>246</sup> Stokes, pp.157-8.

<sup>247</sup> Churchwell, see above.

<sup>248</sup> Memorandum to Mr. White of the NAACP on *The Birth of a Nation*, 1923?. *W. E. B. Du Bois Papers* (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

succeed.<sup>249</sup> However, a much more effective response to the cultural memory being cultivated in *Birth of a Nation*, was Oscar Micheaux's 1919 film, *Within Our Gates*.

Micheaux, considered by many scholars to be the father of Black filmmaking, set out to create films ('photo-plays') which showed a true reflection of the Black experience.<sup>250</sup> This was in opposition to the sorts of depictions of Black people shown by Griffith and the prevailing white narrative films. Micheaux's films could also contrast with the portrait of African American life painted by other notable Black filmmakers of the early twentieth century, which often tended to be films concerned with promoting racial uplift, and airbrushing out some of the everyday brutality and harsher realities encountered by Black people in America.<sup>251</sup> Equally, his depiction of Black middle-class characters on screen challenged the contemporaneous white cinema's predilection for omitting them altogether.<sup>252</sup> In this respect, Micheaux's highlighting of Black middle-class lives at this time presents an act of resistance. As scholar Madubuko Diakité argues, these:

"portrayals of Black people...reject a reality that Hollywood preferred to overlook. His portrayals of features of the reality of Black life in defiance of Hollywood's overwhelming influence as radical and perhaps militant; it also was very much a part of the theoretically active thoughts and writings of the freedom movement of the period."<sup>253</sup>

In the sense that he wanted to offer African Americans a more representative, Black-centric alternative to the whitewashed narratives presented to them in wider, white society, Micheaux's mission chimes with Du Bois' work of the same period. They were also both 'race

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<sup>249</sup> See Stokes, particularly Chapter Six, 'Fighting a vicious film', pp.129-170. For example, National NAACP Secretary May Nerney's letter to Frederick C Howe, former chair of the National Board of Censorship: " 'No one knows better than yourself the effect of this play [*The Birth of a Nation*] on the public... If it goes unchallenged it will take years to overcome the harm it is doing. The entire country will acquiesce in the Southern program of segregation, disenfranchisement and lynching. If we do challenge it, it must be done in some telling way, that is, in some spectacular photo-play.' " p.164. The NAACP had put together a "Scenario Committee" to work with Universal film company on producing the project.

<sup>250</sup> Robinson, *Forgeries*, p.243.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.242-244.

<sup>252</sup> Gladstone Lloyd Yearwood, *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African American Aesthetic Tradition* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), p.60.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

men' – African Americans concerned with the uplift of the Black race in America, economically, politically, and in terms of social respectability – although this wasn't always the object of Micheaux's filmmaking.<sup>254</sup>

In contrast to the stereotypical characters in white film offerings of the period, played by white actors in Blackface, and often grotesque extensions of vaudeville and stage minstrelsy, Micheaux showed Black characters, played by African American actors with realised interior lives. And much like the films of the current Black renaissance, the films of his early period in particular (until funding problems pushed him in other directions) centred on Black narratives, told from the perspective of the Black characters.<sup>255</sup>

In his analysis of Micheaux's work, scholar Cedric Robinson discusses how the filmmaker contested the historical memory being created by Griffith and others. In *Within Our Gates*, the story of a young Black woman (Sylvia) who faces violence and several other challenges, and leaves her home in the South to travel to the North to raise funds for a Black school, Micheaux undercuts the fantasy of the 'noble and righteous' romantic fiction of Ku Klux Klan ideology, conjured by Griffith. Instead he exposes the white community as predisposed to violence, and little more than blood-lustful mob. In a much more factually accurate representation, he highlights the perversity of white supremacist ideology, as his southern white characters take their children to join baying crowds watching and celebrating the lynching of a local Black family, Sylvia's adopted family.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Micheaux's work wasn't universally liked or lauded by African Americans. See: Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, Charles Musser, eds., *Oscar Micheaux and his Circle: African-American filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

As described in the text, Micheaux was at once a 'race man' concerned with 'racial uplift', but also keen to show a realistic representation of African Americans, including the negative aspects of human nature. This led to criticism that he was reinforcing white negative stereotypes of African Americans, chiming with the "Negro-hating sky pilots" depicting racist imagery of African Americans. (p.46). Micheaux's mission however, as he argued it, was to strive for a truthful rendering of African American life: "I have always tried to make my photoplays represent the truth, to lay before the race a cross section of its own life, to view the colored heart from close range." (p.45)

It is worth noting that later Black filmmakers, particularly Spike Lee, have also come under attack from Black gatekeepers of cultural and historical memory, concerned about representation. This is discussed briefly in Chapter Three, with regard to *Chi-Raq*. But it points here to the same issues with the 'politics of respectability' which emerged in this late nineteenth/early twentieth century period. The phrase was coined by scholar Evelyn Higginbotham; more can be read about this notion here: Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard university Press, 1993).

<sup>255</sup> See Robinson above, *Forgeries*.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*.

The white supremacist ideology which underpins the Klan is on full display under Micheaux's direction; [Southern] whites are shown to be violent hypocrites and terrorists, the claims of whiteness' innate superior intellect, morals and behaviour over Black people are plainly exposed as sham. In a clever injection of satire and commentary, he mixes newspaper front pages in with the intertitles detailing the plot - illustrating how the white media 'spun' the story of the lynchings to make the white sounds just and civilized, despite the feral and despicable actions we have witnessed from the white townspeople. And he also takes on the notion of Black people as predatory, would-be rapists, with white women ever in their sights (one of the central tenets of the white supremacist ideology promoted by *Birth* – and something which remains an underlying part of the white supremacist primer). Acting as counterpoint to Griffith's characterization of Black people of mixed heritage as cunning and licentious, and particularly his depiction of a mixed heritage would-be rapist, Micheaux reminds viewers that the historical origin of mixed-heritage people in America was the rape of Black women by white men.<sup>257</sup> Further, Micheaux's central character Sylvia is mixed heritage, an educated and intelligent woman with high moral standards. She becomes the victim of an opportunistic attempted rape, and is only saved when the perpetrator, the local dignitary Armand Gridlestone, realizes she is the daughter he'd fathered years before (and has not seen since). Not only is this a direct counterpoint to Griffith's rape scene in *Birth* and his other depictions of Black licentiousness, Micheaux is reminding his audience that rape, 'interracial rape' in particular, is an important part of both Black (and white) historical memory – but not for the reasons Griffith promotes. White rape of Black enslaved women was a well-established part of the economic system of slavery.<sup>258</sup> As a tool of white terror during Reconstruction years and beyond, rape by white men remained a realistic menace for Black women.<sup>259</sup>

Griffith's film attempts to inverse this narrative this deeply painful aspect of Black historical memory – but Micheaux specifically draws attention to it. Further, he specifically rebukes the South – by showing African Americans' historical memory of living in Southern States (and the racism of the North too, elsewhere in the film), in contrast to the myth of nobility and honour

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<sup>257</sup> See James Baldwin in his set of essays on American film and society, *The Devil Finds Work*. James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (Vintage Intl ed. edition) (New York: Vintage, 2011).

<sup>258</sup> Rachel Feinstein, *When Rape Was Legal: The Untold History of Sexual Violence During Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, Feinstein.

promoted by Dixon, Griffith, and those busy erecting monuments to Confederate soldiers at this time, in memory of the 'Lost Cause'.

### ***Rising Black consciousness, the arts, and historical memory in the twentieth century***

Over a century ago Du Bois and Micheaux, ostensibly working separately in the fields of history and culture respectively, both tackled the rising threat to Black historical and cultural memory posed by academic and cultural forces around them. African Americans have continued to tackle this challenge as the century progressed. The same repressive forces – along with a reaction from the Black community to the politics of assimilation-integration promoted by some of the Black leadership - helped engender the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>260</sup> This period of intellectual and popular celebration and reclamation of Black identity through music and the arts, and conscious celebration of African and African American Black historical and cultural memory, posed a fundamental challenge to a white supremacist American narrative, and a country preoccupied with what scholar Sarah Churchwell calls “Pure Americanism”<sup>261</sup>.

Building on the foundations of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black leaders and political and cultural eruptions of the 1950s and 60s brought about the creation of the Black Arts Movement, and a renewed call for truth in representation, authenticity, and a conscious awareness that individual and collective Black identity were inextricably linked – an awareness that has persisted, and strengthened, in the fifty years that passed since. If you are Black in America, you share a history with all Black people in America. Collective memory, then, becomes integral to individual as well as collective Black identity – and synonymous with cultural expressions of that identity and history.

As we approach the new filmmaking renaissance of the Obama era, and the subjects chosen by Ava DuVernay, Spike Lee, Nate Parker, etc., and how these directors tell the stories of their subjects, it is notable that all borrow from the 'memory palaces' of Black historical and cultural

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<sup>260</sup>For scholarship on this period see, for example:

David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997).

Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image and the New Negro: Representations and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

Andrew M. Fearnley and Daniel Martin, eds., *Race Capitol? Harlem as Setting and Symbol* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>261</sup> Churchwell, *Behold America*

memory in America – most notably perhaps, the experience of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>262</sup> Similarly, the directors of the Obama era renaissance – themselves actors in the continuum of Black cultural and historical memory formation, stand in a lineage from early Black filmmakers such as Micheaux, and reflect his praxis of resistance.<sup>263</sup>

From the slave narratives of the mid nineteenth century, through to the artists, writers, filmmakers of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, African Americans have been using art as political and cultural tools. As we have seen, and eloquently articulated in the quote from James Baldwin earlier, the act of resolutely articulating one’s being in a world which prefers not to see you or your history, is an act of protest by a marginalised group. For African Americans, art of multiple kinds have been a conscious medium of resistance.

Having now established the context of the early days of Black filmmaking, and its birth amidst the rise of Black consciousness at the beginning of the twentieth century with its sister expression in the New Negro Movement, I now turn back to the new Black filmmaking renaissance. As we saw earlier, the importance, reach and psychological impact of film makes mainstream filmmaking a powerful repository for narratives about historical (and collective) memory, amidst a new period of rising Black consciousness. I return to Ava DuVernay’s *Selma* to explore how she weaves themes of resistance into meditations on the importance of historical narrative.

### ***Selma and the use of historical narrative***

*Selma* (2014), depicting a relatively short spell in what is traditionally thought of as the Civil Rights Movement, focuses on the campaign to promote and protect the enfranchisement of African Americans during 1964-5 (which culminated in the Voting Rights Act of 1965). Specifically, the campaign targeted unjust and spurious tactics used by several states, designed to ensure that few, if any, Black people were able to use their legitimate right to vote. One of

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<sup>262</sup> For more on “memory palaces”, see:

Genevieve Fabre, ‘African-American Commemorative Celebrations in the Nineteenth Century’, in *History and memory in African-American culture*, eds. Fabre and O’Meally (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>263</sup> For more on Oscar Micheaux and other early Black filmmakers, see: Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

the first scenes of the film, for instance, illustrates the kind of strategies used by some states, as we see Annie Lee Cooper (played by Oprah Winfrey), a woman who in reality tried to vote multiple times, denied registration by the County Clerk. As she sits and waits to be called by the Clerk at the Courthouse, DuVernay frames Cooper as a relatively diminutive figure bottom right of the screen, and at the foot of a grand staircase as the viewer looks down on her – literally and figuratively. It functions well as a metaphor for the repressed positioning of African Americans in American politics and society, and sets us up for the scene that follows. First threatening her livelihood by insinuating that he will tell her employer that “one of his gals” is at the Court House “stirring a fuss”. He then asks her to recite, from memory, the Preamble to the Constitution, followed by the names of all 67 County Judges in Alabama. It is clear that the interview is designed to discourage, degrade and threaten her. Cooper walks away humiliated, and understanding that the apparatus of the state has sought to destabilize her resolve. However soon after, we see that Cooper is back at the Court House, this time as part of a crowd of protesters led by Martin Luther King, and she is beaten as she tried to defend an elderly protester from the sheriff’s brutality.

The depiction of Annie Lee Cooper’s experience communicates a deep collective memory for African Americans, and one within living memory – the historic denial of rights as American citizens, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. It reinforces that the movement was not only an ideological imperative, but the response to daily, endemic aggressions and abuses of Black people by whites, abuses which the State colluded to prop up. No amount of respectability, in the person of the middle aged, immaculately attired Cooper, the film makes clear, could circumvent the rigged system. DuVernay here highlights that humiliation, fear and frustration are woven into the historical memory of the African American experience, as is institutional racism. And given the State’s underpinning of such abuse, no end appeared in sight. However, Cooper’s appearance at the court house emphasizes that the resolve to protest is just as much a part of the same historical memory for African Americans. This is clearly not the first time that Cooper has attempted to register to vote, thus she has been undeterred by the censure of the state. This despite her age (we see from her registration form that she is 56) and her economically vulnerable position. One of the most useful tools at the disposal of white supremacist states was the threat to Black livelihoods. Stephen Tuck illustrates the point when describing the activism of Fanny Lou Hamer; voter registration required the name of one’s employer, which meant that “ ‘you would be fired by the time you

got home' ”, an outcome with serious repercussions for the Black community at all levels, but particularly the poorest in society.<sup>264</sup>

Cooper's dignified resolve here represents and evokes, in collective memory, the same dignified and resolute attitude of the Civil Rights activists, and all African Americans who put themselves at risk to secure their basic rights. It appeals to a collective identity – Cooper may be a middle aged woman, but experiences of oppression for Black America are woven into the inherited cultural and ethnic identity of all African Americans, just like the experience of double consciousness highlighted by this scene – Cooper is a Black woman, and she's also an American, but for African Americans there is a clear differential between the two states.<sup>265</sup>

The scene also acts as a signpost. It dialogues with other elements of Black historical memory, in the further distant past and the future, through Cooper being asked to recite the Preamble to the Constitution. The script's choice of this particular impediment to Cooper's getting the vote in 1965 Alabama is deeply symbolic. While the Constitution is a synecdoche for freedom from oppression and tyranny, in (white) American cultural and historical memory, it is a vexed “lieu de memoire” for African Americans, intrinsically compromised in that it excludes Black people from the very freedoms it triumphs for whites. The Enlightenment Founding Fathers celebrated the throwing off of bondage, while at the same time accepting its presence within the nascent nation, even adopting the policy of the “Three-fifths compromise” to ensure that, while enslaved Black people were denied the vote themselves, their ‘masters’ benefitted from their numbers by increasing the number of elected representatives in the House, accordingly – and thus increased their power to maintain the system of slavery for their economic advantage. Since voting is a proxy for legitimacy and agency, the County Clerk asking Annie Lee Cooper to recite this particular document, is reminding her – and the audience – that suffrage in America was designed to be far from universal. The flip side, however, is that the fact of a Black woman reciting it in the Jim Crow South under these circumstances, offers a strong rebuke to one of these sacred texts – and tenets – of American nationhood. In other words, it offers a challenge to American white cultural and historical memory, its belief in American exceptionalism. The same rebuke is also offered to the patriarchal nature of the American narrative.

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<sup>264</sup> Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought To Be: The Black Freedom Struggle From Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011), p.299.

<sup>265</sup> Double-consciousness was a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the experience of being Black in America, as outlined in this paragraph. See: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.

This passage also dialogues with the future, specifically Obama's presidency. Along with "We the People", "a more perfect Union" is one of the best known phrases from the Constitution's Preamble, and we hear the words as Annie Lee Cooper recites it before she is cut off by the County Clerk. It is also the title of one of Obama's most famous speeches, as he campaigned for the presidency in March 2008 in Philadelphia, and arguably his most significant speech addressing race relations in America. As such, it gained its own cultural and historical currency, and has taken its place in Black collective memory. It is worth a moment to consider how historical and cultural memory intersect further at this point. As Cooper recites the opening lines of the Constitution's Preamble, as Obama did at the beginning of his 2008 speech, it becomes a co-existent moment, referring to and connecting three points in Black historical memory: the baptism of the American nation, including its hypocrisy over slavery as we have seen; the oppressions of the Jim Crow era, and the massive Civil Rights protest mounted by activists which changed the landscape of segregation; and finally, the election of a Black president, a rebuttal to the white, often supremacist, system, which had conspired to limit Black political power throughout American history.

However, it also presents some ambiguity. Ostensibly this co-existent moment points ahead to a satisfying historical arc of justice for African Americans, Obama's election being the ultimate victory delivered by the efforts of a thousand Annie Lee Coopers over the history of Black protest. However, Obama used the reference to the Constitution and its Preamble not to evoke specifically Black historical memory, but an overarching American historical memory.<sup>266</sup> One of the reasons the speech was so welcomed was his previous (and subsequent) reluctance to talk about race.<sup>267</sup> Whilst he acknowledged a history of slavery and discrimination against Black people, and himself evoked the historical memory of "slaves and slaveowners" running through the veins of his daughters, he also evoked "the vitality of the American dream", and

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<sup>266</sup> Susanna Dilliplane, 'Race, Rhetoric, and Running for President: Unpacking the Significance of Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union' speech', *Journal of Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 15.1 (Spring 2012), pp.127-152.

<sup>267</sup> Obama was frequently criticized, particularly in his first term, for seeming to avoid discussing racism and its effects, and focusing on other aspects of structural inequalities. This theme is discussed in, for example:

Michael Eric Dyson, *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

Keeanga-Tamahitta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter To Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket books, 2018).

both here and subsequently “failed to connect the sins of the past to the crimes of the present.”<sup>268</sup>

### ***Competing narratives and real-world impacts***

The town of Selma, and particular entities associated with it, such as Brown Church, are pre-eminent “sacred sites” in collective memory for African Americans, for many reasons.<sup>269</sup> The fully exercised enfranchisement of African Americans, particularly in the South, was important not only because of the ability that gave Black people to elect leaders who would represent their interests, but also because of other rights voter registration afforded – most importantly perhaps, the right to sit on a jury, a point which is explicitly outlined later in the film, as King discusses with his colleagues how their hierarchy of demands for presenting to the president. Further, and in reference to the more meta- collective memory of African Americans, the denial of the right to vote, and the extreme, often violent resistance by the white authorities, evokes a period when whites exercised control and dominion over Black people through the use of terror.

Here *Selma* dialogues very directly with present day America. The Voting Rights Act protections fought for in the film were effectively eviscerated in June 2013, when the Supreme Court struck down the requirement for federal oversight of state changes to voting legislation. The move is still being opposed by a host of civil rights organisations and campaigners, but has remained in place. Issues over voter identification, district boundaries, provision of voter booths in remote areas, are the kinds of tactics which protestors feared would be introduced, resulting in restrictions on certain groups of citizens exercising their right to vote – particularly people of colour. Sure enough, as soon as the decision was handed down, Texas enacted a voter ID law that had previously been blocked, and announced it would no longer be seeking federal approval for redistricting maps.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Transcription of Obama’s ‘Toward A More Perfect Union’ speech, 18 March 2008: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>

Second quote from Taylor, as above, p.138.

<sup>269</sup> Theon Hill, Sanitizing the Struggle: Barack Obama, Selma, and Civil Rights Struggle, *Communication Quarterly* (65:3), Aug 2017, pp.354-376. Note too that Hill describes “the collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement” as “one of the most precious rhetorical resources available to people of color”.

<sup>270</sup> Adam Liptak, ‘Supreme Court Invalidates Key Part of Voting Rights Act’, *The New York Times [Online]*, 13 June 2013 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html>> [accessed 8 November 2018].

In an ironic twist which in itself proves the fallacy of the ‘post-racial’ epithet to the Obama era, critics of the Voting Rights Act used Obama’s win as a reason to argue it was no longer necessary – something which may well have influenced the judges who struck down the law, who asserted that “our country has changed” and that legislation about voting needs to “speak to current conditions”.<sup>271</sup>

In this context, the striking down of the freedoms secured in 1965 act was a desecration on the memory of the hard-won achievements of the Selma march, and all the activism which underpinned it. The film also serves as a sharp warning that historical narratives can compete across time (one is set in the past, and one is an emerging historical narrative of the present) and remain ever open to political repurposing. Drawing into the present the triumph of the campaign for the Voting Rights Act, endows both the present threat to voting protections, and the historical narrative of the past victory, with new perspectives. The repercussions of the 2013 decision cannot, when one considers civil rights memory, be viewed as the progress hitherto ascribed to it. In African American memory, the arc of achievement of the Voting Rights campaign is somewhat fractured with its recent weakening, while also affirming what historical memory has always taught Black Americans – that their position as equal citizens with whites remains vulnerable.

### ***Competing histories: memories and counter-memories in the South***

This vulnerability, the continual efforts for progress in equal rights for African Americans to be stalled or regressed, as with the 2013 Voting Rights Act decision, also illustrates the paramount importance of both national historical narratives, and competing narratives of collective and historical memory.

In *What Reconstruction Meant* Bruce Baker discusses how White America, and the South in particular, had been tremendously successful at promoting a narrative – and collective memory – of Reconstruction as a ‘mistake’, as we saw earlier in this chapter. He argues that this view of Reconstruction, and the narrative about the superiority of whites that came with

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., *New York Times*, 13 June 2013. The judges specifically cited that improved Black voter turnout in certain states showed that things had changed.

it, became an important part of creating the Jim Crow regime. This was not driven just by pragmatic concerns over economic dominance, but it was also a deeply held belief.<sup>272</sup> While for African Americans, a counter-memory prevailed, says Baker – but one that had to be expressed privately, ‘flourishing in just those segregated spaces the Jim Crow system created, where whites were not around to stifle it and shut it down.’<sup>273</sup> I would equally argue that the white supremacist memory is really the counter-memory, considering that it was a narrative constructed to undermine the successes achieved by Reconstruction.

Understanding how ‘Southern White’ memory was transformed into a [white] hegemonic national narrative, one can more easily see how the commemorative drive of white supremacy in the South acted as collective memory foundation for the Jim Crow era, and has persisted in some quarters to the present day. The white supremacist version of public memory came to be a force “dominating the landscape in monuments, parading down the streets of the towns and cities” notes Baker. For the Jim Crow era South, Mississippi writer William Faulkner’s famous line from his novel *Requiem for a Nun*, “the past is never dead. It’s not even past” couldn’t be more apt – as long as the version of that past conformed to the white supremacist ‘Redemption’ narrative.<sup>274</sup>

In *Selma*, DuVernay creates this zombie past backdrop very effectively. As King, Diane Nash and other activists drive towards Selma for the first time, the camera lingers on road sign welcoming drivers “TO HISTORIC ALABAMA”, decorated with pictures of a Confederate, as well as American, flag. When they arrive we see an archetypal southern town, with a hotel topped with an actual Confederate flag. As King walks into the hotel, he walks past an inscription on its walls declaring “SERVING WHITES ONLY SINCE 1855”. Most notably, the principal action of the film takes place on Selma’s Edmund Pettus Bridge, built and named as late as 1940, for a Confederate general who became a Grand Dragon of Alabama’s Ku Klux Klan.<sup>275</sup> These mises en scène, create a powerful sense of ‘past-present’, and reveal the meta-narrative of the film – what it tells us about the ‘race-ing’ of history, and the contest between duelling narratives of historical memory.

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<sup>272</sup> Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South*, The American South Series (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), pp.69-72.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.69-71.

<sup>275</sup> Christina L. Moss and Ronald L. Jackson, ‘Introduction to Special Issue: We March Lest We Forget’, *Howard Journal of Communications*, 28.2 (2017), 123–31.

From a meta-narrative perspective, on one side sits the narrative of white supremacy, and the social and political memory it had [and has] long used to circumscribe the African American community - Jim Crow laws, Confederate commemorative symbols, and violent repression. On the other, DuVernay debunks all of it by depicting African Americans as equal human beings, rather than a monolithic, inferior 'other', incapable of self-governorship, the kind of characterization propagated by Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. As typical of the artists of the Black filmmaking renaissance, DuVernay emphasizes African American characters as distinct individuals, with complex family and community lives. The Civil Rights protestors are also shrewd activists with a great deal of political confidence, courage, and moral power. And crucially, these African Americans understand the contemporary usefulness of historical memory – that is, to draw on a collective memory which allows them to reference their narrative backwards, but also forwards, “to the mountaintop” as King promises them at the end of the film.

By contrast, the historical memory of white supremacy is tied to the lexical field of the Civil War, and is an overstated ante-bellum construction of memory. It is discredited not just as a transparent construction of white system of control, but as anachronistic in the face of progress. When King chides President Johnson on the telephone, following the death of a white preacher Reverend Reeb who joined the Selma campaign, King tells him:

*“You are the man who won the presidency of the world’s most powerful nation by the greatest landslide in history four months ago. And you are the man dismantling your own legacy with each passing day. No one will remember the Civil Rights Act – but they will remember the stand off in Selma... They will remember you saying ‘Wait’.”*

Later, Johnson goes on to precisely echo this notion of memory-making when he tries to cajole George Wallace, the openly racist and intransigent governor of Alabama, to remove the voting restrictions in the state:

LBJ: *We shouldn't even be thinking about 1965, we should be thinking about 1985. You and I will be both dead and gone by then. In 1985, what do you want looking back, you want people remembering you saying 'Wait', or 'I can't', or 'It's too hard'?*  
Wallace: *[Pause] I don't right care what they think. And you shouldn't neither.*  
LBJ: *[Sighs] Well, I'll be damned if I'm gonna let history put me in the same place as the likes of you.*

The contests between competing historical narratives is most notably played out during the Bloody Sunday clash. Diane Nash had previously declared to King and the other activists, ahead of arriving in Selma, that the town is the site of “the next great battle” – and her description is correct on several levels. The protests they are about to engage in will not only involve physical clashes, and end the legal struggle for voting protections. They will also mark the battle between two versions of history, a struggle which will also see Black Americans win.

The combat motif is established during the first protest march, to the Court House. King and the other marchers are arranged in lines, strongly evoking an image of battle lines, and they are met with a line of defence in the armed police. They are dressed in their Sunday best, and in the context of the silent, ordered marching, the respectable clothes look almost uniform.

But it is on the bridge where the Manichean battle takes place – between the white supremacist South, and its claims to superiority from its constructed collective memory; and the determination of the African American marchers, borne forwards by the historical memory of centuries of resolute resistance. Echoing American history, the latter are ostensibly at a disadvantage. As referenced above, Edmund Pettus, in whose honour Selma’s bridge was named, was a Confederate general who later became a leader of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama. The semiotics are clear: waiting on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they stand on a giant, *constructed* symbol – signifying white supremacy, and the terror which dominated the post-Reconstruction era and underpinned the system of Jim Crow.

As both sides stand facing each other on the bridge, the audience are faced with two clashing American identities, each governed by their respective collective memory, and each contesting the other’s right to own the historical narrative of the future. However, the white supremacists are unaware that they have already lost. The Black protestors not only have righteousness and public opinion on their side, they have a historical and cultural identity which has endured through hundreds of year of oppression – and which is further aware of its obligations to the future. The white Southerners are too buried in a cultural identity and political system situated in the past, to know that they have not adapted to evolving history. The protestors are viciously attacked on the bridge, beaten with billy clubs and driven at by horses (a scene I return to later in this chapter), but it is the protestors who are eventually victorious. The representatives of Southern power, the police and Alabama state troopers, are supplanted by federal troops protecting the marchers. With heavy symbolism, the final march across the bridge marks the victory of the Black protestors. The marchers ‘overcome’ the

bridge and its symbolic meanings – white supremacy and terrorist racial violence, and the historical narrative of white supremacy too.

Later in the film, during the violence of Bloody Sunday, DuVernay cuts between different locations, different groups of people – all watching the beating of peaceful marchers unfold as it is broadcast through 1960s television sets, or listening to vivid descriptions on the radio. This includes white citizens in their living rooms such as Viola Liuzzo, inspired to join the campaign after seeing the newsreels, and who is later assassinated while helping Black civil rights activists. It also includes a barber shop in Watts, Los Angeles. This is another direct pointer to historical memory for the audience, given that the Watts rebellion took place just a few months after the events in Selma. The uprising was sparked by events surrounding a police traffic stop, but decades of severe racial inequalities spilled into the biggest urban rebellion of the age. By inserting this short sequence into the *Selma* narrative, DuVernay indicates that the stimulus for the Watts rebellion had long historical roots, and connected with the wider oppression of African Americans across the country. In the process, she also draws attention to the continuum of violence suffered by African Americans at the hands of police, how Black bodies have been repeatedly subjected to assault and rupture, and how all these events connect Black people via collective memory.

### ***The roots of historical and cultural memory, and nostalgic loss as mechanism of resistance***

About half way through the film Malcolm X appears suddenly in Selma, while Dr King is held in jail for a Court House protest. Coretta Scott King is required to meet Malcolm and determine what his intentions are in Selma. The activist Amelia Boynton counsels a nervous Coretta by invoking the historical memory of their forefathers:

*“I’ll tell you what I know to be true...*

*I know that we are descendants of a mighty people,*

*Who gave civilization to the world.*

*People who survived the hulls of slave ships across vast oceans.*

*People who innovated, create and love, despite pressures and tortures unimaginable.*

*They are in our blood stream, pump in our hearts every second.*

*- They’ve prepared you; you are already prepared.”*

Boynton at once invokes ancient and recent histories of Africans and African Americans, the spirit of endurance and a legacy of suffering, to inspire Coretta Scott King and remind her of what has been bequeathed her through the ripples of her ethnic origins.

It is not surprising that Boynton points here to ancestral African civilizations, and to the transatlantic slave trade. The history of African Americans alluded to here is steeped in loss and longing – something which physicians treating slaves termed nostalgia. The term has evolved to retain a sense of longing, but has become overwritten with often pejorative notions of sentimentality. But nostalgia in its original, medical sense of the word, refers to a deep yearning for home, so severe as to result in sickness, and is also a trope of African American history, culture, and historical memory.

Recent scholarship looking at the experiences of those same ancestors which Boynton refers to uncovers the issue of nostalgia as one which deeply affected enslaved Africans brought to the new worlds via the transatlantic slave trade. In his research into what he terms “Black nostalgia” Jonathan Schroeder discusses how the issue was one which preoccupied doctors, slave owners and slave traders in the Americas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, because of the profound reactions of Africans to being kidnapped and transported. Enslaved suicide, either during the Middle Passage, or once arriving in America, was far from uncommon; as was an enslaved person’s incapacitation or inability to move, emanating from an utter and debilitating sense of loss. For an organisational structure that saw Black human beings as chattel or tools, the effect of enslaved people taking these actions and inactions, was a serious impediment to the system and its viability.<sup>276</sup>

This tells us that right from the beginning of slavery as a transatlantic enterprise and economic system, enslaved people were using their bodies as weaponry to protest and resist. As Schroeder notes:

*“the varieties of self-destruction attributed to nostalgia bear an uncanny resemblance to modern-day forms of resistance, as we hear of flying suicides, mass suicides, and hunger strikes, which can easily be construed as using the power of death to resist being reduced to someone else’s disposable life.”<sup>277</sup>*

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<sup>276</sup> Jonathan D. S. Schroeder, ‘What Was Black Nostalgia?’, *American Literary History*, 30.4 (2018), 653–76.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

The diagnosis of nostalgia for enslaved Black people was often racialized, says Schroeder. Nostalgia was a condition also severely affecting some soldiers, sailors and migrants – which presented an indisputable moral and ethical imperative for slavers to recognise that Black slaves were human beings, just like other ethnic groups.<sup>278</sup> Physicians employed to treat the enslaved could side-step this awful acknowledgement, however, by denoting the deep and disabling feelings of loss and longing amongst Black peoples as a form of “nostalgic insanity” – in an attempt to “neutralize [suicides amongst enslaved people] before they could be read as a political act of self-dispossession with the potential to destroy the very basis of slavery in human property.”<sup>279</sup>

This framework provides an extra dimension for appreciating the immeasurable suffering of the enslaved, and adds to understanding acts of rebellion which appeared to have no hope of success. While these were surely driven by the irreconcilable trauma of enslavement, they can in addition be seen as political acts in an evolution with their forefathers’ and foremothers’ suicidal and other, immobilizing acts, driven by both the need to resist and a deep sense of loss and yearning. This would have been part of historical and cultural memory for enslaved Africans, and the emerging African Americans being born through the chattel slavery system. In this context, the connections with Africa and the natural yearning that goes with it, would have become part of emerging historical memory, and a strong imperative to actively engage with one’s heritage.

### ***Black historical memory, and the Black body, as sites of resistance***

This historic sense of nostalgia, the psychological and emotional response to loss and displacement experienced by enslaved Africans brought to America can be seen as part of African American collective memory and identity. Given the centuries of exploitation through slavery, and the legacies of inequality which followed the Civil War, this dissonance means that historical memory, a resource for identity, has itself become a site of resistance. That is, for early enslaved people self-harm was an expression of loss, but also a form of protest. As I have argued in this chapter, African Americans have resisted American national and white supremacist narratives which occlude the past. For a community ever subject to double

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., pp.11-12.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p.10.

consciousness of identity as DuBois termed it, historical memory also provides a locus for identity – as well as a site of resistance, both to ongoing structural and social racism, as well as resistance to an imposed narrative which airbrushes out their history. As Cornel West has observed, “in this nation infamous for its brash will to historical forgetfulness, African Americans have been the ones who could not forget.”

In *Selma*, we see both the evolution of African American historical memory in twenty-first century film. We also see how the site of the Black body has evolved as a site of loss, and of resistance – yet retains its place in a lineage from the early enslaved Africans in America.

The opening of the film has David Oleyowo’s Martin Luther King as a disembodied voice over a blank screen. The audience hears: “I accept this honour for our lost ones, whose deaths pave our path.” The disorientation of the blank screen, without reference points of time or place, makes the sentiment expressed both timeless and haunting. The audience understands immediately that what is meant is loss through time, historical loss. It also understands that this historical loss is embedded in the present and future – as the voice tells us that these losses “pave our path” for progress. The blankness of the screen also allows our visual imagination to ascribe images to accompany the words. While the words may be understood immediately to be a figurative concept, particularly given that they are spoken without any pictures, nevertheless the opening words evoke images of Black, dead bodies, which have suffered at the hands of white supremacist, American racism. It sets a tone of Black suffering, of the Black body as inscribed with a history of oppression – but also of the Black body’s inherent resistance and progress: these bodies forge “a path” – the way ahead, and their sacrifice is a fixed element of the future, and future history.

Suddenly an extreme close-up of King’s face fills the screen. We see that it has been his voice talking about loss and sacrifice as he practices a speech, which we soon see is his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, in front of a mirror. This makes this scene particularly poignant, since the audience is likely to know that King was assassinated a few years after this event. King is already in the process of becoming one of the “deaths [that] pave our path”, and though his murder does not take place in *Selma*, it is nevertheless something which pervades the film. He speaks to the audience directly – and thus speaks to us from history (something which scholars note is a function of historical film), which increases the poignant emotion for the audience since King is unaware of his own impending death. With these words he appeals to us as human beings – and at the same time evokes a key part of historical memory for African Americans. Notably, this same dual historical memory (African American protest,

death and sacrifice, coupled with a conviction of progress towards equality in the future), bookends the film. The final lines and visual focus of the film also belong to King; as he gives a speech outside the state capitol in Montgomery, the endpoint of the Selma march. The final caption records that King was murdered in 1968, but his last words to the crowds point to the future – “[God’s] truth is marching on.”

Cutting from the opening words to an emotionally intimate scene between King his wife, we are reminded that the bodies which have in the past, and continue to, line the path to Black equality are more simply names, or icons; they were living people with emotions, disappointments, joys and love. Next, in one of the most shocking and violent scenes of the film, director Ava DuVernay then crystallizes and intensifies this sentiment - the rupture to civilization which racism causes, and the disavowal of humanity on which racist violence and a racist system flourishes. After the Nobel committee chair gives his speech about King’s importance and reason for being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, we cut to a scene which is loaded with historical memory for African Americans – the murder of four children in Birmingham, Alabama.

The bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church was one of the worst, most transformative and infamous events of the Civil Rights Movement period, and one of the engines for change in American society, galvanizing both activists and American society at large. The words we had previously heard King practising in front of the mirror are now being delivered in an auditorium in Sweden as he receives the Peace Prize. These continue from the Nobel scene of privilege and celebration, next drifting over new images on screen – a group of children walking down the staircase of the church, in almost dream-like visuals. The camera looks down and at various points on the stairwell glimpses the children as they descend, the picture of innocence stressed by their white clothes and youthfulness, as we begin to hear them talking. The audience understands from the words of King’s voiceover about lost ones and death, together with the delicate piano soundtrack, that these children are highly vulnerable.

As the camera focuses on one chatty young girl, the scene bursts into brutal rupture, as the sound and debris of a bomb cuts through the music and fills the screen. We are aware of bodies/body parts moving across the screen, the slow motion making them appear as if they are floating in water. The visual dramaturgy of this scene is highly reminiscent of bodies submerged in a mass of water; in this context, this moment of shocking imagery connects with the historical memory of enslaved Africans of the Middle Passage, thrown or jumped overboard. The near silence of the scene, and the imagery of lifeless bodies also contributes

to the intersection of historical memories; both enslaved Africans hundreds of years before, and children destroyed in this bombing in the mid-twentieth century, are all victims of racist violence, and the white supremacy King was describing moments before the blast.

This makes for a good example of what scholar Rebecca Kook noted about memory construction: “the images triggered by [other] images cumulatively make for the memories of the collective past.” The memories “triggered” by the scene evoke memories of indiscriminate violence and loss – soldering a sense of a collective past, and a collective identity.<sup>280</sup> As with this bombing scene, moments of brutality towards African Americans connect and reconnect chapters of historical memory, and point to the present day.

This is seen most clearly in *Selma* in DuVernay’s depiction of the events of Bloody Sunday (7 March 1965) on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, when 600 peaceful civil rights demonstrators began a march to Montgomery, the state capital. As we saw earlier, as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in the town, they were met with violent resistance by state troopers and police, who attacked them with clubs and tear gas, severely beating the fleeing demonstrators, men and women. DuVernay places this event at the centre of the plot of *Selma*, and the brutality of the violence connects and forms a continuum with the other violence depicted in the film, and beyond. The nature of the attack by white state troopers is highly reminiscent for African Americans of the violence meted out to their enslaved forefathers and foremothers. The mise en scène highlights unarmed Black protestors attacked and unable to defend themselves in chaotic scenes, mowed down by state troopers on horseback wielding clubs. It is a strong visceral echo of overseers and slave catchers at work across Southern plantations, a hundred years before, and again suggests that a continuum of racial violence, alongside deeply racist attitudes, has continued into the 1960s from the slavery period.

As I have described, the Birmingham church bombing connects with lost innocents of the Middle Passage – but it also connects with other murders of other Black children motivated by racism, such as Emmet Till, raised in the first part of this chapter. The murder of the 1960s activist and peaceful protestor Jimmie Lee Jackson, also depicted in *Selma*, connects with the killings of numerous other activists and demonstrators throughout the long civil rights movement. And the pervasive references to King’s own death, ultimately described in that

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<sup>280</sup> For more on connections between memory and identity, see: Vijay Agnew, ed., *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2005).

final screen caption in Montgomery, connects with the deaths of other prominent civil rights leaders, such as Malcolm X and Medger Evers.

The brutality of law enforcement on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the violence directed towards other protestors by police (such as Jimmie Lee Jackson), and the dearth of official action in bringing racist white murderers to justice, are ripples of evidence and memory for African Americans, confirmation that the state has long regarded them as second-class citizens, not entitled to the same rights to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' tenets, envisaged by the Founding Fathers, as white Americans. For a present day audience, familiar with the 2013 killing of young Black man Trayvon Martin, the reluctance of police to arrest his killer George Zimmerman and his subsequent acquittal, along with the numerous unarmed African Americans killed at the hands of law enforcement, these moments feel coexistent.<sup>281</sup> These are the modern day deaths whose lost lives sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. But DuVernay demonstrates how, in historical memory – realised through the film as collective memory – 1965 and 2014, are not so very far apart.

## **CONCLUSION**

As I have shown in this chapter, African Americans have been acutely attuned to the power of historical narrative since the post-Reconstruction era, particularly from the early twentieth century. Scholar activists such as W.E.B. DuBois and colleagues actively sought to preserve Black historical memory in the face of dominating white supremacist narratives of American history. This was a movement in common with the artists of the New Negro Movement and, as I have discussed, with early Black filmmakers, most notably Oscar Micheaux. One hundred years later, the directors of the Black filmmaking renaissance are newly incarnating that project. For Black filmmakers, as for the artists and thinkers of the early twentieth century, as for Martin Luther King and the civil rights protestors, the stakes remain high.

The Black filmmaking renaissance enters into an America where, despite the hype that swirled around Obama's historical victory, a post-racial status has still far from been reached. Further,

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<sup>281</sup> Seventeen-year old Trayvon Martin was killed in 2013, by self-appointed neighbourhood watchman George Zimmerman, who was suspicious about his presence in the area. His death and killer's acquittal sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. See Chapter Four for a fuller discussion.

African Americans have not been the only constituency to recognise the political potential of the past.

Sociologists Pickering and Keightley argue that, when we only consider the concept and mechanism of nostalgia as yearning for a lost past, we miss that it is also a mechanism for understanding “how the past may actively engage with the present and future.”<sup>282</sup> These and other scholars also see the nostalgic mode as something of a reaction to modernity. As demonstrated in this chapter, early twentieth century white supremacist ideologies reacted to modernity with a politicized use of nostalgia, amid fears about the loss of status, political power, and even identity. The ongoing century saw the erection of multiple monuments essentially celebrating the ‘Lost Cause’ myth of the White South. This can be seen as a way of “actively engaging with the future”, by trying to control modernity and social progress, and retain power for a mythologized Whiteness, and a social and political order which would keep African Americans subordinate. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* is a good example of such cultural politics, and his nostalgic narrative was something which was reinforced by the ‘plantation genre’ of films in the 1920s and 30s that were popularized in its wake.<sup>283</sup>

Alarming this [politically motivated] nostalgia has persisted, ready to surge, and seen in the reactionary white supremacist backlash against Obama’s presidency. As I outline in Chapter Four, it flourished under the presidency of Donald Trump, a man endorsed for the presidency by former KKK leader David Duke.<sup>284</sup> White nationalists rallied to preserve Confederate monuments in the twenty-first century, and radicalised white men, like the mass murderer Dylann Roof, found the myths of white supremacy seductive enough to prompt them into race-based atrocities.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, ‘The Modalities of Nostalgia’, *Current Sociology*, 54.6 (2006), 919–941 (p.920).

<sup>283</sup> For more on what film scholar Ed Guerrero calls the ‘plantation genre’, see Chapter One in: Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple university Press, 1993).

<sup>284</sup> Camila Domonoske, ‘Former KKK Leader David Duke Says “Of Course” Trump Voters Are His Voters’, *NPR*, 5 August 2016, section America <<https://www.npr.org/sections/twotwo-way/2016/08/05/488802494/former-kkk-leader-david-duke-says-of-course-trump-voters-are-his-voters>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>285</sup> For further scholarship on the white nationalist context of Roof’s act of terror, see: E. Chebrolu, ‘The Racial Lens of Dylann Roof: Racial Anxiety and White Nationalist Rhetoric on New Media’, *Review of Communication*, 20.1 (2020), 47–68.

One hundred years after the battles for historical memory were beginning on the new cultural products of film, the directors of the Black filmmaking renaissance have again asserted the African American historical narrative as a counter to white supremacists' version of American history. They demonstrate that "all good art is political", as the artist-intellectual Toni Morrison declared, and their historical dramas make political interventions, resisting a cultural-political structure and ideology which designates Blackness to the margins. Instead they have centred Black historical memory, and narratives which undermine the myths of American exceptionalism. They have challenged the normative Hollywood prescription of the centrality of Whiteness, literally and figuratively, and inserted alternative historical and collective memory into the national imaginary.

They are also engaging the past with the present and the future, in a political exercise of nostalgia, demonstrated by *Selma's* depiction of the fight for voting rights. Further as I discussed in Chapter One, DuVernay's reclaiming of Martin Luther King from conservative forces, and depicting him as a radical Black leader, propels a narrative of collective memory out to today's Black Lives Matter and other equal rights protestors. As *Selma's* King (played by David Oyelowo) addresses a packed church of protestors, his non-violent activist praxis is shown to be radical and unrelenting. Oyelowo's electrifying delivery hammers the point home:

They say to us, that the local white leadership USE their power, to keep us AWAY from the ballot box – and keep us VOICELESS.

As long as I am unable to exercise my constitutional right to vote, I do not have command of my own life ....

...

THOSE that have gone before us say – NO MORE!

*[Audience replies]:* NO MORE !

That means PROTEST, that means MARCH, that means Disturb the PEACE, that means JAIL, that means RISK – and that is HARD!

We will not wait any longer – GIVE US THE VOTE!

*[Audience replies]:* GIVE US THE VOTE!

We're not asking, we're demanding – GIVE US THE VOTE!

*Selma*'s dialogue with the present demonstrates not only the importance of historical and cultural memory to African Americans, but the importance of collective memory to today's resistance.

Moving on, Chapter Three also excavates themes of resistance in the work of the Black filmmaking renaissance. It traces such themes in a quite different context however, exploring instead how tropes of Black masculinity are tackled by the filmmakers, within the context of Black America, and whether they seek to challenge heteronormative hierarchies. Having established themes around activism and identity narratives as emerging trends in the Black filmmaking renaissance in Chapters One and Two, I consider how the filmmakers consider discourses of Black masculinity in the wake of the first Black man in history to occupy the White House.

## Chapter Three: Masculinity In The Black Filmmaking Renaissance

### INTRODUCTION

A year and a half into Obama's presidency, Kathleen Parker, a columnist for the *Washington Post* argued, "if Bill Clinton was our first Black president, as Toni Morrison once proclaimed, then Barack Obama may be our first woman president." Parker was referencing Obama's leadership style as being not "commanding" enough, citing that he did not respond quickly enough to the BP oil crisis, and spent time "weighing" and "considering". When he did respond – "on day 56 (!)", she wrote – he used 13% "passive voice constructions", and concluded "passivity in a leader is not a reassuring posture".<sup>286</sup>

While Parker may (or may not) have been somewhat satirical, her article was one of multiple questions and comments which swirled around Obama's identity. Some, like Parker's piece, suggested there were things about Obama's rhetorical presentation or demeanour that were somehow amiss, off-centre – comments which themselves highlighted the persistence of outmoded concepts about gender identity and highly patriarchal frameworks for assessing leadership capacity. Such comments also suggest, at best, the naivety of such a 'colour-blind' assessment of an African American man in charge of a country still grappling with deep fissures of racism. For instance, it ignores how the fear of constructed stereotypes of the 'angry Black man' can work to self-police Black men's responses and behaviour in the face of widespread preconfigured notions about Black masculinity.<sup>287</sup>

This was highlighted by one of Parker's African American journalist colleagues, Jonathan Capeheart, in his response column that "Black men are held to a different standard. They are practised at keeping their emotions under wraps. They can't 'go off' as some have urged

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<sup>286</sup> Kathleen Parker, 'Obama: Our First Female President', *The Washington Post*, 30 June 2010.

<sup>287</sup> For more on how African American men often feel they have to police their behaviour due to stereotypical, racialized, social constructions, see for example: Tonya Harris Cornelius, ' "I'm a Black Man and I'm Doing this Job Very Well" ', *Journal of African American Studies*, 17.4 (2012), pp.444-460.

Cornelius draws in part on critical race theory (CRT) frameworks, to consider how race and racism underlie constructions of social narratives. CRT provides scholars with a "practice of interrogating race and racism in society":

Janel George, 'A Lesson on Critical Race Theory', *Human Rights*, 46.2 (2021), pp.2-5.

Obama to do”.<sup>288</sup> Elsewhere Obama’s ethnicity – was he too Black or not Black enough – was also called into question.<sup>289</sup> After Obama’s support for gay marriage, *Newsweek* magazine crowned him on its cover with a rainbow halo and the title, “The First Gay President”. The cover story suggests a queering critique of Obama; beyond his long support for, and passing of gay marriage legislation, the article argued, Obama’s embrace of his Black identity in a white family was analogous to gay people embracing their homosexuality within the heterosexual family.<sup>290</sup>

In the first two chapters, I explored how directors in the Black filmmaking renaissance dialogue with social and political issues of the Obama years through an activist filmmaking praxis, and through historical and cultural memory. Again using an interdisciplinary approach, this chapter considers how Black filmmakers have represented Black masculinity through their works, and whether they have sought to broaden or interrogate heteronormative prescriptions for Black men.

The frenzy of commentary on Obama’s identity is, as the examples above suggest, both raced and gendered. In a perceptible cultural echo of the identity theft of slavery, Obama’s identity has been appropriated and mangled by white supremacists, including those in the Birther movement who insist Obama’s ‘story’ is not as he has described it. At the same time, there are other, Black gatekeepers who question Obama’s authenticity as a Black American man due to his genealogy, and such interrogation is something I consider in this thesis’ Conclusion. But I highlight them here because they illustrate that, in a still- patriarchal society, and one riddled with issues over anti-Black prejudice, the endless questions over Obama’s Black masculine identity suggest a social context ripe for filmmakers of the renaissance to interrogate the meanings and tropes attached to Black masculinity in the twenty-first century.

Taking three films as principal sites, *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), *Chi-Raq* (2015), and *Moonlight* (2016), I examine these texts to triangulate how tropes of masculinity in Black

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<sup>288</sup> Jonathan Capeheart is quoted in: Vershawn Ashanti Young, ‘Straight Black Queer: Obama, Code-Switching, and the Gender Anxiety of African American Men’, *PMLA*, pp.464-470 (464-5). Young considers the same exchange with Parker, using it as a springboard to discuss tendencies for gendered and racialized pedagogical approaches to African American men.

<sup>289</sup> See Michael Eri Dyson, *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America* (New York: First Mariner, 2016).

<sup>290</sup> Matthew Larotonda, ‘Newsweek’s Next Cover: Obama “First Gay President”’, *ABC News*, 13 May 2012 <<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/05/newsweeks-next-cover-obama-first-gay-president>> [accessed 15 May 2022].

American culture are explored in the work of Black filmmakers. While *Moonlight* is my key work for this chapter (the richest and most ground-breaking text of this period for discourse analysis), I examine the others in a more succinct analysis, but an exploration of all three texts are useful to gather a fuller perspective on the renaissance filmmakers' concerns about masculinity and masculinism (denoting traditional expectations of male dominance and power). This is particularly useful since the Obama period arrived amid cultural and scholarly talk of a 'crisis in masculinity', part of which focuses on Black men.<sup>291</sup>

Focusing primarily on constructions of Black masculinity within Black communities, rather than the intersection with White America, I examine how these films seek to challenge or reaffirm existing expressions of hierarchical, hetero-normative hegemony. I have chosen films with a primary narrative or thematic focus on Black men, and their relationship with other Black men. In keeping with my exploration of the Black filmmaking renaissance, I also explore how these films fall into a tradition of, or seek to highlight, themes of resistance. With Obama's victory symbolically inverting a centuries-old power relations paradigm for Black masculinity, I explore the reactions of Black filmmakers to the shifting meanings of Black masculinity that are possible in the wake of destabilized existing hierarchies.

F Gary Gray's *Straight Outta Compton* is a biopic charting the rise of N.W.A., a gangsta rap group from Los Angeles who were hugely influential, both in terms of the evolution of the music itself, but also the wider youth culture that was spawned in its wake. As historical drama, it explores tropes of Black masculinity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but its narrative and characterizations are nevertheless refracted through a lens which takes account of present-day audience. Its portrayal of Black men and their relationships thus provides one set of 'past-present' co-ordinates from which to explore contemporary tropes of masculinity. As I shall outline, these tropes tend to forcefully reproduce, rather than interrogate, tropes of macho, heteronormative, hypermasculinity.

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<sup>291</sup> For more on the notion of a 'crisis of masculinity', in response to rapidly changing economic and social changes to existing gendered hierarchies, see: David Morgan, 'The Crisis in Masculinity', in *Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies*, ed. by Kathy Davis, Mary Evans, Judith Lorber (New York: Sage, 2006).

For more on a crisis in Black masculinity, see: Mark Antony Neal, *New Black Man*, 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (New York: Routledge, 2015). See also: Anthony J. Lemelle, 'Africana Studies and the Crisis of Black Masculinity', in *Afrocentric Traditions*, ed. by James L. Conyers (New York: Routledge, 2005). Lemelle considers this notion in reaction to the over-representation of Black men trapped within the criminal justice system, and the wider criminalization of Blackness.

Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* directly challenges this version of mythologized male within African American heteronormative communities. He updates the ancient Greek play *Lysistrata* to modern-day Chicago, using the classical concept of satire to examine and expose how the dominance of hypermasculine, masculinist attributes can destroy not only the men who cultivate them, but the communities around them. By using the frame of ancient literature, he also points to the persistent nature of such tropes of masculinity, connecting a domineering predilection of some men in the twenty-first century, to the long tradition of such behaviour in Western civilization. *Chi-Raq* focuses particularly on gun/gang-violence in Chicago's South Side, an area of the city known nationally for its extremely high rate of murders and shootings.<sup>292</sup> Lee's overall purpose with the film is to decry and explore violence in masculine society, against a backdrop of violence as a [gendered] American idiom. Lee also seeks to show how masculinist community violence flourishes on a bedrock structural racism, and poverty, and the extreme pressure which these place on individuals and families.

The third and key landing point for my triangulation of Black masculinity in the Black filmmaking renaissance is Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* – in many ways the evolutionary point of the other two films, and the principal text for this chapter. *Moonlight* is a semi-autobiographical story, set in a similar period to *Straight Outta Compton*, though based in an East Coast neighbourhood, a poor suburb of Miami. Like the liminal position of the location – on the edge of the city, by the side of the ocean – the film's lead character Chiron, as queer boy and then man, inhabits a liminal space in heteronormative constructions of Black masculinity. Eschewing the cloak of dominant/domineering and violent expressions of 'manliness' put on show by most of the males around him, he is 'othered' from the start. His authenticity as a man, particularly as a Black man, is challenged by the self-appointed defenders of a social structure which circumscribes masculinity as heterosexual, macho, and aggressive in its maintenance of a masculinist order.

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<sup>292</sup> Lee conceived of this film specifically as activist artistic practice. For an example of Lee discussing his concerns about violence with his film, see: WBLS 107.5FM, 'Lenny Green Interview: Spike Lee Talks New Movie *Chi-Raq* + Gun Violence in America' (New York: WBLS) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6ISg0tjeJ0>> [accessed 16 July 2020].

***“Cuz the boyz n tha hood are always hard”***<sup>293</sup>

NWA’s 1987 lyric (above) from one of the group’s early tracks, *Boyz n the Hood*, trades on the double meaning of ‘hard’, denoting traditional masculine concepts of tough, uncompromising aggression, even violence, but also penile, heterosexual virility. Together with the rest of the track, it is emblematic of the music and the performative stance of the group, one of the early gangsta rap ensembles. As S Craig Watkins points out this “hard-core” sub-genre of rap emerged out of the context of “post-industrial change that reshaped the social and economic character of largely segregated Black working-class communities like south-central Los Angeles”, where Compton is located. Watkins adds that in the context of the “war against the poor”, the “gangsta rapper purported to give voice to the alienation and rage experienced by many young, dislocated Black males.”<sup>294</sup> *Straight Outta Compton*, which tells the story of NWA’s formation, rise and fall (as told by some of the key members, particularly O’Shea Jackson [Ice Cube] and Andre Young [Dre, now Dr Dre], who acted as producers on the film), reflects Watkins’ assessment, as the drama portrays how they developed their artistry against the backdrop of “disintegrating Black urban life.”<sup>295</sup> While *Straight* doubtless reflects (and adds to) the mythologizing that has developed around the group over the years, as far as examining tropes of masculinity in the film, that only adds to our available discourses for analysis, since the film reflects deliberate artistic characterizations and other choices which expose its masculinist perspective, as I explore below.

The film is the site of multiple narratives aside from the director’s cut and the screenplay. Given the masses of fans globally who were contemporaneous rap fans for NWA, the reception of *Straight* is also inscribed with the narratives of the audience, and their nostalgia for their youth. Further, the project was heavily influenced and managed by the subjects of the film. Ice Cube in particular, and Dr Dre were both heavily involved in the film’s production, and Ice Cube’s son O’Shea Jackson Jr portrays his father in the film.<sup>296</sup> The story of NWA circa 1990 is thus heavily refracted through the lens of the older male rap stars on whom the film is

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<sup>293</sup> Lyric taken from NWA’s 1987 track by Eazy-E, *Boyz n the Hood*, Ruthless Records.

<sup>294</sup> Samuel Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.183.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ice Cube was closely involved with the evolution of the film and attended most of the shoot, say news reports, such as USA Today:  
< <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2015/08/24/facts-you-dont-know-straight-outta-compton/32228711/>>

based, and who still have a strong interest in maintaining and controlling a particular narrative and persona. In the film, this lens is exposed as a hegemonic, heteronormative masculinity that predominated in 1990 – even as it is curated for a 2015 audience more sensitive to gender inequalities and representations of what now tends to be termed toxic masculinity (gender traits or behaviours, often thought of as traditionally masculine, but which are harmful to men themselves or others around them). The film also strongly recalls John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), which starred a young Ice Cube, and was also a coming-of-age drama about a group of friends in South Central during the same period that *Straight* is based (and indeed, Singleton’s title is borrow from the N.W.A track). These films are quite different – Singleton’s film is a much richer text and sought to intervene in contemporary discourses, where F Gary Gray’s film seeks primarily to be autobiographical storytelling.<sup>297</sup>

Like *Moonlight*, *Straight* is framed around an (auto)biographical narrative and both are set within a similar timeframe (mid-late 1980s and early 1990s), both in poor Black urban areas. The film reveals how the West Coast artists came to develop their own style of ‘reality rap’ – unflinching stories about ‘hood’ life, including violence and sexual exploits. The film focuses on Eazy-E, a drug dealer and entrepreneur who becomes a rapper and producer, and starts a company (Ruthless Records) to manage NWA; Dre, a highly talented producer and rapper; Ice Cube a lyricist, rapper and producer, who is still in high school when NWA are formed. It also features other members of NWA, MC Ren and DJ Yella, and Jerry Heller the group’s manager.

This selection – curation – of characters included in this biographical narrative becomes important, because of the key female voices and events reportedly removed from the group’s historical record. The most obvious and core absence is the female rapper Michel’le, another artist signed to Ruthless Records who also worked with NWA, and was Dr Dre’s girlfriend throughout much of the period covered by the film.<sup>298</sup> The omission provoked Michele’le into telling her own story, a television biopic *Surviving Compton*, just a year after Gray’s *Straight* was released. The choice to omit Michel’le from the narrative is an important one for examining how masculinity is portrayed in *Straight*. If included, Michel’le’s story as she has described it would complicate and disrupt the portrayal of the young Dr Dre, and paint him in a highly negative light for present-day audiences, given her claims of his sustained violent

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<sup>297</sup> Nevertheless, there is a strong dialogue between the two films, and in a future research paper I hope to explore them side by side.

<sup>298</sup> Michel’le is the stage name of Michel’le Denise Toussaint, also from South Central LA.

abuse towards her during their relationship (which he denies).<sup>299</sup> Another key omission in the film is Dre's serious assault on another woman, the music journalist Dee Barnes, who he reportedly punched and kicked at a party in 1991 in response to a negative piece about the group. (While Dre denies other assaults, he admitted to the attack on Barnes). More allegations of violence have also been made against Dre from the same period by other women.<sup>300</sup>

These claims contrast sharply with the story depicted in *Straight*, which emphasizes Dre and Ice Cube as musical and lyrical geniuses. Eazy-E is seen as a shrewd businessmen, but also as an authentic male figure from the neighbourhood, who gets by on his wits and entrepreneurship, in a volatile environment. The film also very much paints NWA's music as a cry of pain from the ghetto and defiant demand for justice. At the same time however it does not question how the pressure of wider inequalities or deprivation acts on individuals to reproduce behaviours which valorize toxic masculinity. Rather it reinforces some heavily cliched tropes of Black masculinity, with regard to violence and sexist/misogynistic attitudes, and tends to airbrush out the voices of women, particularly if they offer a challenge to that form of masculinist hegemony.

Though perhaps not primarily a film of political commentary and protest in the way observed in, for instance, *Selma*, *Straight* nevertheless offers important commentary on poverty, class, African American economic disenfranchisement, forgotten communities, and particularly police harassment and brutality, amongst other issues still affecting Black Americans. It also ticks the boxes of several well-established narrative and cinematic tropes. *Straight* is primarily a conventional 'rags to riches' tale about disadvantaged protagonists who gain wealth and fame, experiencing camaraderie but also loss, along the way.<sup>301</sup> Further, the film delivers a rite of passage narrative, as the young men are forever altered, achieving success, fame (and notoriety), money, grand houses, adulation, and all the other trappings of wealth in America. At one point, we're told that Eazy-E even has dinner at the White House, with then President

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<sup>299</sup> See also: Rick Juzwiak, 'Michelle'le talks about hanging with NWA, Dr Dre's 'Apology', and Surviving Compton, *Jezebel*, 13/10/2016  
< <https://themuse.jezebel.com/michelle-talks-about-hanging-with-nwa-dr-dres-apology-1787707473>>

<sup>300</sup> See Ben Westhoff, 'The new NWA movie depicts Michel'le's abuse by Dr Dre – but is it true?', *The Guardian*, 17 October 2016,  
< <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/oct/17/surviving-compton-nwa-michelle-dr-dre-beating>>

<sup>301</sup> Scholar Bernard Beck also discusses conventional tropes reflected in *Straight*: Bernard Beck, 'The Emigrants: *Straight Outta Compton*, *Dope*, and Emerging from the Ghetto', *Multicultural Perspectives*, 18(2), 2016, pp.91-94.

George Bush. The enormous success of the group however, and the complications of the rite of passage they traverse, results in a fundamental rift in their relationship – and despite the fun, friendship and loyalty to one another that we watch them share in their early days, nothing is the same ever again.

Importantly, as Bernard Beck points out, the film is also, perhaps counterintuitively given its anti-establishment narrative, quite conservative – conforming very much to the American (capitalist) Dream narrative.<sup>302</sup> Whilst the attitudes of the rap stars, their rage and rightful indignation at the structural and individual racism they and their communities face, borrow from the philosophies of Malcom X and the more militant civil rights activists of the late 1960s, nevertheless the overarching message of the film is that the American Dream is real – that through hard work, a resilient attitude, not relying on welfare but instead embracing neoliberal capitalism, anyone can make it out of the ghetto.<sup>303</sup>

The broadening of the discussion to American capitalism is useful for a deeper understanding the toxic masculinity on display in the film. The economic enterprise of drug dealing in poor areas is, from one perspective, a subversive example of American capitalism at work. As I mentioned earlier, Eazy-E's entrepreneurial skills are particularly emphasized, and Ice Cube initiates the group's split through his frustration about financial compensation; money becomes a key focus, echoing how the notion of money-making is also an important trope reflected in rap music itself. In this context, the group's often sexist and patriarchal behaviour, toxic masculinity, is partly legitimized for them by their embrace of money-making capitalist ideology. Masculinity here conforms to the notion of 'masculine domination' coined by social studies scholar Pierre Bourdieu, and described by scholars writing about the concept of the 'American Dream' as "a sexually defined reality that equates being masculine with positions of social and economic power".<sup>304</sup> In *Straight's* tale of young men pulling themselves out of poverty, their masculinity – expressed as no-nonsense, single-minded, commercially savvy rebellion – is integral to their success. Conversely the route to female escape from the ghetto appears to be to marry, or otherwise be related to one of the male trailblazers.

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., Beck.

<sup>304</sup> A Herbig, 'Masculinity and the American Dream in *American Dreams*', in *Gender in a Transitional Era: Changes and Challenges*, eds. Amanda R Martinez, Lucy A Miller (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), p.65.

This masculinist hegemony is not the only familiar masculine trope that the film travels in. Several scholars have pointed to the gangsta rapper figure as a modern day incarnation of the 'badman' of Black folklore. In this sense 2015's *Straight Outta Compton*, particularly given its primary setting and cultural milieu of urban Black neighbourhoods of Los Angeles' South Central and Compton, can be seen in a lineage from the Blaxploitation genre of the early 1970s, through to the 'hood movies of the late 1980s and 1990s, which also featured the 'outsider', antihero archetype.<sup>305</sup> But as scholar Eithne Quinn points out, this archetype is not solely a feature of African American cultural history, but part of a larger American trope:

The antiheroic outlaw, far from being the sole property of Black cultural repertoires, has always been a mainstay in the lore and legends of the United States...folk badmen of all hues share common traits: they are loners, antagonistic towards society, and they operate outside the law and social order.<sup>306</sup>

Quinn goes on to point out that the African American archetype of this trope has traditionally differed from white American antihero-hero figure, in a way which is particularly important when considering *Straight*, and its role in the Black filmmaking renaissance. The Black folkloric "badman" emerged through a different folkloric tradition to the overall American trope, and was one which did not require its heroes to justify their defiance and challenge towards an established hegemony. This partly emanates from an African cultural legacy, she continues. But she also points out the importance to the collective wellbeing, of resisting an oppressive, violent state apparatus, during the post-bellum period.<sup>307</sup>

New incarnations of post-bellum state oppression persist for the residents of South Central LA, and while the film does not interrogate the basis for the masculinist behaviours it depicts, it does seek to explain that the culture of violence in which the men grow up, within both the community and the police, explains their occasional performance of aggressive masculinity.

Early in the film, for instance, a young Ice Cube rides the school bus with many other Black teenagers, home to the poorer areas where they live. On route the bus is stopped by a car full

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<sup>305</sup> For example, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadaasssss Song* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972), *New Jack City* (1991), *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Menace II Society* (1993). The 'hood or ghetto movies of the 1990s were set in poor, Black, urban communities, featured heavy levels of violence and/or criminality, and largely depicted male, masculinist storylines.

<sup>306</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p.103.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.* Quinn, p.103.

of men just a few years older. Some of the boys on the bus had been teasing the men (driving alongside the bus) from the bus window – innocent adolescent humour. However, the car driver forces the bus to the side of the road, gets out his gun and makes the bus driver open the doors. Menacingly he walks through the bus until he gets to the teenager who has been joking around and, announcing that he is “O.G. Two-Tone, Crenshaw Mafia”, and threatens him with a gun to his head. Standing in the aisle with his gun at the ready, Two-Tone advises that these kids would be better concentrating on their books, in what Ice Cube soon later satirically terms a “motivational speech”. It’s a scene which contrasts heavily with the preceding tableau at the school, where Cube watched from the window as the white kids got into their cars, and were even waved cheerily on their way by friendly school attendants. Cube’s bus is full of Black teenagers, mostly boys, and as he pulls away from the school the urban blight of the areas he passes are personified by the menace of the gangster who gets on the bus. In this atmosphere, aggression and performance masculinity are clearly an integral part of staying alive.

The film is set in the latter part of the twentieth century, but it strikes a heavily familiar political chord with audiences during the Obama-years, given the renewed vigour of Black protest movements responding to the ongoing racial discrimination in the criminal justice system, and particularly the racial harassment of Black people by law enforcement. As with *Selma*, audiences in 2015 readily understood the film’s critique was not just aimed at the late 1980s and 1990s, but the historicity of events emphasizes the continuum of the same problems faced by African Americans into today.<sup>308</sup> In several ways, *Straight* that is even more emphasized since, aside from certain markers of the period (for example, Ice Cube’s jheri curl hairstyle), the film barely seems to have dated. This is for a number of reasons. The urban landscape shown in some parts of the film reveals a deprivation that has not dramatically altered, since the socio-economic prospects for Black America remains disproportionately bleak. In 2015, when *Straight* was released, for example, the median net worth for white households was \$144,200 – a staggering 13 times that of Black households, at \$11,200.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> For scholarship on the disproportionate targeting of Black and other people of colour by law enforcement, and their subsequent entry into the criminal justice system, see: Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Second Edition (New York: The New Press, 2012).

<sup>309</sup> Figures for 2015, quoted in: Kristen Bialik and Anthony Cilluffo, ‘6 Facts about Black Americans for Black History Month’, *Pew Research Center* 22, February 2017 <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/22/6-facts-about-Black-americans-for-Black-history-month/>>.

Further, the harassment of the young NWA members by police, as well as the white manager's near disbelief at what he's witnessing, also resonates heavily with contemporary Black audiences. Set only a few years after the 1986 ramping up of the 'War on Drugs', the film presents an interesting referral point for appreciating how the contemporary surveillance focus of police on Black people, particularly their aggressive engagement with young Black men, was soldered into custom and practice. Bolstered by the powers afforded law enforcement by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, arising from the still-ongoing 'War on Drugs', the attitude of the state and law enforcement was (and too often remains) discriminatory towards people of colour in 2015 as it did in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>310</sup>

*Straight's* apparent topicality is also boosted by the enduring popularity of hip hop and rap, and the 'street' fashions that go with it. These, together with hip hop itself, have been continuously packaged and commodified, to both Black youth, and as a rebellious sub-culture to the youth of White America, a huge – and influential – paying audience. As Tricia Rose points out, that has increasingly come to affect the characterizations of Black men and women, by renewing and reaffirming old racial stereotypes – which are in turn endlessly reproduced in the music and its cultural milieu:

The cycle looks like this: mainstream white consumers drive hyper-demand for these images (whites are raised on images of Black thugs – images that appeal and seem authentic to whites), thereby fueling higher sales given the size of the white consumer market, which then encourages unscrupulous corporations to demand more of these images to make greater profits. This in turn encourages Black youth who are also raised on images of Black thugs as a primary source of power to tailor their image to suit market needs.<sup>311</sup>

While Rose is referring to the super-commercialisation of rap that occurred after groups such as NWA achieved mainstream success, *Straight Outta Compton* is playing to today's audiences, and thus is at least in part inscribed with the texts that Rose suggests have become the mainstay of commercially driven rap. While the film certainly challenges the characterization of the group as thugs, and as I discuss below, seeks to render the young NWA members with

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<sup>310</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of how the War on Drugs has been highly damaging to poor Black communities see: Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

I also discuss police brutality and its legacies in Chapter Four.

<sup>311</sup> Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p.89.

much more complexity than commercial imperatives often dictate as Rose suggests, the film remains highly masculinist. Further, its protagonists still project what are traditionally regarded as male attributes of physical strength, aggressiveness, single-mindedness, and (albeit selectively) responsibility for being the family provider.<sup>312</sup> While there are influential women in the film, there is just one female character who is drawn with anything other than shallow strokes, Dr Dre's mother. She berates her son for missing a job interview she has organised, explaining her anger is rooted not only in her fears for his future but her frustration that he is fulfilling the stereotype that was charged at her, due to her having become a young parent – “[they] said I wouldn't be shit, said you wouldn't be shit...Now I have worked my ass off to get us here, and I refuse to let you throw it all away”. Despite this criticism, as a mother figure here, she remains constituted entirely in relation to her son.

The majority of women that appear in the film are extras, mostly semi-undressed or scantily clad groupies or other adornments to help relay the experience of a young and newly successful NWA. As the descriptor 'adornment' suggests, these women are heavily objectified – reflecting the lyrics of the rap music we hear throughout the film. Some of the party scenes are exactly the kind of hedonistic, drink-drug-sex fuelled scenes which popular culture has chronicled for decades, and apply equally to pop/rock/rap bands, and Hollywood stars and other successful individuals. But in *Straight*, particularly in the absence of any substantial female characters as a corrective, the disposability of most women in the film is problematic.

In one scene, for example, the group are partying in a hotel suite with many naked and semi-naked women, when two men come to the door and make clear they are armed when they demand to see the girlfriend of one of the men, Felicia. In response the young rappers brush aside the women they are partying with, one of whom is literally tossed from straddling Ice Cube's character so that she bounces. The audience follows along Dre's point of view shot, locating Eazy-E in the bathroom, fully-clothed while a semi-naked girl performs oral sex on him. The men pick up a small arsenal of weapons and Eazy-E leads them into the hallway, threatening the strangers with his much bigger automatic rifle. As he shouts that Felicia can't

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<sup>312</sup> As described earlier, the film has some notable omissions in the NWA history. But it also has fleeting references which are lightly brushed aside. We understand that Dre is a father by the time the film begins, and his girlfriend and child eventually leave because he's not able to properly support them while he's waiting for his music career to take off. The scene where this is depicted, however, is completely eclipsed by the scene that follows, which sees all of NWA abused by the LAPD – forced to lie on the ground with their hands behind their backs, called “N\_\_\_\_\_” and “gangsters” by the police officers, because of the way they are dressed. In response Ice Cube writes the lyrics for one of their most famous tracks, *Fuck tha Police*, protesting police harassment. The importance of the story of Dre's young wife and child are completely subsumed by the apparently bigger issue, and the story behind one of the most iconic of NWA tracks.

come out of the party because she's "got a motherfuckin' dick in her mouth," the other partygoers stream out to spectate on this display, clunkily (or deliberately emphasizing) the overlap of phallic sexual virility and violence. The strangers run away and everyone troops back into the party. Violent, sexually dominant masculinity has prevailed in an argument over a woman merely as a possession. As a final insult, Ice Cube prevents Felicia from coming back into the party, brusquely pushing her back into the hall by her head and closing the door – despite her wearing almost nothing. When Ice Cube closes the door he dismisses the girl he's ejected with "Bye Felicia", a phrase which had already passed into popular culture as a pithy dismissal, and which cinema audiences responded to with laughter.<sup>313</sup> They responded to the fact that the entire sequence is portrayed in an oddly light-hearted tone (possibly somewhat tongue-in-cheek), given that narratively severe violence hung over the scene.

The girl, who is literally left out in the cold, is conceptualized as wholly an object of exchange between the two men. Her humanity is diminished in favour of her role as a canvas on which the men, particularly our (anti-)heroes, inscribe and celebrate their hypermasculine dominance. Once that has been achieved, she is no longer required – worse, she is rejected, belittled and left defenceless in a space where her armed boyfriend has been just moments before, knowing that she has been caught as an adulteress.<sup>314</sup> It seems clear that the sexual intimacy between Felicia and Eazy-E was not just hedonistic fun on equal power relations terms. The actions of the scene described above reflect the sometimes highly sexist and misogynistic lyrics of the raps which NWA perform in the film, littered with pejorative terms like "bitch" and "ho", expressions of treating women with violence, and lyrics which often focus on nameless girls performing oral sex on men, clearly conceptualized as a submissive act emphasizing the sexual and social dominance of the male figure.

Some scholars argue that the use of such lyrics in rap songs should not necessarily be taken at face value, given their performative context. Eithne Quinn argues rather that they are not "wholly performative", but they are much more complex than simple misogyny, and instead

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<sup>313</sup> The phrase 'Bye Felicia' was a put-down used by a character which the real Ice Cube played in an earlier film, *Friday* (1995), a comedy. His character says it to a girl looking to secure favours from Cube and his friend, and it is intended as an uncompromising and dismissive rejection, essentially making fun of the girl. It had already passed into popular culture by the time it was used in *Straight*, and reports relay how audiences reacted to it with humour.

<sup>314</sup> This point was also made by some commentators at the time of the film's release.

point to “emotional subtexts”.<sup>315</sup> By contrast, Margaret Hunter and Kathleen Soto have commented on the parallels between rap and pornography in some rap music:

“Music videos and rap lyrics increasingly draw on well-established themes in pornography... Beyond representation of types of women [strippers, prostitutes, porn stars etc.], the “pornification” of rap also involves the routinization of a “pornographic gender relation.” We describe those relations as those that portray interactions between women and men in particular and limited ways. ...

“Examples of this particular gender relation... include scenes or lyrics where women are routinely humiliated, used for male sexual pleasure at the exclusion of female sexual pleasure, or typically shown exchanging money or status for sex.”<sup>316</sup>

Key aspects of the hotel scene involving Felicia are an example of the “gender relation” dynamic they refer to. The hotel scenes are notable for privileging a dominant masculinity, by blending it with an exploitative pornographic expression not mitigated by any suggestion for the need for equal gender relations with women. The scene’s direction means that Felicia, like many other girls in this orbit, serve only a disposable purpose, to boost the pleasure and status of men. It is worth quoting an interview from rapper Snoop Dogg in 2007, which anatomizes this world view:

Rappers are not talking about no collegiate basketball girls who have made it to the next level in education and sports. We’re talking about hoes that’s in the ‘hood that ain’t doing shit, that’s trying to get a N\_\_\_\_\_ for his money... We ain’t no old-ass white men that sit up on MSNBC going hard on Black girls. We are rappers that have these songs coming from our minds and our souls that are relevant to what we feel.<sup>317</sup>

Snoop Dogg fails to recognize that he has much in common with the “old-ass white men” in his disparagement of Black girls from the neighbourhood. He also reflects the age old conventional and conservative trope, of ‘good girls’ versus ‘bad girls’ – with the girls who agree

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<sup>315</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin but a "g" thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p.102.

<sup>316</sup> Margaret Hunter and Kathleen Soto, ‘Women of Color in hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze’, *Race, Gender & Class*, 16.1-2 (2009), pp.171-2.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.* Hunter and Soto, p.172.

to have casual sex designated bad or worthless. *Straight* confirms the dichotomy when Dre starts seeing a new girlfriend Nicole. While she considers whether to take the relationship seriously, she refuses to have sex with Dre, and thus encapsulates the conservative tropes, and acceptable femininity, of the nurturing, responsible, sexually alluring – but not sexually promiscuous, woman. She is ‘rewarded’ with a more serious place in his affections, and he asks her to move in with him. Again, this conforms to a heteronormative patriarchal hegemony, as well as a traditional conservative/capitalist blueprint for success in America.

One could argue that explicitly sexual and sexist references in rap music are purely for entertainment. Or further, they form part of the larger political engine of rap music, gangsta rap in particular, to purposefully and vividly upend accepted norms – with the intention of challenging the social and political order which maintain these norms. That is, it purposefully challenges the same hegemony which has kept Black communities violently oppressed. Some scholars also point to how this particular use of rap as resistance has long roots in Black American history.<sup>318</sup>

“far from being an unprecedented art form which can only reflect the social pathologies of idiosyncratic American ghetto life, gangsta rap operates within a well-documented poetic tradition within African American culture that ritualizes invective, satire, obscenity, and other verbal phenomena with transgressive aims.”<sup>319</sup>

One might also argue that male rappers here are reclaiming and subverting the notion of the Black man in America as a “walking phallic symbol”, as James Baldwin described the historical fetishization of Black male sexuality.<sup>320</sup> From this perspective the sexist tropes in *Straight Outta Compton* are, as we also saw earlier, in a direct line early Blaxploitation films which could be highly phallogentric in their emphasis on the powerful exercise of masculinity by Black men. Scholars argue such films were in direct response to the sexually-neutered and emasculated Black masculinity which Hollywood projected through stars like Sidney Poitier and films like *Guess Whose Coming to Dinner* in the late 1960s.<sup>321</sup> In the controversial *Sweet*

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<sup>318</sup> For a broader discussion of art used as resistance in African American history and culture, see Chapter Two.

<sup>319</sup> Ralph M Rosen and Donald R Marks, ‘Comedies of Transgression in Gangsta Rap and Ancient Classical Poetry’, *New Literary History*, 1999 (30), p.897.

<sup>320</sup> This is discussed further in the final part of his chapter, in the section on *Moonlight*.

<sup>321</sup> Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p.72.

*Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), for instance, the eponymous hero's sexual virility is a central part of the narrative and goes hand in hand with his outlaw activities, (which include raping a Black woman to escape the police).<sup>322</sup>

By contrast to female representation, *Straight* strives to show the development of these men beyond the performance of their stage and studio personae, and flesh out their lives beyond the broad brush strokes which depict them as icons. We see the young men cry at certain points, huddle together for support, and, in one of the great strengths of the film, we come to understand the fun and joy of their friendship and lives together in NWA, which stands in contrast to the moody personae projected to sell the records, and reminds the audience of the performative nature of rap music itself.

This may be an attempt to update normative masculinity for the contemporary age in which the film was shown; or the older rap stars on which it was based may themselves feel more at ease with depicting this side of their young masculinity. However, the thematic, narrative and visual sexism of the film gives it a somewhat anachronistic feel in 2015. The film's appearance in the Black filmmaking renaissance prompts obvious comparison with *Moonlight*, which came out only a year later, which highlights the anachronism. While both *Straight* and *Moonlight* are primarily stories about African American male relationships, both with casts mostly populated by men, the portrayal of these relationships and the examination of masculinity in the films, are very different. As I discuss in the final section of this chapter, *Moonlight* challenges and interrogates masculinity, male-based hierarchies and heteronormative structures, while *Straight* largely reinforces traditional tropes of virulent, heteronormative, performative masculinity. Conceptually in between these two films sits *Chi-raq*, which also came out in 2015, and narratively at least, focuses on both men and women. As I shall outline in the next section, *Chi-raq* specifically critiques what might be termed a gangsta aesthetic expressed with violence, for the damage he feels it does to men and their entire communities.

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid. Guerrero, p.87.

*Sweetback's* misogyny is also discussed by Michelle Wallace in *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp.262-3.

### ***Chi-Raq and the Black gangsta aesthetic***

Of all the mainstream offerings of the Black filmmaking renaissance, the film which most clearly critiques tropes of domineering masculinity is Spike Lee's *Chi-raq* (2015), set in a predominantly Black community beset by gang violence. The film opened within weeks of DuVernay's *Selma* – and it is noticeable that both films point to American society's relationship with violence. *Selma* is concerned with the violence meted out to individuals, and the wider African American community and body politic, by a racist white America and the apparatus of the State. *Chi-raq* also emphasizes that a racially rigged social and political system is the underlying context which oppresses Black America and particularly poor communities. However, here Lee largely focuses on criticizing pernicious masculinity tropes, particularly the intertwining of violence and masculinity in America. His specific focus in *Chi-raq* is the zero-sum contest of domineering masculinity acted out within violent Black gangster culture. Both films opened in late 2015, each to a backdrop of communities protesting in shock at the violent taking of Black lives. As I discussed earlier in this thesis, *Selma* premiered during protests about the police killing of Eric Garner, who died after being put in a chokehold by officer Daniel Pantaleo. *Chi-raq* opened as Chicago recoiled in horror at the killing of Tyshawn Lee, a nine-year old boy executed in an alleyway by adult men, as part of a gangland feud. Lee could hardly have anticipated a more tragic or more explicatory moment to make his point about violent masculinity.

Set in Chicago's South Side, a relatively impoverished and predominantly African American area, the film's title *Chi-Raq* reflects the term local drill-rappers nicknamed the city – a portmanteau of Chicago and Iraq.<sup>323</sup> The sardonic name points to the fact that more Americans were murdered in Chicago between 2001 and 2015 than were killed in the Iraq War. The film's opening theme tune, a rap with the lyrics projected on screen, reflects the vexed relationship of loyalty and hopelessness at living in a place where violence feels inevitable and locked-in to the dynamics in [some parts of] the city. It's also points to a highly male-centric vision of community and relationships:

"I See Death 'Round Da Corner

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<sup>323</sup> Chicago's South Side includes a significant number of neighbourhoods living in poverty. See: John Dodge, 'Poverty Rates In Many Chicago Neighborhoods Near 60 Percent', CBS Chicago [web page], 22 April 2014  
< <https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2014/04/22/poverty-rates-in-many-chicago-neighborhoods-near-60-percent/>>

Boy I dodge Him Like I Own 'Em  
I Don't Talk If I Don't Know Him  
N\_\_\_\_\_ Plottin/N\_\_\_\_\_ On Me

Boy, I Lost Homies,  
Some Died, Some Crossed On Me  
I Love Da N\_\_\_\_\_ Dats Down For Me  
Fuck Da Ones Dat Sent Shots On Me

The prominence of the rap is part of a five minute opening 'chapter', or prelude before the drama proper begins. Lee has used this technique in several films, highlighting an overarching theme or salient point he wants the audience to consider as they watch the film which follows.<sup>324</sup> In *Chi-raq* the rap is preceded by a simple map outline of the United States - but the audience quickly discerns it is in the form of a mosaic, its tiles a multitude of guns of many different types, military and 'domestic'. The map is draped in the colours of the American flag, and thus the rap which follows associates the notion of violence in Chicago with a specifically American idiom and political context. It is clear Lee wants *Chi-raq* to be understood in the wider context of American history and politics. In Chapter Four I discuss how other works of the Black filmmaking renaissance focus on America's violent racial history, but here Lee is concerned with laying out a broader context of America's wider obsession with violence, nationally and in society. It is with that bedrock established that he then narrows his point to explore how these tropes of violent nationhood are replicated in the smaller territorial disputes, and notions of territorial identity, of communities within America. His specific point is how this bleeds into, and is perpetuated by, a domineering, heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity. The last part of his prelude shows graphics detailing the number of American deaths in Afghanistan to date, as well as those killed in Iraq – followed by the number of murders in Chicago during the same period. At 7,356, Chicago murders outnumber deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq put together. Next, focussing in on a map of Chicago, local priest and activist Fr Michael Pflieger (the inspiration for the character Fr Michael Corridan in the film), relates more shocking stats and the audience in voiceover:

These overwhelming numbers of homicides are committed by young Black males against young Black males. Heaven help us all.

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<sup>324</sup> These preludes stand apart from the drama and which sets the tone for the film which follows. This has taken a variety of forms throughout Lee's career, including graphics, symbols, and clips. I discuss one such example, the opener for *Malcolm X* (1993), in Chapter Four.

Here and throughout the film, Lee separates out the behaviour of women and men as two different constituencies, in order to interrogate why men persistently prop up a system where they cultivate violent personae, at the expense of nurturing loved ones and community.

Like other films in the Black filmmaking renaissance, Lee's work in *Chi-Raq* is a political act of resistance, and it is also explicitly activist – through *Chi-Raq* Lee seeks to address gun culture in America.<sup>325</sup> In *Chi-Raq* he also directly addresses his interrogation – and reproach – towards men. Patriarchal masculinity in general – old, young, white, Black – is critiqued in the film, but he focuses the film primary on those African American men involved in a particular kind of urban gang culture, and the pernicious effects of an adherence to a domineering and violent masculinity within it. The film was met with much criticism, particularly by those concerned about the reputation of Chicago. He was also criticized for reinforcing racist tropes about violent Black masculinity. However, aside from the fact Lee is known as a filmmaker who seeks to interrogate social norms, he firmly sets the violence within Black communities – so called 'Black on Black crime' – within an establishing context of America's love affair with guns. Black gun violence is therefore a mere extension of a wider, disastrous, national predilection. However, for deprived communities without the protections enjoyed by better off parts of White America, the effects of gun culture are even more deadly, argues the film. Black men in poor neighbourhoods turning to gun crime thus plays into the hands of a white supremacist hegemony. In both the opener and particularly through a speech given by the Fr Michael Corridan figure, Lee critiques the American capitalist system and the racism of its execution, while outlining the national and social conditions which allow violence to persist in impoverished communities. These devices work to ward off claims that Lee is betraying Black men in his characterization of some of them as violent, as he explicitly argues in the film that such men are tools of a white supremacist system, which creates social conditions for violence to flourish, and then reaping racist capital by watching it happen. However, the context in which Lee's artist/activist intentions are made and the context in which audiences view them vary, and it is not clear if his contextualizing is rich enough in the film to dispel racist interpretations.

There is also much to discuss about Lee's depiction of women in *Chi-Raq*, and it is notable that a film centred narratively on a female power more generally and a principal female character

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<sup>325</sup> Lee discusses this in numerous interviews. For example see: Bryan Smith, 'Spike Lee Sounds Off on "Chi-Raq," Gun Violence, and Rahm', *Chicago Magazine*, 22 October 2015 <<https://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/December-2015/Spike-Lee-Chiraq/>> [accessed 21 April 2022].

in particular (someone who was also the face of the film's visual publicity materials), should principally be about men. In this respect, women can be seen to ultimately function only in their relation to men in *Chi-Raq*, specifically in the service of male redemption. This is a film of very broad brush strokes, which works well for simplifying Lee's arguments. But these strokes are too broad in his depiction of women given that, unlike men, they are not explored as the narrative subject of the film – something which garnered its strongest criticism. Film critic Ijeoma Oluo critic typified this response in her anger at the reduction of women to “walking vaginas”<sup>326</sup> referring to the fairly one-dimensional role of women in *Chi-Raq*. Lee has the women “walking round...with literal padlocks over their vaginas because that is their only power and they must lock it up in order to get men to do what they want,” she argued. However, as this chapter's chief focus is to examine the Black filmmaking renaissance for its discourses about Black masculinity, I will restrict my principal analysis of *Chi-Raq* accordingly.

The entire film is based on Aristophanes' ancient Greek play *Lysistrata*, a satire where the eponymous Greek heroine leads a ‘sex strike’ by the women of Athens who, weary of perpetual wars, want to force their conflict-happy husbands to lay down their weapon. Lee transports the action to modern day Chicago, with a contemporary *Lysistrata* played by Teyonah Parris, and ponders what would happen if women adopted the same form of protest.

It is important to note that the film is a theatrical satire in the vein of its Greek predecessor. The script, written by Spike Lee and frequent collaborator Kevin Wilmott (who is also a professor at the University of Kansas) is delivered largely in rhyme; there is a chorus, a narrator (Dolomedes) who mostly sits outside the drama and provides commentary by addressing the audience directly; there are even some music and dance routines, and there is comedy, despite the bleak topic. Given this stylized approach, it is clear that *Chi-Raq* is not cinematic realism. However, Lee is striving for authenticity in subject matter, not least because the film is a work of anti-gun violence activism, and while he caricatures the gangland figures, they are nevertheless recognizable from contemporary culture – both via the images promoted by many rap artists, but also repeatedly on film. By exaggerating mannerisms or rhetoric, in fact he draws attention to the constructed – artificial – nature of the male gangster persona.

Although the principal character is *Lysistrata*, the woman who orchestrates the anti-violence movement, the primary subject of the film is her boyfriend – a rapper and leader of the

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<sup>326</sup> Oluo I, ‘*Chi-Raq* is an insult: everything about Spike Lee's latest is awful’, *The Portland Mercury* [online], 2 December 2015  
<<http://www.portlandmercury.com/portland/chi-raq-is-an-insult/Content?oid=17083852>>

Spartans gang, who takes the moniker Chi-Raq. In taking the slang name for the 'warzone city', he echoes the drive for authenticity present in hip hop and rap culture.<sup>327</sup> He also embodies the violence of the term implied in the name. Along with their rivals the Trojans, led by eyepatch-wearing leader Cyclops, these all-male gangs are responsible for multiple gang-related killings in the area. The action of the film turns on the accidental killing of a child, Patti, the victim of a stray bullet in a drive-by shooting. No one will come forward with information, and the desperate mother is left doubly distraught.

When Lysistrata is left homeless after the Trojans burn down her house, an assassination attempt on Chi-Raq, she reconsiders the behaviour of the gang members. Notably it is a female neighbour who takes her in (Miss Helen), and functions as an elder and teaches her about African American history and politics. She also challenges Lysistrata's acquiescence to gang culture and inspires her to take action. Miss Helen points Lysistrata to the story of Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian woman who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, apparently by successfully leading a sex strike which helped end the Liberian War. Out of love for her boyfriend and wider community, Lysistrata is inspired to bring about the same outcome in Chicago, and persuades her fellow Spartan wives/girlfriends, together with the rival Trojan women, to follow her lead. The women take an oath to forgo sexual activity with their partners, until the gang warfare stops.

The movement spreads in solidarity to the rest of the women in the city and soon the country. As they develop their campaign, Lysistrata and her protestors trick the male military brass, and take over the Chicago headquarters of the National Guard, which also houses the city's armoury. In a comic scene, Lee satirizes the military, the ultimate symbol of masculinist violent power, by lampooning and caricaturing the ageing white general – depicted as a racist, old, white man, inflated with his sense of entitlement due to his senior position in the military. Lysistrata and her striking sisters deceive the general and his fellow soldiers at the armoury with the promise of sex, and the latter are duly relieved of their command, their clothing and their dignity. The soldiers' judgement is hopelessly compromised by their sexual appetites. More importantly, their male egos are readily manipulated because of their profound sense of male power. Specifically, Lee points to how male systems of domination - sexual power and

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<sup>327</sup> The vital importance of authenticity, for example of Black identity, for hip hop performers is discussed by multiple scholars. For a summary of both authors and approaches, see Anthony Kwame Harrison, 'Racial Authenticity in Rap Music and Hip Hop', *Sociology Compass*, 2 (6), pp.1783 – 1800.

Authenticity and identity in hip hop are discussed further in this chapter, in the section on *Straight Outta Compton* (2015).

military/violent power – entwine here. One scene in particular points to how these systems blur, as Lee has the semi-naked general literally mount a cannon in order to impress and arouse Lysistrata. Wearing his confederacy themed underwear, he sits astride the cannon's phallus-like projection, enthusiastically 'riding' it as his sexual excitement mounts. Leaving the racial politics of this scene aside, the film here pokes fun at and makes serious points about gender, power and abuse. He ridicules the military commander – but his highlighting of how male attraction and even arousal can overlap with sexual and violent systems of power, is directed at men more widely. Both are systems, in this context, which are masculinist, domineering, and see women as subordinate.

With the sex strike widespread, and now that they have taken control of the ultimate symbol and actuality of male power, the armaments store, Lysistrata and her fellow strikers increase their demands that the gang members renounce violence, and end the gang warfare. The denial of sex and intimacy is supposed to make the men listen to their female partners – and in so doing to examine their consciences, characters, and by extension, consider what is constituted by masculinity. While the gang members are the primary focus of his critique, Lee also suggests that a patriarchal male hegemony has trapped men in a psychological straitjacket of constructed, competitive notions of masculinity, a construction which can easily tend towards violence.

In taking the armoury, the power relations which link violence, sex and gender roles is firmly established. As the store of guns, it has been legitimated by hegemonic authorities to control and defend both the city and the forces defending the status quo themselves; it is symbolically also the store of phallic power (guns), and when it is seized by the women, they thus deny the hegemony a crucial element of their agency. But more widely, throughout the film the references to men and guns or other weaponry, makes clear Lee's premise here that violence and masculinity can become deeply entwined. Further, the films outlines that the domineering, patriarchal forms of masculinity that go with this violent masculinity mix are constructions, with disastrous results for all.

Bell hooks makes a similar point: "the primary genocidal threat, the force that endangers Black male life, is patriarchal masculinity."<sup>328</sup> The film illustrates this when Chi-Raq, the Spartans' leader, refuses the priest's request to join in the peace talks because it would be "fucking with my rep". He shrugs off the priest's appeal to end the violence, violence which sees children

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<sup>328</sup> bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.xii

and others injured in the crossfire, with a blithe “bullets ain’t got no name, no eye.” And he is unmoved by the priest pointing out that pursuing the ‘thug life’, a violent way of life privileging “capital accumulation and personal gratification”, is playing into the hands of the capitalist hegemony.<sup>329</sup>

Chi-Raq slow-claps the priest’s speech, and ostentatiously offers him wadges of cash, donating a few of the bills “for the collection basket”, thereby mocking the priest’s sincerity as no more than performance for money. By so doing he rejects the proffer of love instead of hate, and seeks to diminish the priest’s moral narrative which both challenges and threatens Chi-Raq’s constructed sense of self as a gangster. His response is instinctively combative – to maintain his sense of self, he retreats into an oppositional, constructed persona which puts exaggerated tropes of domineering masculinity on show. Ironically however, the encounter only stresses the highly performative nature of this hypermasculine persona. He privileges the importance of a veneer – ‘rep’ (reputation) – above real connections; he pointedly *shows off* his wealth with decks of bills; and espouses the idea that entering dialogue with rivals is weakness. In particular, he remains ostensibly unmoved at the notion of violent death, even of children. This is a pantomime villainy, in gangster role.

Chi-Raq’s demeanour is also an exaggerated version of “cool pose” – described by scholars Majors and Bilson as “carefully crafted performances that deliver a single critical message: pride, strength and control.”<sup>330</sup> Others point out a greater complexity in the meaning of ‘cool pose’, for instance as a coping mechanism for African American men. This argument traces the roots of “Black coolness” to the historical response of Black Americans in dealing with racism, a deportment of proud composure in the face of injustice – that is, a form of resistance.<sup>331</sup> Lee does not contest this, and his pantomime villain performative characterization of Chi-Raq at this point highlights what these critics suggest. But his purpose in *Chi-Raq* is not to dwell on the historical concept in which these masculine tropes have developed, but to confront how their persistence affects contemporary African American men who engage in violence, and their communities.

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<sup>329</sup> For further discussion about ‘thug life’, its relationship to hip hop personalities – equally relevant here since Chi-Raq is a gangsta rap artist – see Michael P Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender and the Meaning of Hip-Hop*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Particularly Chapter Three, ‘Thug Life and Social Death’, pp.77 – 112.

<sup>330</sup> Quoted in: Jeffries, *Thug Life*, p.57.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid. Jeffries, p.58. Jeffries is referring specifically to the arguments of Amira Baraka on this latter point.

The unmoved pose Chi-Raq adopts is virtually indistinguishable from the way male gangsta rap stars depict themselves in countless rap music videos and through their lyrics in real life. Indeed, we first meet Chi-Raq as he raps at a battle at a drill-rap gig, and we soon understand that he is the head of a violent street gang. Lee highlights the contribution which the musical culture of gangsta rap, and these stars, make to perpetuating a particular type of hypermasculinity. And he further teases at the notion of performance and contrivance by his casting of actor Nick Cannon as Chi-Raq. As scholar Lawrence Brown points out, Cannon brings the personal cultural image of a “goody two shoes”, a “nice guy” to the casting, from his real life image as a performer/comedian/rap star – for instance with his comedy television sketch show, *Wild ‘N Out*.<sup>332</sup> This casting draws attention to the performative nature of masculinity inherent in being a ‘tough guy’, and that the gangsta rapper persona is performed in the same way that an actor can convincingly inhabit a role. This may have underlay the criticism Lee received from several Chicago drill rappers and their supporters, who angrily rejected *Chi-Raq* as “not authentic”, with several pointing to the casting of Nick Cannon as evidence.<sup>333</sup> Lee described how some of the criticism stated bluntly that Cannon couldn’t play the role because he wasn’t a real gangster, and hadn’t killed anybody. This in effect proves Lee’s points about the entrapment of a straitjacket of gangster pose, as such criticism was more concerned with the veneer of authenticity projected by the film, and Nick Cannon in particular, than the substance of the film’s critique.

Lee also suggests that the heteronormative, domineering masculinity, shown here and elsewhere, is both a cowardly and intensely lonely life. We almost never see Chi-Raq happy, even when surrounded by his fellow gang members who, given the mortally high stakes involved in protecting the reputation of the gang, one would expect form a solid brotherhood. As he sits in an abandoned parking lot in a typical scene, mixing alcohol and drugs, Chi-Raq cuts an isolated figure – as do all the gang members around. The sense of an individual’s humanity being closed off, even closed down, in such spaces, is stark. These urban lots are uncompromising, hard, concrete spaces, reflecting the circumscribed life chances and the unbending type of masculinity being distilled there. They contrast sharply with the female spaces such as Miss Helen’s house and particularly her garden. Though it also sits in a

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<sup>332</sup> Lawrence Brown, ‘Why We Need Spike Lee’s *Chi-Raq*’, *Abernathy*, 23 December 2015  
< <https://abernathymagazine.com/why-we-need-spike-lees-chi-raaq/>>

<sup>333</sup> See for example, a discussion between Chicago rappers Fredo Santana and Chief Keef, in reaction to the trailer for *Chi-Raq*, on YouTube channel Kollege Kidd:  
< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtkc-fBPVl>> 4 November 2015

concrete space under a flyover, she has cultivated a beautiful green space and has nurtured multiple plants. This is an expressionist device, the urban architecture emphasizes the wider points Lee makes about masculinity. While the women propagate life and connections between living things, the gang members propagate a constructed version of hypermasculinity which shuts down connections with others. It is in this closed-off psychic space, that the execution of a child like Tyshawn Lee can be understood to be mentally and emotionally sanctioned.

The straitjacket of this type of masculinity, characterized by machismo, is a limiting force perpetuated through the generations, suggests the film. Lee reserves some of his bitterest dialogue for the interactions of the older men, who should act as – and who believe themselves to be – community elders. In counterpoint to the female elders we meet, whose rhetoric focuses on their community and the future, Lee sets up the pompous Knights of the Euphrates, a club/lodge of mostly older African American Chicagoans, whose concern is mostly focused on preserving an anachronistic notion of men as the superior sex. Through this older generation of men, we're directed to consider how the cycle of a violently-tinged, heteronormative patriarchal masculinity is passed on, and can become a prescribed template for masculinity. Further, as a construction, this type of masculinity becomes both a refuge for the inadequacies and baser impulses of the patriarchy, and is shown to be intolerant of dissent. These men interpret the sex strike as abject insubordination to masculinity, and feel only affront at such an impediment to male access to sexual gratification – rather than any concern for the profound issues raised by the women. They only see the women in belligerent terms, as direct challengers to the 'natural' authority of their gender.

“At my age I thought my missus was just a pest, But Lord have mercy, she’s a sexual terrorist,” says the oldest member of the group, as the men gather at a grand lodge to consider the strike. The leader, Duke, is vehement in his fury. As the meeting concludes, he rouses his fellow ‘Knights’ with a call to arms: “We took those flags once, we can take ‘em again”. Notably at this point he swaps his Knight’s fez for a cowboy hat – a strong symbol of male mythologizing, and cries:<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> The name Duke here also suggests an archetype of masculinity, propagated by Hollywood – John Wayne, known as ‘The Duke’. The archetypal, ‘no nonsense’, ‘man’s man’ actor was the epitome of the cowboy mythology and, physically large and macho, a revered figure by a patriarchal society and film-going public. Spike Lee is known for his references to film history, so this fits well – and is emphasized by Duke’s flourishing swap of one hat for another.

Like the battles of the past, we shall come together to whoop some female ass  
Let us not stand for their flapping lips or that chronic nagging bullshit  
Are we mice or men?!

Such talk of conquering, the hints of violence and the vitriolic tone, point to a more explicitly misogynistic side of patriarchal hegemony, which develops as the film continues. At a later point, Duke and his men enter the besieged weapons store, each 'armoured' with bunches of keys for unlocking the women's chastity belts, thinking they have outsmarted Lysistrata (though once again, the men – the patriarchy – are led into a trap due to their own arrogance.) The men walk in with cries of:

"Bitches and hoes, come out to play!  
With our keys, we shall unlock the sacred brotherhood of male needs....

Take off those chastity belts and surrender the armoury.  
Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt."

With the rhetoric progressing into the sphere of sexual violation, the atmosphere turns even more toxic as the men are confronted by Lysistrata, backed by her comrades. Finally, when Duke learns that Lysistrata is an orphan, he retorts, "So you never had a pappy to school you on the female way. It takes a man to teach a heifer like you how to behave." In turn she challenges his virility, and the mood turns severe: "You trifling little Black bitch", he says, the rhyming couplets suspended.

Lysistrata slaps him fiercely in response, and goes on to rebuke the men, obsessed with their own sexual gratification while the women forgo theirs and take on the responsibility of protecting the entire community – including the men who perpetrate the violence:

"This ain't no joke... Dude, this is about life and death, about a community that's a wreck.

And you wanna sit here and talk about how women behave!

These men should be the community's guides but Lee shows that the patriarchal legacy of machismo, and its close relationship with misogyny, sex and violence, is regurgitated from generation to generation.

Lee points to this legacy of destructive masculinity most clearly in another scene, where Chi-Raq describes how he came to be a gangster. He reveals his mother needed to “turn a few rent tricks” when his father died in order to survive, and her pimp became his mentor, schooling him in how to become a badman, a feared street criminal. While on the one hand suggesting a troublesome blurring of sex and violence in hypermasculine men, Lee also looks at the vulnerability of such men who grew up in deeply impoverished and difficult circumstances. The action begins with Chi-Raq and a girl having very aggressive sex, Chi-Raq shouting “I’m killing that pussy”. When they talk afterwards, in what seems a potentially tender scene, he talks about his childhood. But what he relates is disturbing - walking in on his mother having sex with the pimp. The latter also gave him his first gun at just twelve, and rewarded him for cleaning his Cadillac with “his best, bottom ass bitch” at the same tender age. Chi-Raq then gets angry and pushes his companion away. Altogether the scene, the flashbacks and Chi-Raq’s reaction, suggest a psychologically damaged man, someone for whom exposure to brutality at a young age, and sexual abuse, have left in a perpetual state of dislocation with other human beings. It is a dislocation expressed in violence and misogyny, and it renders other children to face a similar fate. Lee specifically connects these dots through the film, and finishes the thread at the film’s conclusion, when we learn that Chi-Raq was Patti’s accidental drive-by killer. We also learn that his father Jemel had killed Miss Helen’s daughter in the same way years before. Jemel had confessed to Miss Helen in remorse, and had gone to prison for it – where he himself had been murdered.

It is important to note here that Lee does not engage with discourses around absent fathers/single-parent, female-led households which frequently characterize media commentary about crime - or indeed any problems experienced – in Black urban communities. As scholar S Craig Watkins points out, ever since the government published the Moynihan Report in 1965, a social and political narrative has persisted in the US which placed the blame for Black poverty on a ‘pathology of Blackness’ centred on the family. Or as Moynihan put it “the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family.”<sup>335</sup> Moynihan argued that the key expression of this was the “matriarchal structure of Black culture”, explains Watkins, which “weakened the ability of Black men to function as authority figures.”<sup>336</sup> Fixed in the [white] public imagination and overarching political narrative, this

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<sup>335</sup> S Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp.218 – 221. Quotes here are from the Moynihan Report, reproduced by Watkins, p.218.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, Watkins. Quotes are Watkins’ paraphrasing, p.219.

notion gave the government (and successive governments) license to play down the manifold real impediments to Black equality caused by a racist capitalist system, and the legacies of slavery. In his run up to the presidency, and at several other points, Obama also chided that absentee fathers were an issue that the Black community' needed to face up to (something which I discuss further in Chapter Four). *Chi-Raq* however, simply does not give these theories airtime – I posit an act of resistance, a refusal to follow the repetitive Hollywood narrative about absentee fathers, a cliché promoted by conservative forces in America. Lee goes further and complicates this notion. Chi-Raq's single-parent upbringing is not ignored, and is implied as a factor in his later violent life, but the path there is rather paved by poverty and an existing environment of violent masculinity (the pimp who becomes his mentor). Moreover, there are more positive characterizations of other single parent characters, and even those with no parents, which counterbalance Chi-Raq's problematic upbringing.

Through the exploration of both the Knights' and Chi-Raq's behaviour, Lee asks men to interrogate their own behaviour. He also reflects the work of scholars such as bell hooks, who have written at length about Black masculinity. In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* hooks encapsulates many of the themes in *Chi-Raq*, and ties the heteronormative patriarchal attitude of some men towards women, to the violence they act out in the wider community:

“Whatever the roots of Black male rage, it is sexist thinking and practice that teaches them that it is acceptable to express that rage violently. Black male abuse of Black females, both psychological and physical, is similarly present in Black male relationships with each other. Black-on-Black homicide is one of the leading causes of death in Black life.”<sup>337</sup>

Hooks here is referring to the fact that the brutality of the slavery system had a generative effect of violence within future generations.<sup>338</sup> As discussed earlier, Lee paints a picture of men who, mistaking dominance for control, fail to realise they have already relinquished control to dominant political forces which keep people of colour from claiming the fullness of their potential. They have also lost control to a constructed masculinity based on a violent patriarchy, which damages their communities, and traps them in cycle of machismo. This is

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<sup>337</sup> bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, New York: Routledge 2004, p.58

<sup>338</sup> For a fuller discussion, see: Anthony E. O. King, 'Understanding Violence among Young African American Males: An Afrocentric Perspective', *Journal of Black Studies*, 28.1 (1997), 79–96.

expressed through Lysistrata's rebuke to the male elders: "We're trying to free these slaves, slaves to the madness, slaves to this violence."

Such escape – redemption – is possible, argues Lee. Eventually the gang members on all sides re-examine their impulse for violence and where it has led them. Towards the film's end, both gang leaders meet their respective foot soldiers. Cyclops initially berates his gang: "What about your name in the game?" says an exasperated Cyclops. "Our *name* has got us six-feet deep" replies his friend.

Finally Lysistrata agrees to a "sex match" with Chi-Raq.<sup>339</sup> Whoever reaches orgasm first will be the victor, and accede to the other's demands – or as Chi-Raq notably puts it, "the first one to surrender, loses... and you make a public statement apologizing to all men." His assumption that Lysistrata will be the loser in the contest, and that she will publicly abjure the strong position she took – but particularly his demand that she humiliate herself with apologizing, characterizes the patriarchal dominating position. If Chi-Raq 'loses', he and all the gang members are asked to make a change in their lives. But if the women lose, they must not only alter their course of action, but submit, be subjugate, be conquered.

Importantly, we see that Chi-Raq is prompted to issue this challenge by the city officials; it is a joint enterprise with the male figures of authority. He is physically taken to Lysistrata, accompanied on all sides by soldiers holding guns, and directly flanked by the city's police commissioner (appointed by the mayor), and the chief of police. In this moment, Lee expresses the underlying points he made in the prelude about the legacy and ongoing influence of American history and politics. The violence that underlies the historical American project (the soldiers); the political expression of American nationhood (the commissioner), and the institutions which prop up its hegemony (chief of police) – all come together in a patriarchal move to quell dissent and any threat to their hegemonic authority. Chi-Raq may not consider himself to be a tool of this system. But Lee is arguing that, by becoming a violent gang member, he both illustrates how he is nevertheless a product, and further an agent, of it.

Finally the 'match' sees Chi-Raq and Lysistrata take their places on a giant, luxurious bed, in the middle of the armoury auditorium. Set up like a boxing match, the spotlight focuses on the 'ring', and we see that spectators are watching live from home. But it turns out that Lysistrata

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<sup>339</sup> This scene is particularly problematic, taking place in the middle of the armoury auditorium, on a huge bed that resembles a boxing ring. As well as conjuring tropes of manipulative women and transactional intimacy, as an uncritical dramatic device it sits uneasily with the work Lee has done to highlight the dangers of a violent patriarchal approach to sex and power.

has tricked Chi-Raq; just as he thinks he is winning the contest, a group of Trojans and Spartans appear, led by Cyclops. They are there to renounce the gang warfare, and encourages a shocked Chi-Raq to do the same, as they all throw their guns on the bed. Symbolically hate has surrendered to love. This is Lee's resistant, activist cinema at its most explicit: the violent and domineering form of masculinity demanded as necessary by a hypermasculine gang culture has collapsed, in favour of the embrace of a masculinity based on equality and love.

When Chi-Raq finally agrees to peace, Lysistrata remarks that he is no longer Chi-Raq, but Demetrius, his birth name. In this moment Lee sums up and re-emphasizes the essential point he has been striving to make. Lee named his film after the constructed portmanteau Chi-Raq, which encapsulates the violence, identity-anxiety and historical socio-political pressures of the South Side of Chicago. But giving his major male character the same name renders the film's title ambiguous; the same elements encapsulated by the portmanteau also apply to Chi-Raq the man. In this light, the film's exploration of masculinity becomes even more important. Despite the political and community angst directed at Lee for making a film titled 'Chi-Raq', his focus was less about depicting the city than exploring contemporary masculinity, particularly for those men who have become accustomed to violent gang culture as a prop for their identity.<sup>340</sup>

Again Lee reflects the writing of bell hooks, who argues that men opting for love over violence in this way, is a radical form of resistance:

"The real agency and power of Black liberation struggles was felt when Black male leaders dared to turn away from primitive models of patriarchal violence and warfare towards a politics of cultural transformation rooted in love... This is the masculinity Black males must emulate if they are to survive whole."<sup>341</sup>

Hooks' argument about the transformative power of love, and that the more potent [masculine] strength comes from love rather than war, is at the heart of Lee's messaging in *Chi-Raq*. The film seeks to intervene in larger discourses about masculinity and gun culture, as well as seeking to, as does hooks, speak directly to Black men in violent communities. These

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<sup>340</sup> The Chicago mayor, Rahm Emanuel, reflected wider opinion in his fear that the title of the film would hurt the city's reputation and tourism, and asked Lee to change it.

<sup>341</sup> bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, New York: Routledge 2004, p.62.

points about the redemptive and radical possibilities of Black men embracing love over social constructions of masculinity is also a key focus for Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*.

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### ***Moonlight in a Lineage of Black Queer Art***

Bell hooks' analysis and argument about embracing love as both a radical and redemptive pathway for Black men, was also suggested by the Black intellectual and writer James Baldwin (discussed in more depth below).<sup>342</sup> Baldwin, a fierce public commentator on racism in American white supremacy, particularly its effects in America, was also a queer man, who stood somewhat at the margins of Black society. Publishing a new book on Baldwin in 2020, scholar Eddie Glaude Jr. remarked that there had been resurgence of interest in James Baldwin in popular culture in the previous few years. Glaude connects the renewed focus on Baldwin to the cultural currents which also made Black Lives Matter so popular. Its flatter structure which resisted a "pulpit focus" suggested a "queer model", said Glaude, that people seemed to want to embrace. In addition, there was Baldwin's own refusal to be othered at the margins: "Here you have this fragile queer black man who spoke boldly and truthfully to the times, to the circumstances of black folk, and circumstances of all Americans, actually." All of these elements "queers American politics," said Glaude.<sup>343</sup>

These observations suggest a kind of queered connective tissue – a thirst for new, off-centre approaches to both politics and culture in the Obama years, embraced and nurtured by those often at the margins of social and political power. I posit this is a radicalism likely, at least in part, due to Obama's victory – not because his politics are radical, but because the symbolism of his victory suggested the possibilities of the subversion of racial hierarchies, and thus the de-centring of many other normative ideas and ideals. Such a de-centring allows for the potential for many alternative perspectives – on politics, activism, cultural production and identity – to flourish. This is one of the key legacies of the Obama years, and has had a radical, queering impact, as Glaude observed, on American politics. It is this arena, I posit, which

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<sup>342</sup> See: Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson, 'Beneath the Black Aesthetic: James Baldwin's Primer of Black American Masculinity', *African American Review*, 32.2 (1998), 247–61.

<sup>343</sup> Eddie Glaude was discussing his new book, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America And Its Urgent Lessons For Our Own* (New York: PenguinRandomHouse, 2020).

formed the context for the success of *Moonlight*, a 'queer film' thematically, but also in its queering of mainstream cinema. *Moonlight* also provoked discourses about masculinity, and queer Black masculinity in the wider audience – the latter in particular heretofore a highly marginalized identity, as I shall discuss below.

In Chapters One and Two I examined both the long tradition of the arts as resistance for Black artists, as well as the importance of historical and cultural memory for Black artists. To understand the radical nature of *Moonlight*, and its interrogation of Black masculinity in the Obama years, it is important to understand the wider context of radical Black queer artist-activism.

The AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, which rapidly threw particularly queer male communities into crisis, provoked much activism from a community who were already cast to the margins of society. For Black gay poet and activist Joseph Beam, it led him to defiantly declare: "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties."<sup>344</sup> The AIDS crisis wasn't the only prompt for Beam's sense of a community under attack however. Beam had also noticed that Black gay writing was almost absent in gay bookshops (important sites for the gay community during the conservative Reagan years) – something which reinforced existing feelings of Black gay men's exclusion or at least distance, from the more prominent white, gay, male community. In an act of resistance to such marginalisation, Beam insisted that the voices of gay Black men be heard and created an anthology of work by Black gay male writers, *In the Life*. This included his own essay 'Brother to Brother', where he coined his rallying cry about Black, gay love as an act of resistance. Together with other queer Black male artists, writers and activists, such as Essex Hemphill and filmmaker/academic Marlon Riggs, Beam protested that his community had found itself confined to an intersection of triply marginalized groups - struggling for acceptance in the culture of the predominantly white, gay male community who ignored the needs of people of colour or were racist towards them; while also facing rejection from the primary milieu of the predominantly heterosexual, Black communities in which they were raised.<sup>345</sup> Overarching these rejections, lay the pervasive racism against Black people in American life and culture.

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<sup>344</sup> Joseph Beam, 'Brother to Brother', in *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, ed. by Joseph Beam (New York: Alyson Publications, 1986).

<sup>345</sup> See Beam. This is discussed in several sources, for example journalist Liz Highleyman expands on this in her profile 'Who was Joseph Beam?' for the *Seattle Gay News*, [http://www.sgn.org/sgnnews34\\_51/mobile/page30.cfm](http://www.sgn.org/sgnnews34_51/mobile/page30.cfm)

For an example of more recent scholarship on the marginalization of gay men of colour within the wider gay community, see the following article published the year before Obama was elected:

Beam's project to publicize the work of authors was itself an act of resistance, at once provocation and celebration, and it precisely echoes the mechanism of resistance outlined by James Baldwin. As described in Chapter Two, decades earlier Baldwin had explained that for marginalized peoples, to insist on one's own narrative, one's own authorship of history, one which contradicts the erased or corrupted historical narrative pervasive in surrounding society – in short, to insist on one's identity – is itself a threat to the political and social power structures which determine and control a population.<sup>346</sup> In the moment of Baldwin's speech, he was discussing race and imperialism. But as a Black, queer man himself, his comments held equally true for society's suppression of queer people of colour - a marginalized group at the bottom of a hierarchy of other, less marginalized groups.

Tarrell Alvin McCraney, also a highly acclaimed Black, queer playwright, and activist of the twenty-first century, can be seen in a lineage of both of these figures. Like these activist-writers before him, he writes a great deal of his own experiences into his work – most obviously in the heavily autobiographical *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, the play on which the film *Moonlight* is based.<sup>347</sup> McCraney has discussed the influence of these artists on his work.<sup>348</sup> For example, he has described calling on – or perhaps more accurately, conjuring – the memory of three poems/verses to tackle feelings of self-doubt, or “imposterphobia”.<sup>349</sup> One of these is a poem by Essex Hemphill, about his friend Beam, who died of an AIDS related illness a few years after publishing *In the Life*.<sup>350</sup> It is noticeable that McCraney should call on his artistic ancestors in this way. Firstly, as we saw in Chapter Two, it is another example of a

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Chong-suk Han, 'They Don't Want to Cruise Your Type: Gay Men of Colour and the Racial Politics of Exclusion', *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation, and Culture*, 13.1 (2007), pp.51-67.

<sup>346</sup> See Baldwin's *N\_\_\_\_\_*, dir. by Horace Ové (1969), film recording, *YouTube* (22 January 2014), < <https://youtu.be/hnljXmfTSYg> > [accessed 14 November 2019]

<sup>347</sup> The first two 'acts' in *Moonlight* are based on McCraney's existing play. The third, in which the central character Chiron grows up to be a drug dealer, was introduced by director Barry Jenkins.

<sup>348</sup> Patrick Healy, 'What "Angels in America" Meant to Them, and to You', *ArtsBeat*, 2010 <<https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/25/what-angels-in-america-meant-to-them-and-to-you/>> [accessed 1 November 2019].

<sup>349</sup> Tarell Alvin McCraney, 'Tarell Alvin McCraney : How to Endure Imposterphobia', *Broadway.com*, 30 October 2007 < <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/6255/tarell-alvin-mccraney-how-to-endure-imposterphobia/> > < <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/6255/tarell-alvin-mccraney-how-to-endure-imposterphobia/> > [accessed 8 November 2019].

<sup>350</sup> Darius Bost, 'Loneliness: Black Gay Longing in the Work of Essex Hemphill', *Criticism*, 59.3 (2017) (pp.353-374).

Black artist using cultural memory to deal with a situation in the present. But also, the poem – *When My Brother Fell* – characterizes the artistic enterprise of the 80s/90s writer-activists, sometimes referred to as the Black Gay Arts Movement, as a battle:

“When my Brother fell,  
I picked up his weapons,  
...  
He had fallen  
And the passing ceremonies  
Marking his death  
Did not stop the war.”<sup>351</sup>

*Moonlight* may not immediately seem like a protest film in the provocative tradition of the performance poets such as Hemphill, who saw themselves as the inheritors of the Black Arts Movement, and its connectedness with the spirit of the Black Panthers. Nevertheless McCraney’s insistence on making a Black, gay man the subject and object of his own narrative, and Barry Jenkins – as scriptwriter and director – deciding to keep him as the centre of a film backed by a major studio, is directly in a line with these artists.<sup>352</sup> McCraney is well aware of Beam’s conception of the revolutionary nature of queer Black male love, often repeating his declaration “Black men loving Black men is a revolutionary act.”<sup>353</sup> Removing Beam’s temporal reference to the 80s, McCraney elevates the declaration to an eternal mantra for Black, queer, male artists.<sup>354</sup>

All of these artists owe a debt to James Baldwin, someone for whom queerness and civil rights activism were intrinsically bound. Although largely absent from his social commentary and essays, his primary civil rights activism, Baldwin was a writer for whom being queer was an integral driver in his demand for justice for African Americans and all those oppressed by an

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<sup>351</sup> See above, McCraney.

<sup>352</sup> Jenkins’ film was backed at an early stage by Plan B Entertainment.

<sup>353</sup> See for example, Tarell Alvin McCraney, ‘Tarell Alvin McCraney Celebrates *Paris is Burning*’, *Medium*, 15 August 2017. < <https://medium.com/@bbcradiofour/tarell-alvin-mccraney-celebrates-paris-is-burning-62095cccb97d>>.

<sup>354</sup> It is worth noting that the phrase takes on new amendments, or digressions, when repeated by different voices in Black activism. For example, at the Harlem premiere of Jenkins’ next film in 2018, an adaptation of Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin’s niece Aisha Karefa-Smart was quoted as saying “The act of loving while Black is a revolutionary act” (Hannah Giorgis, ‘If Beale Street Could Talk and the Urgency of Black Love’, *The Atlantic*, 25 December 2018).

imperialist hegemony (even if he felt uncomfortable at terminology such as 'gay', or being part of the 'gay world').<sup>355</sup> He described this in an interview with *The Village Voice* in 1984:

“The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality.”<sup>356</sup>

Despite the absence from his non-fiction works, Baldwin nevertheless explored queerness and the lives of men loving men in his fictional work. He did so during a historical period when queerness was almost completely taboo in mainstream white society and Black America, writing *Giovanni's Room* as early as 1956, a story about men falling in love with, and having sex with, other men. Baldwin's publishers refused to support the novel, concerned his burgeoning career would be ruined. For Baldwin however, engaging with this essential truth about his life and sexual orientation was non-negotiable, and he found a publisher in England instead.<sup>357</sup> In his later *Village Voice*, he acknowledges that publishing the work was “enormously risky”, but adds “the alternative was worse... If I hadn't written that book I would probably have had to stop writing altogether.”<sup>358</sup>

For a young Black man living in a racist America, from a background of severe poverty, trying to make a successful career through writing, his refusal to mask homosexual themes in his work in the face of a nation and readership hostile to queer people, was a profound act of resistance, given the disadvantages he faced. I further posit that this and all of Baldwin's work has contributed a primer for Black, gay, male art-activism which followed. As I described at the beginning of this section, Baldwin's work and activist approach has also had renewed influence on activist and artists of the Obama years more generally. For Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight's* director, Baldwin's influence was profound.

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<sup>355</sup> See Shin and Judson, for discussions on Baldwin's work and identity (as above).

Baldwin discussed discomfort with such identity terminology in a 1984 interview: Richard Goldstein, ' "Go the Way Your Blood Beats": An Interview with James Baldwin', *The Village Voice*, 26 June 1984. Reprinted in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2014), pp.55-74 (pp.59-60).

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, Goldstein, p.64.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

## ***Moonlight*, hypermasculinity, and love as engine of resistance**

Jenkins has described how he feels deeply indebted to James Baldwin, and the intellectual/spiritual/emotional awakening he gained from reading his work – describing Baldwin as his “personal school of life” and frequently discussing this influence in interviews.<sup>359</sup> Jenkins’ first contact with the author was at university, reading *Giovanni’s Room* and *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin’s non-fiction work in epistolary form, about the shattering effects of racism in America, and also about religion.<sup>360</sup> He describes this introduction to Baldwin in almost damascene terms, telling one interviewer that reading *Giovanni’s Room* was “shocking...insane...it opened up my world view”. As a result he set out to learn all about the writer, and came to realise “that this guy came from the same place I did. This is how big my voice can be. Or how wide-ranging my experience can be.”<sup>361</sup> Jenkins, like McCraney, grew up in the impoverished communities outside Miami where *Moonlight* is located; indeed their experiences were similar, both with mothers addicted to drugs. Jenkins’ realisation shows that, though reading Baldwin, he came to understand that as a fellow African American man from a poor background, he need not be boxed in by circumstance. He could feel liberated to use and explore profound themes through his filmmaking, and expect to be heard. Inspired by Baldwin, he could be a Black artist making the work he wanted to make, and at the same time *resist*.

The inspiration Jenkins takes from Baldwin is vital to the understanding the director’s work. Baldwin’s act of resistance in publishing *Giovanni’s Room*, and throughout his work, is something Jenkins channels in *Moonlight* and elsewhere. In the same interview discussing Baldwin, the director describes how, when promoting the film, he suddenly understood that in *Moonlight* he had “referenced the first two Baldwin books [he] had ever read”. With this comment Jenkins implicitly acknowledges that he had created a film which privileges (in fact, centres) the traditionally taboo subject of men loving men, particularly the rarely depicted story of Black men loving Black men. At the same time, he understood he had made a film commenting on how the entire political, social and economic structure of America works

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<sup>359</sup> Eliza Berman, ‘Barry Jenkins Wants you to Read James Baldwin’, *Time* [online], 6 December 2018. <<https://time.com/5472338/barry-jenkins-james-baldwin/>> [accessed 4 November 2019] (para 1 of 31).

<sup>360</sup> David Jenkins, ‘Barry Jenkins: People of colour have been looking into the eyes of white people forever’, *Little White Lies*, 5 February 2019. <<https://lwlies.com/interviews/barry-jenkins-if-beale-street-could-talk/>> [accessed 28 October 2019]

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, Jenkins.

against poor communities of colour trying to rise out of poverty. And further, how that denial and oppression can affect social hierarchies and individual freedoms within such communities. That is, the binding forces of economic and social degradation are reflected in prescribed strictures on individual behaviour, in social norms, and in social hierarchies.

The central protagonist in *Moonlight* is Chiron, a character who we follow over three Acts. In the first, we are introduced to him as a small child, nicknamed 'Little' due to his size. The second follows him in high school, and during his first and only sexual encounter with another boy at school – an acquaintance/friend called Kevin. The final act sees Chiron as a grown man, now a drug dealer ('trapper'), living in Atlanta.

Chiron grows up in an almost exclusively Black, poor neighbourhood – Liberty City, a housing estate on the edge of Miami. He is vilified in this community, identified as 'different' or gay, at a young age. One of the first scenes in the film sees Little being chased by a group of other boys, shouting "Get his gay ass", and towards the end of act one we witness his mother (Paula) mocking her child's 'difference' as she argues with Juan, the 'trapper' from whom she gets her drugs. Juan has befriended the lonely and vulnerable Little, and together with his girlfriend Teresa, effectively provides him with a surrogate father figure/parents. The final scene in Act One takes place the morning after Juan's encounter with Paula where, in a heart-wrenching scene, Little leaves his home and seeks refuge at Juan and Teresa's house. Little's diminutive size and vulnerability are stressed in the mise-en-scene, as he sits at the dining table dwarfed by the adult figures of Juan and Teresa, and asks: "What's a faggot... Am I a faggot?". The audience is given to understand that the child has heard the insulting, homophobic term from a vitriolic, abusive Paula, the night before – likely not for the first time.

In Act Two, we watch a teenage Chiron mercilessly tormented and harassed by a group of other boys led by his classmate Terrel, a brutal bully, someone evidently keen to promote his domineering and violent performance masculinity at all times. It is established from the start of this Act that Chiron is exploring his sexuality, at least internally. The opening shot of the Act lingers on the lower half of a young man's face; then suddenly we cut to Chiron, looking. The scene is a school classroom, and we realize we have just been following Chiron's gaze – the subject of which was shown in a visceral close-up shot, focusing on the young man's lips, and lump in his throat as he swallowed. With the cut to Chiron, we momentarily see him lick his lips, possibly lost in desire. His thoughts are interrupted as the teacher, noticing his student is distracted, cuts through Chiron's visual preoccupation with the other student, with an auditory shock – a question. Chiron is snapped away from his reverie and back to the menacing

environment of the classroom, as the teacher's call to focus is immediately followed with threatening mocking from the bully Terrel, who sits nearby. Terrel then ridicules Chiron in front of the class, emasculating him with insulting homophobic tropes – "Yo that N\_\_\_\_\_ just forgot to change his tampon...he just having woman problems today."

The scene illustrates very well what scholar E Patrick Johnson calls the imperialism of heteronormativity.<sup>362</sup> Discussing male Black comedians of the 1980s and 90s, most famously Eddie Murphy, a hugely successful Black star who was also known for homophobic tirades in his comedy routines,<sup>363</sup> Johnson discusses how homophobic humour serves not just to 'other' Black gay men, but to render them as inauthentic, and outside the shared community of Black identity. Johnson writes:

"humor is based on a particular kind of cultural logic that sustains heteronormative constructions of maleness and Blackness – constructions that exclude Black gay men in particular from the boundaries of authentic Blackness and maleness."<sup>364</sup>

At this moment in the classroom, Johnson's description of the use of humour to position Black gay men as located outside the parameters of authentic Blackness, is clearly on show. With Terrel's mocking jibe, delivered in front of fellow students – much like a stand-up routine in front of a crowd – he censures the very notion of queer Black masculinity, and emphasizes that it is not permitted a place in the school, or in wider society. In this heteronormative hegemony, it cannot be tolerated as having a legitimate position in, specifically here, an African American masculinist culture.

Terrel's tirade finishes with an explicit threat – "I'll fuck you up". An abrupt change of gear from uneasy ridicule to sudden menace, the audience is meant to feel the force of it along with its target Chiron. We are positioned watching a point of view (POV) shot, as Terrel stares out from the cinema screen directly at us/Chiron, his head and shoulders filling the frame. Although Terrel is sent out of the room as punishment for his threat, the repudiation and suppression of Black queerness remain present in the classroom space. Smiles linger on the

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<sup>362</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, 'The Specter of the Black Fag: Parody, Blackness, and Hetero/Homosexual B(r)Others', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45.2–4 (2003), 217–34.

<sup>363</sup> Eddie Murphy mostly dominated as the representative Black male figure on Hollywood screens during the 1980s and 90s, appearing in films and filmed versions of his stand-up routines – such as *Delirious* (1983) *Raw* (1987).

<sup>364</sup> *ibid.* Johnson, p.233.

faces of the girls and other students, who had laughed at Terrel's 'routine', and now turn to look at the object of their shared joke. Chiron is hemmed in by the judgement of the hegemonic forces around him; physically he attempts to shrink into a smaller space, sinking lower in the chair and looking around furtively, much like an animal hiding from predators. Suddenly his world has been destabilized; the ever-present threat has resurfaced, he is reminded there is little safe space to be found around his peers.

Terrel's hostility here and elsewhere, particularly in a later scene where he orchestrates Chiron's violent beating, illustrates – and interrogates – the imperialist heteronormative hegemony at work in regulating African American hierarchies, social structures, and individual behaviours. Jenkins wants us to understand that the classroom and the school is a representational space for wider society, and as a queer Black male, this public arena is where Chiron is most under threat. Through his behaviour Terrel effectively instructs his victim that not only is he Othered, but that he is 'Outer-ed' – repelled outwards, outside the parameters of acceptable African American community.

In this paradigm, authenticity as a Black man resides only in the 'Terrel-model', here a physically strong male figure willing to fortify the accepted masculinist hierarchies against the threat of queerness, and one who sees his role also to police the behaviour of the community's subjects. Notably Terrel plays to a crowd not just of his male friends but also to the girls in the class, who visibly laugh and snigger at his jokes. This dynamic bolsters the heteronormative imperialism at play here, which in turn feeds into reinforcing 'acceptable' hierarchies and behaviours. On the criterion of sexual orientation and by extension, on the criterion of 'authentic' male Blackness/Black maleness, the social structure which is brought down upon Chiron at this moment, denies his claim to an equal place amongst his peers, or African American society.

But the performative nature of Terrel's bullying, here and elsewhere in the film, calls into question the very authenticity he tries so hard to accentuate. Terrel never approaches Chiron alone, for instance; he is always 'playing to a crowd', to an audience. And his perpetual need to dominate over the wider group and other men in particular, throughout Act Two, suggests a deep anxiety over his own sense of authenticity and position in the societal hierarchy. In fact, Chiron's mere act of being Other is what appears to threaten Terrel; he has no evidence that Chiron is gay, which suggests how fundamentally unstable a masculinist hierarchy feels itself to be.

While Terrel and his acolytes are at the more extreme end of the heteronormative spectrum, the predilection for male performance is reinforced in scenes throughout Acts Two and Three, Chiron's teenage and adult years – mirroring the increasing importance of performance masculinity for boys as they grow into men. In Act Two, we meet a now-teenage Kevin, apparently Chiron's only friend/acquaintance at school. In one scene, while Chiron hides from the bullies, Kevin regales him with stories of his sexual exploits with a girl, specifically reciting a tale of how the girl begged him for sex, as they became intimate under cover of a school stairwell. Caught by one of the teachers, Kevin now wears as a metaphorical badge of honour the fact that has been given detention for his behaviour. Chiron responds with a mixture of vague embarrassment and evident scepticism about the story – again putting him outside accepted codes of the heteronormative paradigm of teenage masculinity which is expected of him in this scenario. In this scene Jharrel Jerome, who plays the teenage Kevin, embodies those codes with a bragging, misogyny-laced monologue:

Kevin: This chick all like, 'hit that shit Kevin, hit it with that big dick'. What's she gotta compliment a N\_\_\_\_\_ for?... So I started banging her back out, dog, I'm talkin' I'm banging her back out [elongates his delivery of line and half-demonstrates for emphasis]. She wanna make all this fuckin noise though.<sup>365</sup>

Kevin neatly illustrates here the behaviours which scholar Ken Corbett describes as a "central boyhood trope": "In the spirit of 'boys will be boys', bravado, aggressive protest, and illusory phallic narcissism have become defining, normative attributes of masculinity."<sup>366</sup> But at the same time the actor expertly emphasizes, through his exaggerated demeanour and also his reliance on Chiron as captive audience, the performative nature of this expression of masculinity. In this case the performance is multi-layered since, while it signifies heterosexual normativity and codifies his secured place in the hegemonic brotherhood, at the same time there is a flirtatious tone in Kevin's attitude towards Chiron. Kevin's apparent curiosity about Chiron which we note baffles the quiet and reserved teenager, his nicknaming Chiron 'Black' (we later find out Kevin alone has coined and uses this name), and some gentle teasing in the conversation, all point to another level of communication taking place. In this light, Kevin's insistence on talking about sex, his highlighting aspects of the sexual encounter which

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<sup>365</sup> Together with the fact that the "chick" remains anonymous and is only described in objectified terms, Kevin notably also uses the word "trick", aka 'prostitute', to refer to her, establishing the misogynistic attitude which runs hand in hand with the patriarchal, heteronormative hegemony he is part of.

<sup>366</sup> Ken Corbett, 'Faggot = Loser', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 2(1), 2001, p.6.

emphasize his prowess, and his keenness for Chiron to appreciate his performance here, signify a coded effort to arouse sexual interest from Chiron. This is confirmed in an important scene towards the end of Act Two when, alone together on the beach at night, Kevin instigates a sexual encounter with Chiron. While it is Chiron's first such experience, it is clear that this is not the case for Kevin.

Later, at the end of Act Two, the day after the sexual encounter between the teenagers, Jenkins and McCraney crystalize their commentary on how a society predicated on a patriarchal, heteronormative hegemony demands an agility of identity-performance from men in the ways we have observed, one that can be hugely destructive.<sup>367</sup> Terrel corners Kevin in the lunch hall, and, in another example of a codified conversation, Kevin is coerced to take part in a violent 'game', where he will have to punch whoever Terrel picks to be the unfortunate victim.

When examining violence within African American communities, Anthony King and other critics point to overarching American culture, which is imbued with the national history of (and predilection for) violence, together with the manifold horrors of slavery; as well as the ongoing legacies of injustice – economic, social and political – of that historical bondage which still ravage the lives of many Black people (all of which I discuss in Chapter Four).<sup>368</sup> *Moonlight* also looks at the stultifying effects of patriarchal, masculinist, hetero-macho systems of regulation in society, and here African American society, as responsible for ongoing patterns of violence – both physical and mental. Act Two and the scenes I have referred to here, illustrate that these regulatory systems force men into Russian doll-like gymnastics, alternately expressing, experiencing, or concealing their true selves, and it is clear that this is especially the case for men for whom that self is queer. Kevin keeps his queerness 'on the down low'.<sup>369</sup> As we have seen, he drapes it in heterosexual bravado to reinforce the impression that he is not queer. He understands the imperative necessary for such a cloak, if he is to have a place in the heteronormative hierarchy – indeed, to have a functioning place in heteronormative society. Similarly, and dextrously, he reads and responds instinctively to Terrel's pressure to enact a

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<sup>367</sup> Jenkins adapted McCraney's unpublished play manuscript, but noticeably Jenkins has the sole writing credit on the film – suggesting he had the predominant hand in dialogue and realization. However that was closely based on McCraney's story – hence I give them both credit here.

<sup>368</sup> Anthony E O King, 'Understanding Violence Among Young African American Males: An Afrocentric Perspective', *Journal of Black Studies*, 28 (1), September 1997, pp.79-96.

<sup>369</sup> The phrase 'on the down low' is used to refer to hiding a fact, opinion or activity that you do not want others to know. It is specifically used in African American queer culture to refer to queer men who keep their homosexuality secret in heterosexual environments.

violent ritual of punching and beating other teenage boys, understanding the implicit threat in what appears to be Terrel's suggestion/invitation: refusal will result in Kevin himself becoming the target. When the appointed time arrives, it turns out that Chiron is to be the aim of Terrel's intended assault – an assault which progresses from Kevin's punch to a sustained beating from Terrel and his cronies. To emphasize that this is the ultimate expression of performance masculinity, the camera-work illustrates the spectatorship of the crowd, standing in a circle around the protagonists as if this is an expected ritual which it is their role to witness. It is unclear, but possible, that Terrel singles out Kevin to initiate this particular assault because he understands that there is a connection between them. If this is the case then, in an extra-cruel blow towards Chiron, Terrel wants him to know that he has cut off the possibility of him having any allies at all within the heteronormative system which he, the macho teenager, controls.

As the assault begins Kevin tries to get his friend to stay on the ground after the first couple of punches. It is his effort to try and shorten the beating – a beating accompanied by the same soundtrack of voices as Little experienced at the beginning of Act One when, trying to escape childhood bullies, he ran to take refuge in abandoned drug dens. Terrel shouts, for instance, "If he get up, knock his faggot ass back down." As this attack takes place soon after the sexual encounter on the beach, Kevin's betrayal is particularly raw and deep. Chiron seems to dissociate from his physical pain - silently and repeatedly getting up to stare defiantly back at Kevin after each punch, despite this resulting in the bullies extending their assault – something which Kevin desperately tries to curtail by telling him to "stay down" – literally meant, but a metaphor for the wider imperative to keep his queerness hidden, 'on the down low'.

This sequence of scenes at the end of Act Two form a rite of passage for Chiron. After becoming a victim in this way, he later goes home and bathes his face in a sink of cold water - water signaling a 'passage' via which the young Black man becomes something new. Here it signifies his induction into the heteronormative structure he has so far skirted the edges of. The small window which allowed Chiron to experience and explore his true, queer self, the intimacy he shared with Kevin on the beach, is slammed shut. Instead he embraces a system which requires a violent performance masculinity as the price of inclusion – and the price of safety.

The next time we see Chiron he has returned to the school, the site of the assault. The heretofore quiet, nervous Chiron strides noisily and forcefully through the school, loudly throwing doors wide open as he walks to his classroom, where the lesson is already underway.

Picking up a chair, he walks straight to Terrel and beats him with it to a semi-conscious state. Given the importance of the classroom site as we saw earlier, it is logical that this is the space in which Jenkins has him embrace violence, and put on a cloak of acceptable masculinity in full view of the society he's surrounded by. He even uses a school chair as his weapon, a specific choice mirroring the weaponization of the school-society-heteronormative hegemony against him, as a queer Black man. And just like his own beating earlier, orchestrated to take place in front of a crowd, Chiron chooses a moment when there will be a ready audience of students to watch his performance in beating Terrel – stressing the performative nature of the violence, and the degree to which this 'approved masculinity' is acted out. This is emphatically (but subtly) emphasized in the final scene, when Chiron is taken away by police from the school entrance, while a disturbed Kevin watches, hovering near the doors. As Chiron waits in the police car for the officers to drive him away, he locks eyes with Kevin, and puts his lips together, in a just-perceptible kiss to his shocked friend – as if to take a bow at the end of a play.

In the final Act of the film, we meet an adult Chiron – tall and hugely muscly, he seems to work out continually, even in the middle of the night when he can't sleep. We discover he has become a drug dealer, entering a violent world where his physical presence and prowess are his perpetual costume/armour. His entire being is now, in effect, a performance of an ultra-masculinity, to signify his central place in the very hegemonic structure he had eschewed as a boy. This Chiron, appropriately, wears 'fronts' – gold caps on his teeth which can be taken on or off. And he has become a trapper, the term for a drug dealer – but here it functions also as a play on words. This Chiron has donned the mantle of hyper-heteronormative machismo: we later learn that he has never had another homosexual experience since Kevin, he jokes with his street dealer about girls, and he uses a gun. His true, queer self, is locked away – *trapped* – within this persona.

Jenkins' and McCraney's purpose is to question ingrained tropes of what constitutes acceptable masculinity in Black society. But also to show that these are inherently unstable, predicated as they are on an anxiety over Black male identity, given the context a larger destabilizing, racist system. Considering the model for this hypermasculine trope, several scholars point to the late 1960s Black nationalist movement as the progenitor for the kind of reactive, masculinist, heteronormative hegemony which repudiates Black male queerness, and which is unpicked and critiqued in *Moonlight*. Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, for

instance, was famous for his “vicious and repeated attacks on women and gay men”.<sup>370</sup> In his seminal collection of writings *Soul on Ice*, for example, Cleaver strongly rejects the notion of Black homosexuality and homosexuals as compatible with Black male identity, and further, sees queerness as a betrayal.<sup>371</sup> He singled out James Baldwin and Baldwin’s representation as a queer Black man for particular fury, relating his queerness to “the resurrected old world, in which Black men were lynched, their manhood castrated.”<sup>372</sup>

Scholars E Patrick Johnson and Philip Brian Harper also discuss the importance of late 1960s Black nationalism, for soldering negative attitudes towards Black homosexuals in mainstream African American culture, and for designating queer Black men as ‘inauthentic’. The prominent Black Arts Movement writer and performer Imamu Amiri Baraka “was no less virulently homophobic and sexist than Eldridge Cleaver” writes Johnson, seeing Black gay men “as the penultimate embodiment and site of political capitulation and anti-Black sentiment”.<sup>373</sup> Harper also highlights Baraka’s repudiation of Black queer identity, drawn as incompatible with ‘true Blackness’ in Baraka’s influential conception of Black identity, saying “the rhetoric of his poetry, fiction and non-fiction inheres masculinity and heterosexuality to authentic Blackness in troubling ways.” “Insufficient racial identification”, writes Harper, “...[is] figured specifically in terms of a failed manhood for which homosexuality, as always, was a primary signifier.”<sup>374</sup>

Scholars Shin and Judson also credit the 1960s as a point of crystallization for aggressively heteronormative and patriarchal role models for Black men, but they further point to a longer American history of conceptualizing, or perhaps more accurately fetishizing, Black manhood:

“A legacy of the antebellum South, celebrated by 1920s primitivism and consumer culture, this cultural mythology was perpetuated in the 1960s by the radical Black left and white liberals like [Norman] Mailer... The prevailing cultural conclusion designated the Black man as a kind of “walking phallic symbol.”<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Robert F Reid-Pharr, ‘Tearing the Goat’s Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection, and the Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity’, *Studies in the Novel*, 28(3), 1996, p.375.

<sup>371</sup> Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson, ‘Beneath the Black Aesthetic: James Baldwin’s Primer of Black American Masculinity’, *African American Review*, 32:2 (1998), pp.247-261.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid. Shin and Judson, p.250.

<sup>373</sup> E Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, Duke University Press: North Carolina, 2003, p.58.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., p.58.

<sup>375</sup> As above, Shin and Judson, p.248.

The phrase quoted here is from Baldwin's 1961 work, *The Price of the Ticket*, and is instructive for understanding the positioning of heterosexuality as central to Black male identity: "It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others."<sup>376</sup> Here Baldwin points to the sexual, political and cultural maelstrom also faced by Chiron, and queer Black men more generally. Chiron pays a heavy price, in his personality, for the sexual insecurity of the Black men around him, and by extension the Black women and girls who prop up the same prescribed heteronormative paradigm.

Baldwin "resisted an uncritical embrace of Black nationalism", argue the Shin and Judson, instead "developing... a vision of the homosexual as the chief instrument of cultural renovation."<sup>377</sup> They argue further that: "bodily pleasure for men functions as a paradigm for the body politic – two men lying together spoon fashioned becomes an image of the just society. The Black man as fetishized phallus gives way to an image of wholeness, of reintegrated bodies and of community."

### ***Black queer love as an act of resistance***

This analysis of Baldwin's work is just as relevant for considering *Moonlight*, particularly Jenkins'/McCraney's commentary on the possibilities for queer Black protest against contemporary strictures on Black masculine identity. Given his stated influence of Baldwin on Jenkins' work in particular, *Moonlight* can thus be seen as also reflecting Baldwin's argument – that a loving connection, physical or emotional, between men, can be a powerful agent of social and political change.

At several points in the film, the positive effects of Chiron's interactions with Kevin in particular, are illustrated – in contrast to the many unstable relationships depicted throughout the narrative. Most obviously Kevin's approach to Chiron on the beach, where he kisses him for the first time and brings him to sexual climax, allows Chiron to experience his authentic, queer self for the first time. The tenderness of the scene is stressed; Kevin cradles Chiron's

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<sup>376</sup> James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, (New York: St Martin's/Market, 1985), p.290.

<sup>377</sup> *ibid.* Shin and Judson, p.251.

head in his hands, and Kevin's entire approach seems to be one of desire mixed with kindness. The final scene of the film echoes this tenderness, when an adult Chiron – who has gone without physical affection from any man in the intervening years – is held in Kevin's arms on the sofa in his apartment. Jenkins has Kevin cradle Chiron's head, just as he did as a teenager on the beach, in a gesture both nurturing and romantic. The importance of that beach scene for providing Chiron with a sense of being 'home', figuratively and sexually, is amplified by its great contrast to the scenes which precede it. In a desperately sad sequence, the sheer depth of Chiron's lonely life is on display, as we watch him riding the Miami transit system through the night to avoid going home to his mother. On the beach, the delicate lighting of the moonlight and calm of the lapping waves replace the harsh strip-lighting and restless movement of the transport system where he has been forced to take refuge. In this scene, referencing the film's title, the natural setting becomes a participant in the narrative. It reflects that the boys' intimacy is natural, authentic – and by extension the point is made that the queer Blackness/Black queerness is also authentic. It stands in contrast to the harsh concrete and artificial strip-light environments of both the school and housing estate where Chiron lives, environments where he faces the equally artificial constructions of a dominant heteronormative hierarchy which brands him counterfeit.

It is important to note too, that this scene functions as Chiron's second 'baptism', the first being in Act One, when Juan takes him to the beach to teach him to swim in the ocean. In both scenes Chiron is guided to find his true self with the help of another Black man who cares for him – in this way picking up on the mantra of Joseph Beam and his fellow activists, illustrating the importance of Black men loving Black men. In fact, Kevin arrives at the beach, after Chiron's lonely night riding public transport, as Chiron's saviour.

Though the intimate beach scene between the two teenagers is pivotal to the narrative as a whole, in fact it is both prefigured and echoed in Acts One and Three respectively – forming a thread pulling the narrative forward. In Act One, Kevin and Chiron (Little) play-wrestle as children at one point. It is a joyous, innocent scene; the solitary and withdrawn Little we have mostly seen until then, seems lively and happy. The physicality of the scene is also stressed – their bodies constantly overlapping, and at the end they lie together on the grass, panting, in what would seem to be a pointer to their later relationship. But it also illustrates the "image of wholeness, of reintegrated bodies and community" which Baldwin proffers as his alternative to the hard-edged masculinist approach offered by Black nationalism. Finally, it is Kevin who gives Chiron the nickname 'Black'. It is an affirmation of authentic Blackness which counters the repudiation of his Black identity insisted on by Terrel, and thus the heteronormative

hierarchy, in their virulent objection to Chiron's queerness. It provides an answer to the question Kevin poses Chiron, as they stand in his kitchen: "Who is you, man?" Chiron is finally a Black queer man, who is loved as a Black queer man.

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## CONCLUSION

All three of these films, in differing ways, map the role and function of performance masculinity for Black men in some communities. Underlying all of the narratives are historical and contemporary contexts of socio-political and economic disenfranchisement, an overriding milieu that has created the paradigm in which a domineering machismo and hypermasculinity can flourish. The purpose of such behaviours are thus understood as recuperative and compensatory for the historical loss of agency of Black men, in a white and often violent socio-political system – a system which in itself provides the model (patriarchal, approving of violence) for the smaller scale patriarchal hierarchies which we see many of the characters inhabit, and which are critiqued to varying levels in the films. This contextual description reflects how the films comment on prevailing tropes of Black masculinity, showing how such normative expectations pressure men into constricted arenas, literally and psychologically. Further these are models which are easily destabilized, and thus insecure.

While *Straight* is a biopic, we are acutely aware that it is a highly controlled narrative, that sits on top of an already heavily mythologized narrative of the men who formed N.W.A. The audience is allowed glimpses of vulnerability in contrast to the masculinist mythology of the N.W.A product, and we are also permitted to see the joy and other emotions in the young men's lives, in the curation of their coming-of-age story. Ultimately, however, the men are shown to remain confined to the structures of hetero-centric normative hierarchy, and find a way to prosper within it – even if it means that they have lost meaningful friendships along the way, something they come to appreciate towards the end of the film.

In terms of challenging a masculinist imperative, *Chi-Raq* is positioned between *Straight* and *Moonlight*. It seeks to offer some explanation for patriarchal tropes of performance masculinity, and draws attention to its performative nature by refracting the story through the stylized device of rhyme. Further, by using the prism of an Ancient Greek play, Spike Lee suggests that such violent masculinity tropes operate in a much wider historical context. The

film only gestures towards some critique of the sexism which travels alongside the normative patriarchal hierarchies however, and indeed reflects such tropes itself.<sup>378</sup> *Chi-Raq* is more adept at showing how the hard, concrete environments which act as the hypermasculine gang members' communal base, is expressive of the constrained psyche they have adopted, and their walled-off life chances.

That expressionistic external hard exterior is the internalized hard persona which Chiron tells the adult Kevin he had to "build" in *Moonlight* – again drawing attention to the artifice involved in adopting machismo as an expressive identity. It is further the mantra of the rap artist personae in *Straight*, growing up in volatile and constrictive environments, where being "always hard" performatively becomes the recommended normative construction to adopt, in order to survive and prosper. By contrast, as bell hooks and James Baldwin recommend, allowing oneself to love and be loved is a way out, to be one's authentic self. They see it as a radical act, which allows Black men to step out of hierarchies constructed by, or in response to, an overarching white supremacist hierarchy which seeks to keep them contained.

All these works of the Black filmmaking renaissance reflect the menace of violence in the spaces the characters inhabit, including the literal, social and psychological effects on the individual and wider community. With *Chi-Raq* in particular, Lee sites violence in Black communities squarely within – explicated quite literally, with a map of America made of guns in his prelude – the context of violence as a trope of American culture. In my next, final chapter of this thesis, I consider how Black filmmakers of the renaissance focus on white supremacist violence, how they explore and expose anti-Black racial violence as an integral part of the American national story, examine its central place in the economic system of slavery, and how those legacies continue to manifest – and still affect Black Americans – today.

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<sup>378</sup> Lee has often been accused of sexism in his portrayal of female characters. See for example: bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

## Chapter Four: Violence, Control and The American Way: Slavery and its Legacies

### INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of Obama's first term in office in 2012, the young Black high school student Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by a white (Latino) neighbourhood watch volunteer, in a gated community in Florida.<sup>379</sup> Martin was on his way back from a visit to a local shop for sweets. The volunteer claimed it was self-defence, despite the fact Martin was unarmed; and the police initially declined to prosecute, citing so-called 'stand your ground' laws operating in Florida.<sup>380</sup> Such controversial laws, which allow what scholar Caroline Light calls armed citizens or "DIY security" to use lethal force in community- or self-defence, are far from colourblind. While such legislation supposedly applies to everyone equally regardless of gender or race, nevertheless, people of colour are disproportionately killed as a result. As Light points out, this echoes the DNA of law enforcement practices in the United States: "defensive lethal violence by armed citizens shares a historical genealogy with contemporary police violence, in that the usual targets are most commonly people of color."<sup>381</sup>

After eventually being indicted, in 2013 Martin's killer George Zimmerman was acquitted of his murder. This is not unusual; while the victims of these laws are disproportionately Black and

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<sup>379</sup> I have designated George Zimmerman's ethnicity here as 'white (Latino)' as a shortcut, although it remains a contested arena. Zimmerman is not African American, or principally Latino, and may or may not be regarded as a person of colour. The killing was nevertheless regarded as an act of a white (non-Black) violence towards a young Black man.

<sup>380</sup> 'Stand your ground' legislation was introduced in Florida in 2005, and several states have followed suit. It replaced the previous 'castle doctrine' principle in law, which held that a person could use force to defend themselves in their own home. It also overturned the principle that one should seek to escape, rather than attack an assailant. 'Stand your ground' not only removed the latter tenet, but effectively merged the idea of one's property with one's corporeal self – allowing individuals to use deadly force to protect themselves beyond self-defense and beyond the home. The legal scholar and public intellectual Patricia Williams discusses the law, and its racialized application, here: Patricia J. Williams, The 'Ground' in 'Stand Your Ground' Means Any Place a White Person Is Nervous, *The Nation* (15 August 2016) < <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-ground-in-stand-your-ground-means-any-place-a-white-person-is-nervous/>>

<sup>381</sup> Caroline Light, *Stand Your Ground: A History of America's Love Affair with Lethal Self-Defense* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014), p.8.

For more on the disproportionate effects of SYG on Black people, see also: LaKerri R Mack and Kristie Roberts-Lewis, 'The Dangerous Intersection between Race, Class and Stand Your Ground', *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*, 23.1(4) (2016), <https://digitalscholarship.tsu.edu/jpmmsp/vol23/iss1/4>.

male, white perpetrators are eleven times more likely to be exonerated.<sup>382</sup> As I shall explore in this chapter, men of colour have historically been much more likely to be regarded as a threat; their “deck is disproportionately stacked”, merely on sight.<sup>383</sup>

Zimmerman’s acquittal was met with outrage and disbelief. Amongst many protesting the news, Black community activist Alicia Garza reacted on FaceBook with a new hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, and went on to create a movement in that name with two other Black female activists, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors. The movement built on earlier protests beginning with Martin’s death in 2012, and the police’s initial decision not to prosecute Zimmerman. Black Lives Matter would grow rapidly during the Obama years and beyond, into a national (and international) protest movement, demanding action to end state violence against African Americans, amid multiple deaths of unarmed Black people at the hands of law enforcement.<sup>384</sup>

As I shall discuss in this chapter, Black Lives Matter, and other racial justice movements under the same banner, shone a powerful spotlight on America’s ongoing problems with white supremacist attitudes to Black citizens and Blackness more generally, well over 400 years after Black Africans were first transported to the North American colonies.<sup>385</sup> But it is the election of the first African American to the presidency, even the mere prospect of a ‘Black presidency’, which acts as a primer for exposing America’s seemingly endemic instinct for racial violence and oppression, and particular agitation in the face of Black advancement. From the moment he became a viable presidential candidate, Obama, along with his family, became the subject of numerous threats of violence and assassination. Scholars Beirich and Schlatter point out that Obama’s election “unleashed a wave of Obama-related hate crimes and domestic terror incidents”, with anti-Black hate crimes jumping 8% in just one year, from 2007 – 8. It further

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid, Light. p.10.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid. Light, p.9.

<sup>384</sup> The BLM movement also seeks an end to other areas of racial inequality and injustice, particularly in the criminal justice system. For this section see: Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), pp.147-152.

<sup>385</sup> While historians have often used 1619 as the date of the first arrival of enslaved Africans on the territory now known as the United States, scholar Michael Guasco and others argue that enslaved Black African people were brought to North America significantly earlier than 1619. See, for example: Michael Guasco, ‘The Fallacy of 1619: Rethinking the History of Africans in Early America’, *Black Perspectives*, 4 September 2017  
< <https://www.aaihs.org/the-fallacy-of-1619-rethinking-the-history-of-africans-in-early-america/>>  
[accessed 12 January 2022]

resulted in a huge boost to the internet traffic to, and membership of, radical far right websites/movements, such as the white supremacist Stormfront hate site.<sup>386</sup> There were also numerous, foiled assassination plots against Obama, before and after his election. One such terrifying plot in the month before his first election victory, saw two men from different states who had met online “plan to shoot 88 African Americans and behead another 14” according to the police officers that interviewed them. They planned to attack a largely African American high school, and end their spree with murdering Obama himself.<sup>387</sup>

These extreme levels of intended violence and visceral violent fantasies, apparently prompted by white supremacist shock at the prospect of a Black man occupying America’s highest seat of power, are part of a long history of anti-Black violence in the United States. This chapter examines how Black filmmakers of the renaissance engage with America’s history of brutality towards Black people, and its ongoing place in social attitudes and the political landscape. While many of the films of the Obama years tackle or depict racist state violence – including *Selma* (2014), *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), and *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016) – two other films also tackle the issue of anti-Black brutality from a longer historical perspective. Nate Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) and Steve McQueen’s adaptation of the slave narrative by Solomon Northrup, *12 Years a Slave* (2013), which I examine in this chapter, are also notably the first major Black-directed films since the 1970s, after the enormously successful television drama *Roots*, to focus on the interior lives of enslaved Americans, and their experiences of slavery. (Notably, *Roots* was remade for a television mini-series during the Obama period, broadcast on the History Channel in 2016).

I posit that this is particularly relevant, because, at the moment at which a Black man has taken the pre-eminent central position of American power – a position imbued with a historical and symbolic power far beyond the present moment – we start to see increasing number of Black filmmakers asserting Blackness and the Black experience into the central space of their films, films intended to reach a mass audience. Further, it is significant that so many of the filmmakers of the renaissance tackle historical subjects in their films. I posit this is part of a trend to subvert the hegemonic, accepted narrative of triumphant American exceptionalism, by exposing racism and white supremacy as a major part of the true American

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<sup>386</sup> Heidi Beirich and Evelyn Schlatter, ‘Backlash: Racism and the Presidency of Barack Obama’, in *Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*, eds. Mark Ledwidge, Kevern Verney, and Inderjeet Parmar (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.80 and pp.80 – 96.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.* p.84.

back story. In this chapter I focus primarily on how some of these filmmakers look to re-focus a national lens on an earlier chapter in the American story by examining the antebellum period, and the violent truth that was the prominent feature of slavery, one of the major engines of the American capitalist system since its inception. American Capitalism itself is a system which continues to reign supreme as a national ideology, and which relies on the maintenance of distorted truths in order to be maintained.<sup>388</sup> While there is insufficient room in this chapter to meaningfully examine how these films explore American slavery's relationship to the contemporaneous economic system and its role in the development of American capitalism, it should be noted that *Birth* and *12 Years* both reference the ever-present economic pressures which influenced the slavery system, ever encircling its existence, and how slave-owners' fears combine with white supremacy to fuel paranoia and violent abuse. More widely then, this chapter looks at how the filmmakers interrogate certain historical factors and explore their role in the development of white America's enduring brutal treatment of, and feelings towards, African Americans.<sup>389</sup>

In summary, through a principal focus on Parker's *Birth*, its relationship to and appropriation of the title of Griffith's 1915 film of the same name, and on McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, I will draw from scholarship across several disciplines – history, psychology, sociology and legal texts, as well as cultural studies. I will examine how these filmmakers have engaged with the history of anti-Black violence in the US, what discussions about violence in America are prompted by these works, and the relevance of these meditations to ongoing, contemporary American problems with racist violence – physical and psychological, particularly in the service of delimiting Black Americans' experience as full Americans. This will include how the films explore white American psychological processes of anti-Blackness, processes that have become ever more maladaptive; and how they point to the brutalizing organizational structures that work hand in hand to support these processes, particularly legal frameworks and policing.

With relation to these underpinning structures, I will also explore how the Black filmmaking renaissance intersects with the preoccupations of Black protest movements, which also

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<sup>388</sup> The reference here on capitalism's reliance on maintaining a distortion of reality is from: Alan Weinerman, 'The Mass Psychology of Capitalism', *Rethinking Marxism*, 24(2) 2012, p.269.

<sup>389</sup> See for example, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard university Press, 2011). I draw on this and other works examining the historical roots for the association of Blackness and criminality, throughout this chapter.

experienced an upsurge during the Obama years. On the face of it this presents a counterintuitive phenomenon, considering that a Black presidency was a huge milestone of progress in Black history (even while some commentators used it to fancifully declare it signalled that the US had achieved a post-racial status). A major criticism of Obama's presidency was his failure to fix the racial disparities which maintain the disproportionate incarceration and fatal shooting of Black and other people of colour by law enforcement.<sup>390</sup> As I approach the end of this thesis, this is an apt point to consider whether the rise in Black Lives Matter and other protest movements during Obama's second term was in response to the tensions arising from achieving a Black presidency, which proved to fall short, for many, when it came to specifically addressing Black challenges. It is further a useful point to consider Black filmmakers' dynamic responses to these tensions, and the violent oppression of Black lives across America which continued, despite – or rather perhaps because of – the momentous symbolism of a Black presidency. As I discussed earlier in this thesis, the arts and visual cultures have long been mechanisms for resistance in Black history and culture. The proliferation in Black filmmaking during the same, Black Lives Matter period, particularly with so many of the films addressing state violence – whether that be during slavery (*12 Years a Slave*, *Birth of a Nation*), during the Jim Crow era (*Selma*), or the present-day (*Fruitvale Station*) – suggests that the question of how these films interrogate American violence is particularly apt.

### ***One nation under God – but whose nation?***

The key promotional material for the American release of the 2016 film *The Birth of a Nation*, the story of a slave revolt in 1832 led by Nat Turner, is visually striking and emotionally provocative. Many of the posters, the DVD sleeve cover, and other visual advertising for the film are dominated by a reimagined American flag. Where 50 stars should sit in a neat design in the top left, the words *The Birth of a Nation* appear, white words on a dark blue background, in calligraphy script reminiscent of America's founding documents. The familiar stripes, colours and outline are adapted, contorted – the stripes constructed of lines formed by repeated stills of men, alternating lines of Black men then white, all in period costume. Through a lightly red-filtered sheen, and with what looks like blood dripping down at several

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<sup>390</sup> This has been one of the major criticisms of Obama's presidency. See discussed in, for example: Michael Eric Dyson, *The Black Presidency: Obama and the Politics of Race in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

points, the men are portrayed weapons aloft and faces full of anger, charging at the viewer. The white stripes are no longer white, but a pinkish-brown tinge. Taken together with the other imagery, the overall impression is a flag that has been washed with blood.

From afar it nevertheless resembles an American Flag, if messily constructed and colours a little askew. The details described only emerge when the viewer gets a little closer, when those watching are inclined, or in a position to, scrutinize the picture presented to them. That process is an analogy which is a key part of the film's messaging. The overall picture of national American identity, crystallized in the semiotic harmony of the American flag, is not what it seems when studied closely. Instead, a violent and racialized history is revealed, woven into the fabric of 'Old Glory' when one cares to look beneath the surface.<sup>391</sup> With the *Birth* project, Parker implies that same is true of the dominant national identity narrative of America itself.

Other aspects of this disruptive use of America's ubiquitous symbol expand on Parker's thesis in *Birth*. The dissonance created by this similar but distorted flag draws attention to the fact that one of America's most recognizable icons – its flag – is a contrivance, a set of visual symbols arranged to create an overarching signifier alive with contemporary meanings, as well as inscribed with American history. In the traditional flag, the organization of stars and stripes references a geo-political-historical narrative. Fifty stars represent the number of states in present-day USA; 13 stripes indicate the number of British territories that made up colonial Britain's seventeenth and eighteenth century stake in the land mass that is now the USA. Further, the colours have specific symbolic meanings: red for valour and resilience, white for purity, blue for justice and perseverance.<sup>392</sup> In all of these ways the visual language of the US flag promotes a narrative of American history as virtuous, even anointed (exceptional), and as synonymous with white, European origins; the seamless relationship of thirteen original colonies [stripes] to the present-day 50 states [stars] reinforces the narrative. As a whole it propagates a version of American history stripped of its discomfiting and violent parts; no representation, for instance, of the genocide or displacement of Indigenous Americans, or the massive traffic in human misery of the American slave trade. In this respect the flag icon, also named the 'Star Spangled Banner', works in synergy with its namesake, the American national

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<sup>391</sup> 'Old Glory' is a colloquial term for the American flag.

<sup>392</sup> 'The History of the American Flag', *PBS.org* [Public Broadcasting Service online], [n.d.] <[175](https://www.pbs.org/a-capitol-fourth/history/old-glory/#:~:text=The%20colors%20of%20the%20flag,represents%20vigilance%2C%20perseverance%20and%20justice.></a>></p></div><div data-bbox=)

anthem. The latter's principal verses promote the ideology of American exceptionalism, a narrative of American superiority amongst countries of the world, reassuring America of its righteousness - but during public performance, its inconvenient stanzas referring to slavery are usually dropped.

The publicity for Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* and the film itself seek to expose the historical narratives stripped out of that national myth, supplanting it with the history of slavery and the violence that underpinned it, into the American flag and the identity narratives enshrined within it. As scholars Leib and Webster argue, flags are " 'symbolic containers', and national flags... 'condense' a range of meanings and emotions pertaining to a group's perceived common historical experience, real or imagined cultural homogeneity."<sup>393</sup> The publicity materials described here expose that an American "common...experience" is a relative fiction, one that has historically prescribed America as white, with European "cultural homogeneity" and experience – while excluding or playing down in the national imaginary the experiences of indigenous, African and other peoples of colour.

The supplanting of the stars with the title of Parker's film is a direct challenge to the racist but influential 1915 film by DW Griffith, also called *The Birth of a Nation*. Parker's appropriation of Griffith's title, discussed in detail below, was a deliberate rebuke to the former's narrative of American history.<sup>394</sup> The flag-publicity conceit of Parker's film reinforces his provocation in its exposition that American history – the origin story of American nationhood – is steeped in racism and violence, pointing to the primordial role of slavery in the nation's history. Later publicity for the film built on the same theme, emphasizing still further the violent fate of numerous Black people in America, at the hands of white supremacy. Against a smudged black background, a close-up head and neck shot of Nat Turner (played by Parker) emerges, held in a noose fashioned from the traditional American flag. The metaphor drawn by all of these materials is unequivocal; brutal racial injustice underpins the history of America, its historical and identity narratives are under and over-written by violence, a truth which those same narratives seek to obscure from view. This immediately sets up an uncomfortable dissonance for the audience, the witness-bearers. The star spangled banner insists that the past is present

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<sup>393</sup> Jonathan Leib and Gerald Webster, 'Rebel with(out) a Cause? The Contested Meanings of the Confederate Battle Flag in the American South', in *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America* (Routledge, 2007).

<sup>394</sup> Parker discusses this in various interviews. For example: 'Meet the Artist '16: Nate Parker', *Sundance Institute* YouTube Channel, 13 January 2016. <<https://youtu.be/B5i7o41THM4>> [Accessed 2 June 2021].

today, as a past narrated through an ongoing American story of valour and courage, emphasized by its colours. The flags of 2016's *Birth*, alongside the film itself, suggest that rather than valour and courage as fundamental aspects of white America, brutality and white supremacy are the present-day legacy of America's origin story.

It is impossible to ignore that, in both its implied critique of national American identity myths, particularly in terms of America's relationship with violence, and in material reference, *Birth's* publicity materials recall a key work of another Black filmmaker whose career has focused on exposing structural and cultural racism in America. Spike Lee's 1993 biopic of another historical Black leader, *Malcolm X*, also employed the American flag in publicity materials and, to dynamic and powerful effect, in the film's opening title sequence, commenting on some of the same issues raised by *Birth's* contorted Star Spangled Banner. In a sequence lasting almost three minutes, Lee plays one of Malcolm's most searing speeches about racism in America (performed by Denzel Washington) over the infamous footage of African American man Rodney King being beaten by LA police officers in 1992 – cut alternatively with an image of the American flag. The flag becomes set alight, and as the cross-cut sequence continues it increasingly burns through to leave only the shape of a striking capital X, the rest of the flag destroyed in the fire. The imagery, reinforced by Malcolm's speech, exposes the self-deception that underlies America's identity myths of itself as a land of freedom, justice, and meritocratic opportunity and democracy. The sequence emphasizes that instead, a violent history of anti-blackness, beginning with slavery – but persisting, as the video footage exemplifies, into the present day – forever undermines any claim of American exceptionalism. As the words spoken Malcolm X (played by Denzel Washington) neatly summarizes over the images:

We didn't land on Plymouth Rock – Plymouth Rock landed on us... We don't see the American dream – we've experienced only the American nightmare.<sup>395</sup>

As Malcolm's speech concludes, Lee retains the burning image of the X on screen for a further ten seconds. The 'star-spangled' X is representative of all the descendants of slavery in America, who lost their ancestral identity via the brutal historical slave trade. In this sense the burning image is at once historically narrative of the violence inherent in Black Americans' experience of American nationhood. But it is also a warning. The X is three-dimensional, and emerging from the flames, resembles the head of a branding iron. Used to mark cattle and

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<sup>395</sup> *Malcolm X*, dir. by Spike Lee (Warner Bros, 1992).

other livestock as the owner's property, enslaved Africans and their descendants were symbolically – and sometimes literally – violently branded in the same way. Malcolm's transported ancestors and unhappy brethren all became American 'property' in the same way, and as such were the engine of American capitalism as the new American nation emerged, with hypocritical irony, from the shackles of British colonialism. Announcing Malcolm at the start of the film in this way, Lee asserts for Malcolm and all African Americans, the reclamation of the symbol of the racially oppressed – those "stamped from the beginning", to play on Jefferson Davis' justification for white supremacy and racial slavery as the natural order of things.<sup>396</sup> This symbol of Black America emerges Phoenix-like, standing resolute and impervious while the surrounding American flag, and all it represents, burns to ashes. The discordant and increasingly frenzied jazz soundtrack underlines the point – this is an African American musical artform, with its roots in both the blues and the emerging affirmative Black identity environment of the early twentieth century.<sup>397</sup> Its accompaniment here bolsters the sequence's narrative, its implication both of African American strength and hints of a reckoning for America, as well as the historical memory of slavery and its aftermath, embedded in the musical sequence itself. The entire audio-visual narrative points towards the warning hinted at by the Black public intellectual James Baldwin, which recalls the reckoning promised in a prominent slave spiritual:

God gave Noah the rainbow sign,  
No more water – the fire next time.<sup>398</sup>

*Malcolm X* was perhaps the major film to emerge from a previous Black filmmaking wave, which took place in the very late 1980s/early 1990s. Described as "the outstanding achievement" of what scholar Wendy Sung calls the "insurgent black film movement" of the period, as such it is an important touchstone for considering what the Obama period Black filmmaking renaissance tells us about today's Black filmmakers – particularly for projects like

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<sup>396</sup> This well-known phrase, uttered by senator (and later Confederate president) Jefferson Davis in a famous Senate speech in 1860, refers to influential contemporary claims of scientific and divine determination of Black inferiority compared with whites. See recent scholarship from Ibram X. Kendi for more on this; Kendi uses the phrase as a title for a book exploring the formulation and enactment of racist ideas in the West:

Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017).

<sup>397</sup> Stephanie Hall, 'The Painful Birth of Blues and Jazz', *Library of Congress*.  
<https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2017/02/birth-of-blues-and-jazz/>

<sup>398</sup> From Negro Spiritual, *I got a home in that rock*.

*Selma* (2014) and Parker's *Birth*, which also focus on historical Black leaders targeting a racist American system.<sup>399</sup> Parker appeared as a gang member in Lee's 2012 film *Red Hook Summer*, was later helped by Lee in the promotion of his next directorial effort, *American Skin* (2019), a topical drama also dealing with racial violence and systemic injustice. In a way a modern day follow-up to the Turner story, the topical film is centred on a Black father's reaction to the death of his unarmed teenage son at the hands of a white police officer.<sup>400</sup> Parker also described Lee as an "elder" of the Black community, referring to him as a guide for younger generations of African Americans.<sup>401</sup>

It is significant that, over thirty years since Lee's *Malcolm X*, Black filmmakers – including Lee who, still directing today, is another of the filmmakers of the Black filmmaking renaissance I discuss in this thesis – should still need to tackle themes of anti-Black violence and racism, and expose these as contradictions at the heart of America's notion of itself as an exceptional nation. It also speaks to the continuum of Black artists using visual cultures to challenge and expose these contradictions.

### ***The Corruption of a Nation***

Examining the publicity material for Parker's *Birth*, it is clear that it is part of the overarching architecture of the film, and worthy of an extended analysis partly because of the richness of its semiotics, alongside its persuasive function as a material part of the film's argument. It

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<sup>399</sup> For this quote and more on this wave of Black films, especially the key role of Spike Lee as the "symbol and personification" of the period, see: Wendy Sung, 'Mainstream African American Cinema: The Struggle for Black Images in Hollywood', in *African Americans in Popular Culture Volume 3*, ed. by Todd Boyd (Santa Barbara (CA): Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), p.258.

See also the final chapter of Ed Guerrero's book: *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp.157-208.

<sup>400</sup> Parker's *American Skin* could be seen as a contemporary reimagining of the Nat Turner story. It concerns a Black chief protagonist, driven to drastic measures and direct action against hegemonic forces, in order to protest the injustice and racism of the American system he finds himself in.

<sup>401</sup> Parker was asked about Lee on the publicity trail for *American Skin*: "Spike Lee is one of those people, those *Black Men*, elders, that realizes he has a responsibility to the youth, to pull them forward, to be a ladder..." [Parker's emphasis]

'Nate Parker On What Inspired *American Skin* And Working With Spike Lee', *HipHollywood YouTube Channel*, 25 January 2021.

< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dXWDuqYFeI> >

neatly evokes and summarizes the film's messaging – that racial injustice enforced by violence is a core part of American history. However, while Parker may have been aiming for the power of, for instance, Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, he falls far short for reasons I discuss in this chapter.

2016's *Birth* dramatizes the story of Nat Turner, an enslaved man on a plantation in Southampton, Virginia who led a two-day slave revolt in 1831. The revolt resulted in approximately 55 white people killed by the enslaved rebels, with the enslaved rebels also killed or tried and executed. Significantly, a combination of vengeful wrath and instinctive fear by the white communities resulted in many more Black people also being killed in response and retaliation.<sup>402</sup> Turner is played by Parker in the film that he co-wrote, directed and produced. The project, begun around the time of Obama's victory (2008/9), was a labour of love for Parker who, despite growing up just forty miles from the site of Turner's revolt, had never heard of the figure regarded as a folk hero in African American history until he went to college.<sup>403</sup> Parker has described in numerous interviews that once he discovered Turner, he became Parker's hero as a man who stood up against the injustice of the slavery system; and he went to great lengths to get the film made, essentially using a targeted crowdfunding approach, asking for contributions from multiple Black celebrities and sports stars in the absence of securing studio backing.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> The 1832 uprising has been variously called Nat Turner's Rebellion/Revolt, the Southampton Uprising, the Southampton Rebellion. Recent scholarship favours the latter nomenclature, as it emphasizes that the uprising was not simply the work of one man (in contrast to the thrust of Parker's *Birth*). Moreover, as Robert Colby point out, later scholarship also seeks to uncover the role of women in the rebellion and its aftermath, who, as Vanessa Holden illustrates, are mostly absent from the contemporary archive, and often missing or subordinate to a focus on enslaved men, in the scholarly research on the broader events. For more on this, and the rebellion itself, see:

Robert Colby, 'Black Women and the Southampton Rebellion', *Black Perspectives* (October 27 2021) <https://www.aaihs.org/black-women-and-the-southampton-rebellion/> [accessed 3 January 2022].

Vanessa M. Holden, *Surviving Southampton: African American Women and Resistance in Nat Turner's Community* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

Patrick H. Breen, *The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

K.S. Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>403</sup> As above, 'Meet the artist: 16' interview for *Sundance YouTube Channel*.

<sup>404</sup> Once the film debuted at Sundance however, it resulted in a bidding war between the top studios/distributors. This is discussed later in this chapter.

Parker's struggle here is an example of the ongoing lack of support in Hollywood for telling important Black stories. It also illustrates a continuum of collective response from African Americans, keen to reconstitute the [popular, white] American historical narrative, excavating the place of Black history at its heart, just as *Birth's* publicity materials suggest. On a parallel note, Parker's experience in trying to get the film adequately financed – his resolute endeavour to seek financing from prominent Black celebrities and sportspeople when he failed to win it from Hollywood – also echoes the efforts of earlier Black filmmakers. Spike Lee had a similar process when making up a shortfall in funding for *Malcolm X*, and earlier Black filmmakers like Melvin van Peebles, who made *Sweet Sweetback's Baadaasssss Song* (1971), the film which helped usher in the Blaxploitation genre of the early 1970s, did the same. These filmmakers also resorted to Black community funding when they met with Hollywood resistance to supporting their vision – films centred on strong Black male figures, challenging anti-Black hegemonic oppression. These are all examples of both Black unity, and the understanding that such support is a political gesture.<sup>405</sup> Parker summed up the importance of community power and intervention in the national narrative on film, when visiting the historically Black college Norfolk State University on his publicity trail: "We have the power to tell stories... We have the power to correct revisionist history. We have the power to pass that on to our children."<sup>406</sup> Parker has repeatedly emphasized in interview that a key aim for the film was to "start a national conversation" about injustice in America, systemic and on an individual level, racial injustice being a key part of that. He has explicitly pointed to the film as an exploration of the influence of the past in the present, and how contemporary injustice and discrimination, particularly with regard to the racial legacies of slavery, persist in current American cultural, social and power relations, including the African American experience of the criminal justice system:

"With things happening in the community at that time [2008/9] – even now, 2016 – I felt like I had to do something with my art to show that I wasn't being silent."

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<sup>405</sup> See Guerrero, as above, pp.200-1. Guerrero discusses what he calls Lee's entrepreneurial approach to securing funding from prominent Black celebrities, to finish making *Malcolm X*; and how it echoes Van Peebles' approach with *Sweetback*.

<sup>406</sup> Jim Morrison, 'Nate Parker Gets Warm Reception at Virginia *Birth of a Nation* Appearance', *Variety*, 27 October 2016.

“Being a black man in America and growing up with certain systemic crises, you ask yourself what can I do? Nina Simone said the artists’ job was to reflect the times, so I use my art to deal with the things I see every day with hope to create a solution.”<sup>407</sup>

However, Parker’s aspirations fall short of compellingly communicating the historical bridge that he intended. Alongside more serious problems that arose from Parker’s own behaviour, discussed in depth below, some of the dialogue, directing, cinematography, and score choices Parker has made for *Birth* often appear clunky and mis-judged, not helped by some poor acting from some of the cast – endowing the film with a ‘made for TV’, pedestrian feel, in contrast with the ‘epic’ story Parker sought to tell.<sup>408</sup> However, more sophisticated elements of Parker’s *Birth* succeed in making cogent arguments about the malign influence of America’s violent past on its national identity, and race relations today.

### ***Birth and Deliverance***

Despite the weaknesses of the film, Nate Parker’s appropriation of the title of Griffith’s controversial 1915 epic *Birth of a Nation* insists on a paradigm for interpreting the 2016 film which pointedly elevates it to a politically interventionist artwork, as he supplants Griffith’s white supremacist, revisionist American narrative, with a Black-centred story, and dates that to a period preceding the romanticized re-imaginings of Lost Cause writers. Moreover, it is a narrative which focuses on the story of an enslaved Black folk-hero rebel, who, with a hint of Malcolm X, rejects submission to an established, dominant white supremacist system,

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<sup>407</sup> ‘*Birth of a Nation*: Historical Film Opening Overshadowed - Star & Director Nate Parker Speaks Out About Past Rape Claim’, *Good Morning America*, ABC, 3 October 2016 <<https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/news/video/birth-nation-star-nate-parker-speaks-42521617>> [accessed: 1 February 2022].

It is noticeable here and in other Parker interviews, and indeed as reflected in his work and the controversy around *Birth*, that Parker tends to conceptualize through a male gaze. While this is outwith the breadth of this chapter to explore, it is worth noting because it goes to the contradictions in *Birth*, aside from the rape storylines added to the narrative. For example, his male-centred gaze governs the narrative, resulting in a film where Black women are not engaged in resistance against slavery, and curiously, white women are depicted as, largely, almost neutral figures in the slavery system, even kindly. By contrast, Steve McQueen’s narrative heavily features the stories of women – enslaved, formerly enslaved, and white: providing a much more textured and rich exploration of gender roles in society – then and now.

<sup>408</sup> Several film critics remarked on production values issues such as these. See for example: Emily St James, ‘Nate Parker’s *Birth of a Nation* is almost good enough to withstand its controversy’, *Vox* (11 September 2016) <https://www.vox.com/2016/9/11/12873016/birth-of-a-nation-review-nate-parker> [accessed 14 April 2022].

galvanizes the support of fellow rebels, and inflicts a significant symbolic blow to the overarching system of slavery, and the tenets of white supremacy.

Parker's film also explicitly explores certain themes which repudiate the messaging of Griffith's influential *Birth*, messaging which correlated white supremacy with chivalry, justice, refinement and patriotism. He supplants that propaganda with more accurate representations of the physical, emotional and psychological violence of the operation of the economic slavery system. He further seeks to draw attention instead to that American history as an integral part of the heritage which present-day Americans share, and which continues to affect systems and social relations today. "The reality and the root of all of what we're seeing in America right now, in my opinion, is white supremacy", Parker has said. His film attempts to highlight how that ideology took hold in American history – expressly in order to comment on the political and social reality of violent racism that African Americans suffer today.

To understand the significance of Parker's work, it is vital to consider certain aspects of Griffith's earlier film of the same name, an early epic studied by generations of student filmmakers.<sup>409</sup>

Griffith's *Birth* was based closely on the novel *The Clansman* by white supremacist preacher and writer Thomas Dixon. Dixon had written his story in furious response to the popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which continued to be dramatized in theatres across America during the Reconstruction period and beyond, and was even used to teach children about history.<sup>410</sup> Griffith's *Birth* focuses primarily on two white families, one from the North (the Stonemans), one from the South (the Camerons), who were friends before the war. The antebellum South is shown as a harmonious place, where the enslaved are contented. The war causes terrible rupture, and during the Reconstruction period, the South is badly treated by both Northern carpetbaggers and Black politicians (noticeably mixed-heritage individuals) – whose venal nature rises to the surface and is

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<sup>409</sup> Spike Lee, who focused on the racism and racial violence of *Birth of a Nation* as the centerpiece of his first film school project *The Answer*, discussed how his teachers were unhappy with the challenge he was making to 'the father of cinema'. In a mid-1990s interview Lee describes how they had studied Griffith's film in the classroom as a trailblazer, for its technique and other aspects of film production – but the racist aspects that Lee highlighted in his film had never been raised.

See: 'Spike Lee – First Works', *Reelblack*, 1995

< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfxCcePNBw4>>, [from t.c. 2:25]

<sup>410</sup> See Melvyn Stokes, *The Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"*, New York: Oxford University Press (2007).

eventually exposed.<sup>411</sup> Southern Black people are also depicted as either somewhat menacing to whites, as they take control where they were once enslaved. Over the course of events, noble white Southerners realign with Northern whites (brought to see the 'error of their ways'). The 'brave' Southerners are forced to draw existing white resistance groups into a powerful militia, the Ku Klux Klan, in order to protect white womanhood, and reinstate white supremacy in society.<sup>412</sup>

The 1915 film was technically highly innovative, and hailed as a huge success in part as a result of Griffith's ingenuity. But for the purposes of understanding its significance for race relations it is only fully understood by appreciating its intervention in the historical moment in which it came into being. That is, in the early part of the twentieth century, Black Americans were gaining ground in political organizing and cultural advancement, following the period termed 'The Nadir' - the repressive and often violent racial backlash of the Post-Reconstruction period, which saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, and the reversal in civil rights gains for African Americans won during the Civil War, as well as the establishment of de jure apartheid with the Jim Crow era.<sup>413</sup> The late nineteenth and particularly early twentieth century saw increasing numbers of prominent Black intellectuals and Civil Rights activists, such as W. E. B Du Bois, Ida B Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Marcus Garvey and many others. The NAACP was formed in 1911, and prominent and widely read Black newspapers and magazines were established in this period too, such as the *Chicago Defender*, assertively championing Black rights and autonomy. This was also a time of mass migration of Black people from the rural South to mostly northern cities – to escape the violent oppression, financial and other hardships of neo-plantation economy of sharecropping, as well as the legal jeopardy from Jim Crow. These were also the preamble years to the New Negro Movement, where African Americans forcefully rejected the racist designations they'd been subject to, socially, politically and culturally, by a white supremacist hegemony. Instead they embraced new opportunities and ideas, galvanizing an assertive Black identity and consciousness.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> For this and more on the depiction and significance of mixed-heritage figures in Griffith's *Birth*, see: Cedric Robinson, *Forgeries of memory and meaning: Blacks and the regimes of race in American theater and film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>412</sup> For a comprehensive study on *Birth*, see: Melvyn Stokes, *D W Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>413</sup> Robinson, 2007.

<sup>414</sup> For more on this see, for example: Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

*Birth's* project was twofold. Amidst the growing influence of the Black community and its leaders, *Birth's* message was unashamedly revisionist. Enslaved Black people were depicted in the film as existing in an antebellum South in a happy child-like state (common of so much of the plantation genre of film that followed, until the late 1930s).<sup>415</sup> While the Black Americans that aimed for political power and advancement – notably portrayed in the film, as scholar Cedric Robinson points out, as 'lighter-skinned', echoing contemporaneous African Americans leaders and progressives such as Du Bois – were shown as conniving, self-serving and dangerous.<sup>416</sup> It further heroized southern whites and, in the service of the 'Lost Cause' narrative, depicted Black Americans either as contented slaves or villainous and cunning.<sup>417</sup> Characterized as a menace to the national (white) body politic in the film, it also promoted the common racist trope of Black men as a threat to white womanhood. *Birth* romanticized and glorified the Ku Klux Klan, and the film is thought to have played a key part in the Klan's resurgence in popularity and the early 1920s, something which Parker has referred to in interviews.<sup>418</sup> As scholar Manthia Diawara points out, the film was also hugely influential for the growing [white] film industry, establishing the "grammar book of Hollywood's representation of Black manhood and womanhood." Whites are firmly at the centre, visually and organizationally; with Black characters as marginal props, often in denigrating characterizations.<sup>419</sup> These tentacles have stretched well into the present day – as Parker noted in interview, reflecting his and other African American actors' opportunities as a working actor, often restricted to criminal archetypes.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> For more on these depictions and the plantation genre, see Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple Hill Press, 1003).

<sup>416</sup> See above, Robinson, p.215. See pp.205 – 224 for Robinson's wider discussion of what he calls the "mulatto genre" in *Birth* and other films, and its socio-political purposes. Several other scholars also discuss Griffith's specific portrayal of dual heritage African Americans. For example, see James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Vintage International, 2011), pp.45-53.

<sup>417</sup> The scholarship on Griffith's *Birth* is vast. For the analysis described here in much more depth, see for example Stokes, 2007, as above. As well as the other works cited in this section, further examples include: John Belton, *Movies and Mass Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996). Michael Rogin, 'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision: D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*', *Representations*, 9 (1985), pp.150-195. Michael H Epp, 'Raising Minstrelsy: Humor, Satire, and the Stereotype in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Bamboozled*', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 33.1 (Spring 2003), pp.17-36.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., Stokes - See Chapter 8, 'After Birth' For Parker's discussion of Griffith's film, see: 'Meet the artist '16: Nate Parker', *Sundance Institute YouTube Channel*, 13 January 2016 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5i7o41THM4>>, [accessed 3 February 2022]

<sup>419</sup> Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.3.

<sup>420</sup> For more on this, see:

This influential representational mechanism exemplified in Griffith's *Birth* – that Black characters, and Blackness itself is peripheral to American nationhood – is what Parker's 2016's film challenges. Further, I posit that the messaging of the earlier film insists that to be a genuine American – as opposed to 'three fifths' of a person designated by the nation's Founding Fathers – one must be white and of European heritage. This is not least because African Americans' natural state, suggests the film, is to be dependent on superior – supreme – whiteness. Further, when Black people step outside these parameters into centre frame (literally, and metaphorically), their 'innate' bruteness, cunning and licentiousness emerge. This is demonstrated by Griffith's characterizations of Black characters such as the politician Silas Lynch, the white abolitionist politician's housekeeper Lydia Brown, and the soldier Gus, all shown to have lustful designs on whites. Griffith promotes the idea of Black people as politically as well as sexually insatiable, by stressing that the former two desire white suitors who will also advance their status. Gus however is ultimately lynched for his interest in marrying Flora, the young white sister of the main male protagonist Ben Cameron (Flora jumps off a ridge to her death, rather than entertain the idea of Gus' affections). Restoring the body politic to a state of cohesive wholeness after a brutal civil war, it is clear from the narrative, is a job for white people. Black people, such as those occupying the Senate House of Representatives in one important and viciously racist scene, are less than complete Americans, and certainly uncivilized - fighting in the aisles, drinking alcohol and eating chicken. Notably, Black representatives here vastly outnumber white representatives, and are depicted as most animated at the passage of a bill to legalise marriage between white and Black couples – which, as scholar Melvyn Stokes notes, is an example of one of multiple fictions about Black behaviour and white powerlessness promoted by the film.<sup>421</sup>

Alongside other fictions, notes Stokes, such as Black control of the law courts, disenfranchisement of former Confederates, and the widespread rape of white women, *Birth* gives the impression of a White population, if not quite terrorized then certainly traumatized by the inherent rapaciousness and vengeful actions of an uncontrolled, 'liberated', Black populace. Stokes further notes in his examination of *Birth's* fabrications, "while law and order

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Teresa Hagan, ' "Don't Wait for Permission": Ava DuVernay as a Black Female Intellectual and Political Artist', *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, 19.1 (2022), pp.43-62.

<sup>421</sup> See Stokes, as above.

did collapse in many areas of South Carolina [where *Birth* is set], this had much more to do with the aggressiveness of whites toward blacks than the other way around.”<sup>422</sup>

The misrepresentation of Blackness and its conflation with criminality was not confined to the media, but was emphasized too by politicians such as Woodrow Wilson, the president when Griffith’s *Birth* was first released. Wilson, a Princeton historian, also espoused white supremacist views and was responsible for several segregationist policies in Government and the Executive for the first time since the Civil War, and was a college mate of Thomas Dixon.<sup>423</sup> Dixon leveraged the relationship to get the film shown in the White House, and went on to show it to members the Supreme Court, the ultimate legal body which had, in essence, given Jim Crow legislation a federal carte blanche twenty years earlier, with the Plessy v. Ferguson decision.<sup>424</sup> Griffith had even given the impression that *Birth* was based on Wilson’s academic work *A History of the American People*, along with other claims he made for historiography-based accuracy; but as scholar Bruce Chadwick points out, Griffith often used these quotes from the book out of context.<sup>425</sup> Historians disagree about the level to which Wilson specifically endorsed the film, but having it shown in the White House and other branches of government lent it an important legitimacy, and even served to help it fight off legal challenges to its release in various parts of the country.<sup>426</sup> In summary, as Stephen Tuck points out, “What was true for the movies was true for the White House... *Birth of a Nation* and Wilson’s actions show just how comfortably white supremacy sat with the new urban, technological, Progressive era.”<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., Stokes. Examples given throughout the book. The quote and instances exemplified in this section are taken from his chapter ‘Griffith’s view of history’, specifically pp.202-3.

<sup>423</sup> For these and more details on Woodrow Wilson, his relationship with Black leaders, and Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, see: Stephen Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought To Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp.132-135.

See also Mark E. Benbow, ‘Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and “Like Writing History with Lightning”’, *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 9.4 (2010), 509-533.

<sup>424</sup> The widespread claim that *Birth* was the first film to be shown in the White House illustrates the mythmaking that has followed the film itself. According to Mark Benbow (ibid., p.513), it was the second. However, as described above, the fact it was show in the White House at all, in these early days of filmmaking, was seen as hugely significant and a stamp of legitimacy.

<sup>425</sup> See Bruce Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 2002) for these and other details in this section – particularly Chapter Seven, ‘The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth?’, pp.107-129.

<sup>426</sup> See Benbow, p.516.

<sup>427</sup> Tuck, quote in two parts: p.134...[and] 135.

In this environment, the characterization in *Birth* (1915) of post-bellum Black people as devious, thug-like, and aggressively lustful served to reflect and enforce the prevailing social narrative associating Blackness with an often dangerous criminality. As scholar Khalil Gibran Muhammed points out in his examination of how this trope arose in American consciousness, racializing criminality had been a prevailing drive since the 1890s and the birth of Jim Crow. It was engineered through a particular use of statistics on crime, which showed Black people as overly represented, something which essentially questioned African Americans' "fitness for modern life". This was something which Black scholars and activists, such as W.E.B. du Bois and Ida B. Wells had worked hard to counteract, publishing a great many reports after the mass racial violence which had accompanied the Great Migration.<sup>428</sup> Their attempts and those of other African American scholars to "deracialize black criminality" initially failed to turn the tide in academia, or public discourse. However by the late 1920s prominent and influential white sociologists such as Thorsten Sellin began to draw on their work, to publicly argue that the statistics were unreliable, and that the media had constituted African Americans as criminal through biased reporting:

"The colored criminal does not as a rule enjoy the racial anonymity which cloaks the offenses of individuals of the white race. The press is almost certain to brand him, and the more revolting his crime proves to be the more likely it is that his race will be advertised."

"In setting the hall-mark of his color upon him, his individuality is in a sense submerged, and instead of a mere thief, robber, or murderer, he becomes a representative of his race, which in turn is made to suffer for his sins."

This was something Nate Parker was aware of, and has discussed that he understood the purpose of Griffith's film as an attempt by white supremacists to wrest control of the national narrative early in the twentieth century. Discussing the period, while Parker is a little muddled about some of the facts, he is correct in identifying the KKK's strategy. The more pressing drive for white supremacists was that this was a period of anxiety for the reasons described above, rising Black consciousness and power, and a perception that white power was waning. Parker rightly identifies that Griffith's film "took advantage [of] a people looking for an identity". He elaborates:

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<sup>428</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

“what he gave them was the Ku Klux Klan. The group assured them they would protect their rights and their families and their children. All they had to was buy into white supremacy.”<sup>429</sup>

Parker’s *Birth* is both cultural protest and a socio-political one. He seeks to intervene in 21<sup>st</sup> century discourses, specifically targeting the disparities caused by enduring racism, particularly by law enforcement. His purpose is to both undermine and reconstitute existing American myths of nationhood:

“...Black men being killed in America – we’ve become desensitized to the things that are happening. And the question is, what do we owe – what is our responsibility? I think patriotism is all about wanting to see America better, to see those who are oppressed do better, get treated better.”<sup>430</sup>

As I discuss below, and as reflected in the publicity materials, Parker’s own version of how the nation was *Birthed* aims to excavate the bloody, painful truth – in opposition to a benign version of the plantation genre, engendered by Griffith’s propaganda.

### ***Violence and the Body Politic***

Nat Turner’s true awakening to the deep horror of the slavery system doesn’t come until almost half way through the film, when he is taken to a particularly brutal estate, in his role as preacher-pacifier to the enslaved. This is a business for his owner Sam, who pockets the takings from fellow plantation owners eager to use Nat’s rhetorical skills and selected use of scripture to keep the enslaved subservient. At the Fowlers’ estate, however, Nat comes to understand the depravity of American slavery, and sees the connection between the persecuted Israelites of the Old Testament, and the bondage of Black people in America.

Nat’s personal experience of slavery has, with some exceptions (such as witnessing a slave auction), rather resembled servitude than bondage – something which has also been jarring

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<sup>429</sup> ‘Nate Parker looks to provoke change with *The Birth of a Nation*’, *Sundance Institute* [blog], 25 January 2016, <https://www.sundance.org/blogs/artist-spotlight/nate-parker-wants-the-true-story-he-tells-in-the-birth-of-a-nation-to-create-discussion-and-change/>

<sup>430</sup> *Good Morning America*, 3/10/2016, as above.

for the audience thus far. But through his cross-county preaching, he has been confronted with the reality of plantations where the enslaved are treated more harshly. It is not until he reaches the Fowler estate however, run by brothers Hank and Earl, that the moral corruption and degeneracy of white supremacy is crystallized. In a truly shocking scene, Nat witnesses the punishment of two slaves who have been shackled in cell within the barn.<sup>431</sup> Replicating contemporaneous drawings of slave punishments, the men both have metal plates tied across their mouths, and are in a silent state of distress. One of the men, possibly in assertion of the only act of agency open to someone in his position has, we are told, refused to eat. In a deeply disturbing scene Nat, Sam and the 21<sup>st</sup> century viewers witness how the Fowlers respond – knocking out the man’s teeth with a chisel, and using a funnel to pour cornmeal into his oesophagus.

The entire sequence at the Fowlers’ property is the most pertinent scene in Parker’s film, for the purposes of understanding the relevance of these films to the present. As with the film’s publicity materials, it makes large scale points about violence, white supremacist paranoia and control, and the corrupting influence of the economic system of slavery – all of which underlie the national American narrative that Parker seeks to expose, and to advance as part of the true ‘Birth of a Nation’. While these same issues are tackled in greater depth and subtlety in *12 Years a Slave*, examined in the second half of this chapter, Parker’s *Birth* nevertheless makes some important points here.

In the barn scene, is clear that the white slavers’ horrific actions are a response both to the threat of losing this enslaved man as an economic unit of production, but also to his ‘insubordination’ as he tried to end his torment with a hunger strike. “If it ain’t the Yanks it’s the drought...If it ain’t the drought it’s goddamn mutiny”, says Earl Fowler as he carries out the dreadful actions – all the while showing no emotion. The slavers are shown to be totally desensitized to the moral degeneracy of their behaviour, and violence and menace are their instinctive means of control.

A moment earlier, on arrival at the Fowlers’ estate, we see that it is a grey, dirty, somewhat squalid-looking homestead, compared to the other properties we have seen Nat taken to. The wooden building looks unloved and abandoned – no one came to greet the carriage, and Sam Turner has to search around for the owners. While Nat waits, he descends from the carriage,

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<sup>431</sup> While I will not describe this disturbing scene in full, nevertheless some details are necessary to elucidate the points made in the sequence at the Fowler estate.

and is suddenly attacked by a large, vicious, farm dog, barking furiously and snapping at Nat who falls to the ground in shock. The dog is only just held back at the end of a leash by Hank Fowler, who has clearly set the animal on Nat, and menacingly demands to know “what you doing on my land?” To match the homestead, Hank’s appearance is also dirty, a great stain down the front of his shirt, and wearing grubby attire, clothes leeching of any colour and faded into a mélange of grey-beige.

While the audience is directed to the plight of the enslaved, and feels both outraged and repulsed at their treatment, the film is equally concerned here with demonstrating the moral and psychological corruption that white supremacy infects its proponents with – especially within a system essentially closed to external scrutiny. American white supremacy and white supremacist violence is suggested throughout the film as the bedrock of the slavery system. Here, that corrosion is conceptualized on screen via an expressionist mode – the appearance of both the house and Hank Fowler signify the outward expression of the effect on the nation state and white America, of a slavery system that drags both into a psychological sewer. In keeping with the expressionist device, the dog that ferociously attacks Nat is – notable in this grubby environment – pure white. Though somewhat clunky, it is an effective analogy, literalizing the violent assault of whiteness on Blackness.

In a similar vein, given that a house/home also acts as a constitutive metaphor for the nation state, the film suggests that the economic and essentially political system of slavery also spiritually rots the state, leading it into a deep moral and spiritual decline, reflected in the dirty, darkening wood, evincing neglect and decay.<sup>432</sup> Notably the curtains are closed across the many windows, suggesting that internally the house must be devoid of light – with all the religious connotations of an absence of redemption and salvation that come with such a deficiency. More forebodingly, not only light but prying eyes are shut out of this house/nation state, where the enslavement of human beings both underpins the entire foundation, economic, political and social, and leads to the kind of abnegation of morality which we soon witness in the barn.

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<sup>432</sup> The ‘house’ as a political or psychological metaphor is an established designation. For more on this idea see:

Francesca Rigotti, ‘The House as Metaphor’, in *From a Metaphorical Point of View: A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Cognitive Approach to the Metaphor*, ed. Zdravko Radman (Berlin Germany: W. de Gruyter, 1995).

The barn scene, in narrative and cinematography, itself reinforces the deep psychological damage that embracing a violent and dehumanizing slavery system entails. The audience follows Nat and the white men from the foreboding of the grubby homestead, an edifice we have observed only from the outside, along a path to meet Earl as he terrorizes the enslaved field hands, until we finally reach the barn. Evoking expressionist techniques of noir cinema, we are introduced into the dark barn space, sharply in contrast to the large doorway to the natural world outside – the world of light, and all its positive connotations. Already a space adorned with ominous farm implements (metal chains, hooks, and rope), we see that there is a smaller door within the barn, which leads to a separate, even darker space. It is in this deep, inner space, a physical and psychological location, that the two enslaved men are chained and where the cruel treatment and disturbing violence takes place. The chiaroscuro lighting – darkness broken by slithers of bright light from poorly boarded windows – utilizes the techniques of film noir, drawing attention to this space as a disturbing psychological arena. The “central preoccupations” of the film noir genre, notes scholar Andrew Spicer, are “claustrophobia, paranoia, despair and nihilism” – all visually expressed by this scene. All the while, the key protagonists, the Earl brothers, are themselves expressionless. These are, the film argues, the rancid psychological effects not just on individual white supremacists who engage in such cruelty, but more widely on the body politic. Psychologically, metaphorically, this is a putrefying hub which radiates its contagion outwards, a point analogized when Nat and Sam are almost knocked back by the smell as they enter the space.

The abject cruelty of the slavery system catalogued in Parker’s *Birth* is in sharp contrast with the paternalism propagated by Griffith. Even at Turner’s plantation, where the owner Sam Turner – who is seen as good friends with Nat and the other children as a boy – generally seems to treat the enslaved on his plantation relatively well, Nat is viciously beaten when he transgresses the social order by baptizing a white man, and is subsequently insubordinate to the local white preacher when challenged about his actions. Focusing on the cruelty of the slavery system, its inherent drive to crush the body and spirit of Black human beings, the film reflects the work of historians of the twentieth century such as Herbert Aptheker, one of the scholars who helped break the fiction propagated by white historians of a ‘moonlight and magnolias’ antebellum South.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> For an overview of Herbert Aptheker’s contribution to overturning the inaccurate characterizations of the pre-Civil War South, prevalent since the William Dunning school of history was established (see Chapter Two), see: Herbert Shapiro, ‘The Impact of the Aptheker Thesis: A Retrospective View of “American Negro Slave Revolts”’, *Science & Society*, 48.1 (1984), 52–73.

Further, the contagion that arises from this violently repressive system ignites a hysterical violence that cannot be contained. The second man subject to punishment in the barn, Will, later joins Nat's insurrection and, after killing Sam Turner, Nat and the others go from house to house killing white plantation families and overseers as they sleep – though noticeably, Parker restricts the objects of retributive violence to adults, sidestepping the historical record which makes clear that whole families, including children, were killed in the rebellion. When they arrive at the Fowler plantation, Will asks if he can be the one to exact revenge – or as the film argues for the entire insurrection, he is seeking to be the instrument of divine retribution. We watch over Nat's shoulder as Will proceeds into the darkness of the house, where it is clear from the noises that one Fowler brother has been murdered. As the other flees out to the front yard pursued by Will, the rebels and the audience watch as Will brutally kills Earl Fowler. The viewer sees only the upper part of Will's body in action, but it's clear from the noises, and Will's demonstration at the end of this sequence, that he has been hacking off Earl's head with a hatchet and his bare hands.

The film's messaging on the connections between white supremacy and its corruption of the early US nation state, along with a pointed suggestion that horrific, historical anti-Black violence and retributive response was engendered by that corrupted nationhood, are emphasized here through Parker's mise-en-scene – as he frames the entire sequence centrally in front of the homestead, the visual metaphor for the nation state. Confirming this larger, more profound narrative, the scene recalls and literalizes the allegorical religious promise which Nat, portrayed by Parker as a heavily religious leader and prophet, had made to his fellow insurrectionists earlier: "With the strength of our father we'll cut the head from the serpent – we'll destroy them all".<sup>434</sup> Evoking God as the only true Master, Nat's mission is not confined to his county rebellion, but the object is to destroy American slavery itself.

At this moment of extreme violence suggesting abject psychological bleakness, the committing of such a violent act, Parker suggests the Turner uprising will however have a regenerative effect on the nation. The boy who had joined the rebels is frightened and traumatized by what he has seen at the Fowler estate and runs away, informing local whites. Although he is a

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<sup>434</sup> While Turner did consider himself, according to the principal record of the events, a religious leader and prophet, Parker heavily accentuates this aspect of the Nat Turner story in his film (discussed later in this chapter). It is clear from numerous interviews that Parker sees himself as a religious person, a highly engaged Christian, and believes he had a religious calling to make the film. See for example: 'Southeast Backlot: The Nate Parker Interview – *Birth of a Nation*', *Stan Washington YouTube Channel*, 28 September 2016', < <https://youtu.be/14HQjh66xdQ> > [Accessed 3 February 2022].

traitor to the rebellion, the boy's actions are seen as his traumatized response to the intolerable, horrifying inhumanity and violence inherent in the slavery system, the circumstances that have provoked the violent acts of the uprising. The penultimate sequence of the film covers Nat's execution – but also his Christ-like ascendancy to heaven, suggesting that his rebellion was indeed part of a divine plan to free the enslaved in America. Moreover Parker then directly relates this moment to future emancipation. As Nat stands on the podium, noose in place, he sees the boy in the crowd and smiles at him; they lock eyes as they await the moment of Nat's execution. As the life drains from Nat's face in extreme close up, we switch to the boy's face, pushing in closer to focus on his eyes, with a tear emerging on to his cheek. Next the camera pulls back, and we see that the boy's head has morphed into that of a man; as the camera pulls out to full screen, we see first a United States flag waving behind him, and finally that he is at the centre of a band of Union soldiers, rifles at the ready as they march forward. It is clearly the Civil War, and Parker draws a direct line here, as do some historians, between the Nat Turner uprising and the later conflict.

For Parker – who has discussed how he identifies strongly with the figure of Nat Turner (minus the violence) – he hopes his film will play a role in this redemptive process, in “healing” society.<sup>435</sup> A heavily religious person, the intervention Parker hoped his film would make in contemporary discourse about race, injustice and national notions of American identity, are mirrored in the film itself. In one scene, Nat Turner baptizes a white man, so that he is ‘born again’ in religious terms, and free to start a new life. In my critical reading, this also approximates to Parker's intention with the *Birth* project, conveyed through his appropriation of Griffith's title, and the alternative story and historical moral framework that he depicts. In order to be reborn in contemporary harmony, contemporary American society must confront and own up to its violent and repressive past. It must recognize how those echoes persist in maintaining systemic injustice in the present, and take action to alter course, just like the white sinner in the film.

Griffith's *Birth*, and the political and social messaging it embodied, worked to promote a white supremacist ideology with a historical narrative that would reassure insecure whites of their primacy, and edit out the inconvenient truths of white racist brutality. Further, the film worked to establish the sense of a national, ‘righteous’, legacy for white supremacy in America, as an essential and essentialist element of being a true, American citizen – an identity

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<sup>435</sup> For Parker's identification with Turner and more about his motivations for making the film, see: Stan Washington, *SB- The Nate Parker Interview - Birth Of A Nation*, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14HQjh66xdQ>> [accessed 3 February 2022].

conceived of as white. This was a period when there was an obsession with [white] racial purity, and a prevalence of concepts (applied in legal contexts in some states) such as the one-drop rule determining that any ancestral 'Black blood' made a descendant Black, even if they looked white, and categorizations of Black people into shades of colour: octoroon, quadroon and more.<sup>436</sup> While these were not new concepts – the United States census had asked for information about racial identity since 1790 – the early twentieth century was a period of huge internal immigration from Europe, as well as the Great Migration of African Americans to mostly Northern urban areas from Southern rural states. All of these factors created a maelstrom where questions over American identity were intensified. These anxieties and obsession with 'white purity' worked to revitalize myths about the 'Lost Cause' and Southern (read as 'white') heroism in dominant discourses, which we see reflected in *Birth*. It is also seen in the proliferation of newly erected statues and other monuments to Confederate figures which also were erected at this time.<sup>437</sup> The KKK 'soldiers' also wear a cross upon a uniform of white cloth, a dual signifier of Caucasian ethnicity and of purity, associating whiteness itself with Christianity, and suggesting this anti-Black violence can be righteous within a morally relative universe. Conversely, Parker's *Birth* actively displaces Griffith's origin story, and exposes his fictionalizing of American history, a version of history which both reflects and promotes enduring myths of American exceptionalism.

Focusing on the brutal and brutalizing nature of slavery, as we have seen Parker's *Birth* emphasizes the psychological rot that comes with the exercise of white supremacist entitlement for the whole of society. He repudiates the myth that American history is a story of discrete chapters alternatively peaceful and turbulent, but always moving forward,

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<sup>436</sup> Terms such as quadroon and octoroon were added to the Census in 1890, examples of a host of terms for recording racial identity. See the following report from the Pew Research Center: Kim Parker et al, *Multiracial in America, Chapter 1: Race and Multiracial Americans in the U.S. Census*, 11 June 2015 <<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/06/11/chapter-1-race-and-multiracial-americans-in-the-u-s-census/>> [accessed 15 May 2022].

For more on early twentieth century preoccupations with racial identity, reflected in this section, see: Sarah Churchwell, *Behold America: The Entangled History of 'America First' and the 'American Dream'* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

<sup>437</sup> A century later, such monuments became the site of intense debate, and calls to remove them, during the Trump administration that followed Obama's presidency. They also became rallying points for white supremacist movements in the wake of Donald Trump's election victory, and his racially divisive rhetoric and policies. For more on white nationalist incidents over Confederate monuments, for example at Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 (footage from which was later used by Spike Lee at the start of his 2018 film *BlackKkKlansman*), see: Emily Blout and Patrick Burkart, 'White Supremacist Terrorism in Charlottesville: Reconstructing "Unite the Right"', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021), pp.1–22.

propelled by the innate heroism of a unified white 'race' anointed by God. Instead he replaces that myth with a description of slavery as a violent rupture in the country's history as well as a moral abomination and cancer. He asserts instead that a significant part of the heroicism projected by the hegemony as part of America's national DNA, belongs to the Black victims of slavery if it exists at all. This is exemplified in the film by the dignity, endurance and courage of Nat and the Black rebels, whose sacrifice and insurrection against the odds nevertheless paved the way for freedom for their descendants. A further implication is that the rebels' sacrifice also liberates the nation state from the cancerous legacies of slavery, picking up from Nat's baptism of the errant white sinner that we witnessed earlier. The Christian allegory of Nat's sacrifice as pretty much synonymous with Christ's sacrifice on the cross to redeem the human race, while jarring for the viewer, suggests that the overturning of slavery as an American institution also redeems the nation state from what Lincoln suggested was America's original sin, the institution of slavery, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> Inaugural Address of 1865.

This all amounts to a direct address to 21<sup>st</sup> century America, and arrived at the very the moment that nostalgia was being weaponized, and political and cultural mythmaking was reinvigorated by Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again', 2016 presidential election campaign. Much like the plantation genre of films kicked off by Griffith's *Birth*, and which were a reaction to the anxieties of the period, Trump's slogan was itself a retrogressive call to embrace a nostalgia for a re-versioning of the past, an imagined era free from concerns about loss of power for a white, predominantly male, hierarchical political and social structure in America.

While there is no room in this chapter to adequately explore the role of Christianity in the film, much less the role of the Christian right in America or their response to racialized violence, it is important to highlight as another national discourse the film seeks to intervene in. I posit *Birth* presented a timely provocation to Christian nationalists in America, at the very moment that Christian nationalism and the Christian right in America was on the rise, and gearing up for the next general election.<sup>438</sup> Their subsequent overwhelming support for Donald Trump played an important role in his election – despite (perhaps, in part, because of) the fact he was heavily supported by white supremacists in the United States, and had been the chief proponent of

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<sup>438</sup> In the last few years there has been increasing discussion (within and outside the academy) about the rise of Christian nationalism, and the links I make here. See for example: Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long; The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

'Birtherism' – a thinly veiled racial campaign to delegitimize Obama's presidency.<sup>439</sup> Parker's *Birth* argues that Christianity is instead firmly on the side of Black Americans – the victims not the proponents of white supremacy – and he expresses that by comprehensively weaving Christian iconography and ideology into the narrative and the visual culture of the film.<sup>440</sup>

### ***Parker's Birth and its Reception***

As Parker has indicated in interview, a governing principle for his project was to create a Black American version of the film *Braveheart* (1995), a biopic of William Wallace, the late 13<sup>th</sup> century Scottish hero of the struggle for independence.<sup>441</sup> Parker even went as far as to hire the same editor, Steven Rosenblum, and other figures associated with *Braveheart*.<sup>442</sup> This goes to explain the similarities in narrative focus on the rebellion's leader, and is reflected in other aspects of the film, such as the epic mode of the score in several places, as well as the inappropriate and jarring sentimentality of certain scenes.<sup>443</sup> The use of these tonal registers is increasingly employed in the film alongside the narrative drive to emphasize Nat as a Christ-like, messianic figure. As discussed, the result is a highly religious film – amidst many visual and narrative references associating him with Christ, Turner is literally welcomed into heaven by an angel, for instance; and at several points in the narrative he is framed in shot in a crucifixion-like pose, prefiguring the sacrifice of his final execution.

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<sup>439</sup> For more on this, see for example:

Vincent N Pham, 'Our Foreign President Barack Obama: The Racial Logics of Birther Discourses, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 8.2 (2015), 86-107.

<sup>440</sup> Nate Parker often discusses his Christian faith. For example:

Alissa Wilkinson, 'A Conversation with Nate Parker about *Birth of a Nation*', *Christianity Today*, 11 August 2016

<<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/august-web-only/conversation-with-nate-parker-about-birth-of-nation.html>> [accessed 10 March 2021].

<sup>441</sup> Parker mentions this frequently in interviews. See for example:

Lurie Daniel Favors, 'Nate Parker Speaks Part 2: Mike Brown, Art & Activism, The Nat Turner Project', *Afro State of Mind*, 2014,

<http://www.afrostateofmind.com/nate-parker-speaks-part-2-mike-brown-art-activism-the-nat-turner-project/>> [accessed 8/1/2022].

<sup>442</sup> See Bill Desowitz, '*The Birth of a Nation*: How Mel Gibson Helped Nate Parker', *Indiewire*, 6/10/2016.

<sup>443</sup> For example, at 1:34, the remaining rebels stop to consider the rising dawn, before progressing to Jerusalem. The first half of the scene sees them appear to almost nostalgically reminisce on the tasks they would normally be doing at this time of day on the plantation. Music plays an overly pronounced role in this film; here the mix between a hazy spiritual and overly sentimentalized tone create a highly jarring register, which even borders on satire.

The film is also highly patriarchal – the Black female figures are largely one-dimensional, and seem to exercise little agency or resistance to slavery, psychologically or literally. They barely speak in the film in comparison with male characters, and while one of the female actresses, Gabrielle Union has clarified that this was a scripting decision taken together with the cast, it lends the film a heavily anachronistic feel from the perspective of gender dynamics. This narrative patriarchal drive eventually undermines the film, following Parker and his co-writer Jean Celestin’s decision to invent a rape scene (which features nowhere in the historical record), where Turner’s wife Cherry is brutalized by the local white slave patrol. This becomes the moment that essentially galvanizes Turner into action – which turns Turner’s subsequent actions from being a rebellion of huge significance, to a tonally much more familiar tale of paternalistic revenge. As scholar Manisha Sinha has pointed out, this interweaving of the “love story” into the much more substantial story of the revolt significantly weakens the latter account, which is compounded by other artistic choices which downplay related aspects of the historical record so that narrative focus can remain on Turner. Sinha identifies, for example, the omission of a female rebel who was executed with the others for her part in the uprising. The relatively short time the film dwells on the truly bloodthirsty retribution of whites, who killed hundreds of Black people in the region, free and enslaved, unrelated to the uprising, is another example.<sup>444</sup> In short, Parker’s re-versioning of Turner’s uprising in this way, “serves to eviscerate the radical nature of Turner’s revolt”, a revolt which had truly alarmed whites in the region and beyond, who continued to fear its consequences.<sup>445</sup>

While this chapter is not focused on the many missteps in the film, it is important to note that such problems as narrative tone and choices came to be extremely important in the reception of *Birth* – not least because it had been greatly anticipated as an important story to be told at the very moment when the Black Lives Matter movement and other racial justice activism had gained ground. The media reported rapturous applause for the film’s reception at Sundance, *before* the showing, and it also won two major prizes at the festival, the Grand Jury Prize as well as the Audience Award. The film showing also resulted in a bidding war amongst distributors, with Fox Searchlight winning out with a reported \$17.5 million, a record for the festival and a demonstration of how ‘the Obama effect’, of a public a little more willing to engage with America’s racist past, could be monetized by a Hollywood eager to sell it to them. However the film’s timeliness intersected with (or rather, was overshadowed by) another

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<sup>444</sup> See: Manisha Sinha, ‘Slavery on Screen’, *Dissent*, 64.2 (2017), 16-20.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

rising issue in public consciousness at the time – concerns over misogyny, patriarchal abuse, and sexual violence towards women.

A few months after the Sundance premiere, it came to light that Nate Parker and his friend Jean Celestin, a writer who had developed the story with him, had years earlier faced trial for rape of a fellow female student when they had attended the Pennsylvania State University. Parker was cleared, but Celestin was convicted, though this was later overturned; (Celestin was due to face a new trial, but the State could not locate the woman by that time, and he was released from prison). According to the family of the accuser, she never recovered from the entire ordeal, dropping out of university and tragically committing suicide a few years later.<sup>446</sup> The story was highly disturbing, as the woman accused Celestin and Parker of raping her while she was drunk and asleep in their apartment. She also accused them of repeatedly harassing her after she had gone to the university authorities. Parker and Celestin conversely said the woman had consented to sex. When the case became news a few months after *Birth's* premiere at Sundance, during the publicity trail for his film, Parker appeared to react with some irritation at being asked about it, and little sympathy for the woman, telling the film magazine *Deadline*, "I will not relive that period of my life every time I go under the microscope."<sup>447</sup> He also stressed that his film *Birth* was about fighting injustice, that he himself was out to fight injustice, and initially at least, seemed uninterested in expressing interest in what the woman had suffered. A few days later, apparently after discovering the woman had committed suicide, reports say Parker wrote that he did feel 'sorrow' for the woman via

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<sup>446</sup> In this section I have taken the details for Nate Parker's case from several reputable news media reports, some of which contain interviews with Parker. The case was widely discussed in the media. See for example:

Michael Cieply and Mike Fleming Jr., 'Fox Searchlight, Nate Parker Confront Old Sex Case That Could Tarnish *The Birth Of A Nation*', *Deadline* (12 August 2016)

< <https://deadline.com/2016/08/nate-parker-sex-case-the-birth-of-a-nation-oscar-race-fox-searchlight-1201799115/>> [accessed 1 May 2022]

Molly Redden, 'The story of Nate Parker's rape accuser and a university's cold shoulder', *The Guardian* (19 August 2016)

< <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/19/nate-parker-rape-penn-state-jean-celestin>> [accessed 4 May 2022]

For a useful discussion about the intersecting narratives at work in the Parker case (narratives of race, gender, toxic masculinity and patriarchal hegemony), which illustrate how cultural norms have shifted, see:

Morgan Jenkins, 'Why The Debate Over Nate Parker Is So Complex', *The Atlantic* (21 August 2016)

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/08/why-the-debate-over-nate-parker-is-so-complex/496700/>.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, *Deadline*, 12 August 2016.

FaceBook.<sup>448</sup> The feminist critic and scholar Roxane Gay summed up many people's feelings about Parker's apparent lack of contrition or understanding about his accuser's suffering, however: "Most of what he has to say about that 'painful moment' involves how he felt, how he was affected... The solipsism is staggering."<sup>449</sup> As a result, the film was the subject of an international boycott by many cinema-goers, and did not recoup anything like the revenues expected.<sup>450</sup>

Parker's position in confronting critics was made worse by the fact that he had inserted the rape scene into the story's narrative, despite its absence in the historical record, and yet his having claimed (as did Griffith in the face of his detractors) that *Birth* was very well researched. It is not even clear from the historical record if Nat Turner was married. Parker had presumably chosen to include it to draw attention to the vulnerability of enslaved women to sexual violence from whites during slavery, as well as the impunity of white men to commit such acts. This was probably also an echo of Oscar Micheaux's 1920 film *Within our Gates* – Micheaux's powerful retort to Griffith's film; Parker discussed both films in interviews about his own *Birth* project.<sup>451</sup> Micheaux countered Griffith and his pedalling of white supremacist claims about Black male hyper-sexuality with a scene depicting the attempted rape of the film's Black heroine, Sylvia, one of the more violent scenes in the film. Whatever Parker's purposes, his use of the scene is revealing of his own attitudes about patriarchal violence, as discussed above. Moreover, it is troubling that he chose to utilize such an important facet of Black women's history essentially as a plot device on which to valorize the male hero, metaphorically re-exploiting Black women and their experience of sexual violence – something not lost on commentators and scholars.<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Martha Ross, 'After Brock Turner, Nate Parker Struggles to Overcome Controversy from 1999 Campus Rape Case', *The Mercury News*, 23 August 2016 <<https://www.mercurynews.com/2016/08/23/after-brock-turner-nate-parker-struggles-to-overcome-controversy-from-1999-campus-rape-case/>> [accessed 15 May 2022].

<sup>449</sup> Roxane Gay, 'Opinion | Nate Parker and the Limits of Empathy', *The New York Times*, 19 August 2016, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/opinion/sunday/nate-parker-and-the-limits-of-empathy.html>> [accessed 15 May 2022].

<sup>450</sup> According to the film revenues data site Box Office Mojo, the film made a little less than twice its budget. *The Birth of a Nation*, Box Office Mojo <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt4196450/>> [accessed 26 April 2022].

<sup>451</sup> See: 'Meet the Artist '16: Nate Parker', *Sundance Institute YouTube Channel*, 13 January 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5i7o41THM4>> [accessed 3 February 2022].

<sup>452</sup> Some scholars have also discussed this double exploitation. See for example Salamishah Tillet, 'How *The Birth of a Nation* Silences Black Women', *The New York Times*, 12 October 2016 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/movies/how-the-birth-of-a-nation-silences-black-women.html>> [accessed 4 January 2022]

I argue this public response was at least in part down to the intersectional intellectual discourses about the exploitation of African American women which moved much further into the mainstream during the Obama years, in the environment of the Black Lives Matter protests – discourses which I suggest also contributed to the social tectonic shift that came with the public outcry against the sexual abuse of women a year later, under the #MeToo banner.<sup>453</sup> It is noticeable, however, that amongst scholars as well as the public, a second rape of an enslaved woman in Parker’s story tends to be overlooked, or registers as a more minor part of the analysis. One of the key events that leads Nat to question the benevolence of Turner’s plantation, is when Sam Turner offers a female slave (Esther) as a sexual ‘gift’ to an influential guest in order to boost his reputation – an example of the rape of Black women by white slave owners in the antebellum period, which was carried out on a massive scale.<sup>454</sup> Again disappointingly Parker deals with it squarely through a patriarchal lens – only her husband is asked about the event, and his suffering and humiliation are prioritized. While the storyline may have simply been overshadowed for critics, given the outcry over Parker’s background and insertion of the rape scene for Cherry, it is indicative of what scholar Rachel Feinstein calls “one of the least examined topics within slavery and the experience of black women”.<sup>455</sup> Parker’s choices here are particularly surprising given that this particular issue had been much more comprehensively explored (and drawn critical plaudits), by Steve McQueen’s earlier *12 Years a Slave* (2013) - which I turn to below.

### ***Slavery and the Obama Era Zeitgeist***

Writing in 2017, scholar Manisha Sinha observes that during the Obama era several films appeared focusing on slavery and race – something she attributes to audiences becoming “more receptive to this new history”. *12 Years* and *Birth* are joined by *Lincoln* and *Django Unchained*, she notes (both 2012, directed by Steven Spielberg and Quentin Tarantino

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<sup>453</sup> For a useful, intersectional analysis of both these movements, see: Linda Greene et al., ‘Talking About Black Lives Matter and #MeToo’, *Wisconsin Journal of Gender, Law and Society*, 34 (2019) [https://scholarship.law.uci.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1791&context=faculty\\_scholarship](https://scholarship.law.uci.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1791&context=faculty_scholarship)

<sup>454</sup> Several scholars argue that the mass rape of enslaved Black women is severely overlooked by historians and others. See for example, Rachel Feinstein, *When Rape Was Legal: The Untold History of Sexual Violence During Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

respectively); though these latter two, by white directors, are not driven by the interior experience of slavery.<sup>456</sup> Philip Kaisary suggests that the renewed interest in the history of slavery more generally has come as both the public and scholars revisit debates about slavery and capitalism, reparations, and the prompts of several significant anniversaries connected with the institution.<sup>457</sup> Film industry columnists add that Industry insiders and others started to talk about the ‘Obama effect’ in Hollywood, when films which dealt with slavery (even if more obliquely as with *Lincoln*), started to get made.<sup>458</sup> Given, as Steve McQueen has remarked, Hollywood tends to be much happier with repetition than embracing new ideas, I suggest that economic factors likely guided Hollywood’s decision-making in greenlighting multiple projects connected with slavery – but that in itself suggests that they determined there was a market for it. As discussed earlier, by the time it came to Parker’s *Birth* debuting at Sundance in January 2016 (before Parker’s past came on to the public radar), the film had even sparked a bidding war amongst distributors – despite the film falling far short of the craft quality of *12 Years*, released just over two years earlier.<sup>459</sup> Whatever Hollywood’s motives, Sinha argues that the proliferation of such films was a progressive sign that Americans “will finally reckon with the history and legacy of slavery”, given that millions of them have paid to see depictions of American slavery on film.<sup>460</sup> She further observes that these Obama-era films “have given us more powerful and nuanced representations of slavery than we have seen before.”<sup>461</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Sinha, as above.

<sup>457</sup> Philip Kaisary, ‘The Slave Narrative and Filmic Aesthetics: Steve McQueen, Solomon Northup, and Colonial Violence’, *MELUS*, 42.2 (2017), 94–114 (p.94).

<sup>458</sup> Sharon Waxman, ‘Harvey Weinstein on Rise of African-American Film: “It’s the Obama Effect” (Exclusive)’, *The Wrap*, 10 September 2013  
<<https://www.thewrap.com/harvey-weinstein-on-rise-of-african-american-film-its-the-obama-effect-exclusive/>> [accessed 22 April 2022].

<sup>459</sup> Jeff Sneider, ‘Slave Revolt Drama *Birth of a Nation* Sells to Fox Searchlight for \$17.5 Million in Record Deal’, *The Wrap*, 26 January 2016  
<<https://www.thewrap.com/nate-parkers-racially-charged-birth-of-a-nation-sells-to-fox-searchlight-for-17-5-million/>> [accessed 26 April 2022].

The huge success of McQueen’s film, reportedly making sales of nearly \$188 million worldwide from a \$20m budget, will likely have influenced Fox’s decision to support *Birth*. Following its controversies, however, *Birth*’s sales were hugely affected.

<sup>460</sup> Sinha, as above, p.16.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

I posit that for the Black directors of the renaissance, the focus on racial slavery, and the instinct to bring these stories of slavery to the big screen during the Obama period (McQueen also decided he wanted to make a film about slavery in 2009), indicates that filmmakers themselves had a renewed interest in investigating and engaging with the origins of anti-Black racism in America. This was a moment of heightened public discussion about race, as well as reactionary racial hostility from white supremacists, and the expansion of the right wing in American politics with the growth of the Tea Party movement.<sup>462</sup> As artists keen to engage contemporary debate, in this context it is clear that a deep delve into the antebellum world, in order to better understand the persistence of racism and white supremacist ideologies at work in the present, was a political step.<sup>463</sup>

Steve McQueen has noted a breadth of social and intellectual factors driving interest in *12 Years a Slave* in this period upon its release, commenting that, in his summation that people were finally “open to wanting to deal with this subject matter”. Speaking in 2014 at a screen talk, he also listed the phenomenon of Obama – the historic event of the election of a Black president; as well as the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery [the Emancipation Declaration], and the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington. He further suggested that the recent removal of voting rights, as well as the killing of Trayvon Martin and acquittal of his killer, added to this mix.<sup>464</sup> “It’s a perfect storm, right now, and I think people are asking themselves who are they, and what are they, within the context of now. And how they’ve come to this”, he said.<sup>465</sup>

As a visual artist of Caribbean (Grenadian) heritage, and the descendant of enslaved people, McQueen had already started to explore imperialism, slavery, colonialism and resistance in

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<sup>462</sup> Bruce Baum, *The Post-liberal Imagination: Political Scenes from the American Cultural Landscape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>463</sup> The notion of America having supposedly reached a post-racial state is discussed by several scholars and cultural commentators. See for example: Matthew W. Hughey, ‘Show Me Your Papers! Obama’s Birth and the Whiteness of Belonging’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 35.2 (2012), 163–81. Mark Ledwidge, Inderjeet Parmar, Kevern Verney, eds., *Barack Obama and the myth of a post-racial America* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>464</sup> The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which had guaranteed federal protections for all voters to prevent the disenfranchisement of Black voters by individual States using spurious criteria, was greatly weakened by the Supreme Court in 2013. The Court argued that such protections were no longer necessary. (See Chapter One for more on the battle for voting rights, dramatized by in Ava DuVernay’s *Selma* (2014).

<sup>465</sup> *Steve McQueen: 12 Years a Slave Interview*, Lincoln Center (NY) Interview, 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9J7KKE7BTw>> [accessed 25 April 2022].

earlier artworks, such as the juxtaposed films *Carib's Leap/Western Deep* (2002). The former, set in Grenada, centred on a site where indigenous islanders had jumped from a cliff to their deaths in 1651, rather than agree to European control; the latter set in a contemporaneous South African coalmine, where an almost entirely Black mining workforce work for a mining company which has remained in the same hands since the days of Apartheid, and where they descend daily into the literal (and allegorical) dangerous space of the world's deepest mineshaft.<sup>466</sup> Elements of these explorations of the violent outcomes of global slavery and western imperialism appear in *12 Years*, such as the use of prolonged periods of quiet and punctuating, rupturing, terrifying noise. But in 2009 he decided that he wanted to investigate the institution of slavery through narrative film.<sup>467</sup> Further, McQueen has noted that he was struck by the similarities between slavery and the Holocaust of WWII. As a resident of Amsterdam, he also noticed that Solomon Northup's describing his "first-hand experiences of slavery" reminded him of the diary of Anne Frank, the Jewish child-diarist who endured two years in hiding from the Nazis before being discovered and dying in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.<sup>468</sup> There have been hundreds of films about WWII and the Holocaust, McQueen said, and yet there was "a hole in the canon of cinema about this particular subject".<sup>469</sup>

It seems that *12 Years* indeed hit a social and cultural nerve both in America and beyond; hugely feted in the press, it also made nearly \$188 million worldwide, a great deal for a film about slavery. It won multiple awards, including the coveted Best Picture Oscar, the first time ever that the work of a Black director had won the award. It was met with a great deal of acclaim in the academy and without; *New Yorker* critic David Denby reflected many reviews in the media when he called it "easily the greatest feature film ever made about American slavery", and Henry Louis Gates Jr., also an advisor for the film (as well as for Spielberg's

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<sup>466</sup> For this and more commentary on these artworks, see: James Lingwood, ed., *Steve McQueen: Carib's Leap/Western Deep Exhibition Catalogue*, Documenta 11 [Art Exhibition] (Kassel, Germany, 2002). Thomas McEvelley, 'Documenta 11', *Frieze*, 69 (September 2002).

<sup>467</sup> McQueen discusses this in multiple interviews. See for example: Bloomberg Quicktake: Originals, *Steve McQueen: Why I Made '12 Years a Slave'*, 2014 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BS\\_5iEdzzm0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BS_5iEdzzm0)> [accessed 24 April 2022].

<sup>468</sup> Bloomberg Quicktake (see above).

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

McQueen discusses the dearth in films focused on slavery here, for example: Ben Child, 'Steve McQueen accuses film industry of ignoring slavery', *The Guardian*, 3 January 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/03/steve-mcqueen-slavery-12-years-a-slave>> [accessed 2 May 2022].

*Lincoln*), called it "the most vivid and authentic portrayal of American slavery ever captured on screen".<sup>470</sup>

Like Parker, McQueen seeks to explore slavery as a means to understand the present. He has also outlined that, though the work is important, it is the debate it inspires which is more important, describing his filmmaking as akin to throwing a pebble in a lake – the ripples in public discourse are what counts.<sup>471</sup> Notably the factors McQueen suggests (above) which made the time ripe for a public soul-searching about matters of racism, history and anti-Black violence, also highlight that this pathway was peppered with contradictions for African Americans. Alongside the achievement of the first Black presidency, for example, and the commemoration of the political pronouncement which marks the end of slavery sits continued violence towards African Americans, particularly the shocking event of the teenage Trayvon Martin's senseless killing – and importantly, the laws which made such moral outrages legal.

### ***Slavery and the Legacy of Policing Blackness***

*12 Years* entered into public and cultural space in 2013 when the frustration at the continued oppression of Black people in America was crystallizing, with the acquittal of teenager Trayvon Martin's killer. The verdict prompted three Black women activists – Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza – to begin the Black Lives Matter campaign, drawing attention to the fact that Black America had, despite having a Black president, still not attained citizenship on equal terms with whites, given the huge inequalities in society, particularly in law enforcement and the wider carceral system (discussed more broadly below). The death of Martin was the tipping point of a multitude of factors discussed above – and recent challenges disproportionately facing many African Americans. Such challenges as the effects of the 2008 economic crash on already struggling Black communities; the ongoing effects of the War on Drugs policies, dating from the 1980s; and further, the systemic failures arising from racial biases which led to "uniquely devastating outcomes" for Black people in New Orleans, when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005.<sup>472</sup> As scholar Jelani Cobb and others point out, the frustration

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<sup>470</sup> Andrew Anthony, '12 Years a Slave and the Roots of America's Shameful Past', *The Observer*, 5 January 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/05/12-years-a-slave-america-shameful-past>> [accessed 22 April 2022].

<sup>471</sup> See: Richard Suchet, 'McQueen Slams Hollywood for Ignoring Slavery', *Sky News*, 3 January 2014.

<sup>472</sup> For the disproportionate effects of the 2008 recession, see:

with having achieved a Black presidency, but still suffering from glaring racial injustices, particularly with regard to the criminal justice system, was also an important factor.<sup>473</sup>

This was the environment which birthed the Black Lives Matter movement, and in 2014 it turbocharged into the public arena. Amidst a climate of already heightened public discourse about race, that year saw yet more killings of unarmed Black people by police, two of which in particular became rallying points for protest, when neither resulted in a Grand jury indictment for the perpetrators. Eric Garner's death in New York was a horrifying incident, ruled a homicide, and pre-figured the later killing of George Floyd in 2020 (discussed in Chapter One), as both victims protested that they could not breathe while they were in the process of being killed. Shortly afterwards teenager Mike Brown was shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. In an area where there was already an established bedrock of distrust of the police from the Black community, due to discriminatory policing practices, the death sparked huge protests, and an FBI civil rights investigation.<sup>474</sup> A subsequent Department of Justice investigation into the local police force found deep seated racial biases, and a governing strategy based on revenue generation rather than protecting the public:

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Rakesh Kochhar and Richard Fry, *Wealth inequality has widened along racial, ethnic lines since end of Great Recession*, Pew Research Center (Washington, 12 December 2014)  
< <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/12/racial-wealth-gaps-great-recession/>>

For more on the effects of Hurricane Katrina on African Americans in the region, see: Kristin E. Henkel, John F. Dovidio, and Samuel L. Gaertner, '2006. Institutional Discrimination, Individual Racism and Hurricane Katrina', *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 6.1 (2006), 99-124.

Spike Lee also addressed the events around Hurricane Katrina contemporaneously, in the documentary *When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006).

For a comprehensive study into the effects of the political and policing strategy of the War on Drugs, see:

Michelle Alexander's seminal text:

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: The New Press, 2012).

<sup>473</sup> See Cobb (as above).

Also:

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

<sup>474</sup> *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department*, Department of Justice Civil Rights Division (Washington, 4 March 2015), p.2.

< [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/doj\\_report\\_on\\_shooting\\_of\\_michael\\_brown\\_1.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/doj_report_on_shooting_of_michael_brown_1.pdf)>

See also a summarising press notice (providing link to the report, above):

<<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-findings-two-civil-rights-investigations-ferguson-missouri>> [accessed 29 April 2022].

**“Ferguson’s own data establish clear racial disparities that adversely impact African Americans...**

**“The City’s emphasis on revenue generation has a profound effect on FPD’s [Ferguson Police Department’s] approach to law enforcement. Patrol assignments and schedules are geared toward aggressive enforcement of Ferguson’s municipal code, with insufficient thought given to whether enforcement strategies promote public safety or unnecessarily undermine community trust and cooperation... Partly as a consequence of City and FPD priorities, many officers appear to see some residents, especially those who live in Ferguson’s predominantly African American neighborhoods, less as constituents to be protected than as potential offenders and sources of revenue.”<sup>475</sup> [my bold]**

As the DOJ report into Ferguson indicates, Black people in America may be no longer regarded as property, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century state agents can still treat them as units of economic production. The report also found that the use of force against African Americans was at a disproportionately high rate, “accounting for 88% of all cases from 2010 to August 2014 in which an FPD officer reported using force.” As these statistics suggest, when threatening coercion isn’t enough, African Americans can still be subject to the violent insistence that they agree to be subordinate to agents of the state.

Racial bias in policing is far from confined to Ferguson. These figures underline the overarching discourse which emerges in both *Birth* but particularly *12 Years* – the persistence of a relentless delimiting of the Black experience in America. In what the films suggest is a legacy of slavery, this restrictive practise is achieved in the everyday experience of the literal policing of African Americans, in the service of privileging a white hegemony and maintaining its economic advantage. This overall motif of constriction emerges throughout the films, and contradicts the national ‘land of the free’ myth, promoted in contemporary America through the national anthem and its ubiquitous proxy, the American flag. I posit that the practice of surveillant control would have resonated heavily for audiences in the contexts in which the films were circulated since 2013 – and continue to do so. The experience of physical and psychological restriction is depressingly familiar for many Black Americans, over a hundred and fifty years after Solomon’s kidnap.

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid. DOJ report, p.2.

Some of the data in the Ferguson report is particularly striking in its pertinence to both the physical and psychological trope of restriction, and literally stopping Black people from moving.<sup>476</sup> African Americans number two thirds of the local population, but accounted for 85% of traffic stops, and 93% of arrests, in the study period of 2012-2014. They were twice as likely to be searched during a vehicular stop – despite the fact they are over a quarter less likely to have contraband found on them. Further, officers in Ferguson (and elsewhere) are allowed to charge people based on where they are walking – via “Manner of Walking” violations, a bylaw to ensure pedestrians use the sidewalks or walk by the side of the road. Black Americans accounted for 95% of such charges in Ferguson – in what I posit amounts to a policy of harassing Black people’s physical and mental liberty. Interviewed for the *Los Angeles Times*, a local Ferguson resident described the experience in ways that sound similar to the way vagrancy laws were used in the post-Reconstruction era, spurious reasons to arrest African Americans, in order to make money from their prison labour:<sup>477</sup>

“ ‘We call it walking black’, said Kevin Seltzer, 30. ‘You would leave out of your house to go to the store and might not make it back’.

“ ‘They’ll stalk you and stop you,’ he said. ‘They will say, “Hey, what’s your name? Got any warrants? Why are you strolling through the neighborhood? Come here, you look suspicious.”’<sup>478</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid. All of the figures in this paragraph can be found in the DoJ report, p.62.

<sup>477</sup> For more on the system of convict leasing, making money from the labour of Black people in prisons, see:

Gilda Graff, ‘The Intergenerational Trauma of Slavery and Its Aftermath’, *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 41.3 (2014), pp.181–97 (pp.185-6).

Graff points to how the prisons in the post-Reconstruction era functioned as a replacement for slavery. This was most symbolically represented by the Parchment Farm, formerly a cotton plantation and now still Mississippi’s State Penitentiary – where inmates in the early twentieth century could be seen picking cotton in an echo of their enslaved forefathers, complete with guards carrying shotguns.

<sup>478</sup> Molly Hennessy-Fiske, ‘Walking in Ferguson: If You’re Black, It’s Often against the Law’, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 March 2015

<<https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-walking-black-ferguson-police-justice-report-20150305-story.html>> [accessed 16 April 2022].

## ***Wider system of control***

Long subject to a system governed by a white, largely conservative hegemony, African Americans have historically continued to be excluded or restricted from entry to many areas of civic and cultural life. That has been effected through formal systems like Jim Crow, or informal routes, such as setting up private schools to circumvent desegregation legislation for education. It has manifested in the post-Jim Crow (but nevertheless de-facto) segregation of housing in many American towns and cities, with many African Americans abandoned to poorer neighbourhoods.<sup>479</sup> This system of control is in the everyday encounters for Black people – being followed around shops by security guards, for example, or, as in the tragic case of Trayvon Martin and multiple other cases, being identified as an alien presence in a local neighbourhood and accosted by a neighbourhood watch volunteer. More broadly, it manifests in the skewed or otherwise limited representation of Blackness in the media; as well as exclusion or restricting of Black progression into and through certain career pathways, including the film industry. In summary, as I mentioned in Chapter One, Reverend Al Sharpton was to put it succinctly in 2020, when he linked the mechanism of George Floyd’s murder by a police officer to the Black American experience:

“George Floyd’s story is the story of Black folks... The reason we could never be who we wanted and dreamed of being was, you kept your knee on our necks.”<sup>480</sup>

Sharpton here reflects the repercussions of hundreds of years of the formal and informal policing of Blackness in America, exercised through a panoply of areas as I have described, and persisting despite the winning of new freedoms as times and legislation changed. Often, as the works of the Black filmmaking renaissance highlight, that overall system of policing and restriction has been carried out through violence, and perpetuated by the terrorizing fear of being its victim.

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<sup>479</sup> Douglas S Massey and Nancy A Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>480</sup> See: ‘ “Get your knee off our necks”: Al Sharpton delivers eulogy at George Floyd memorial – video’, *The Guardian*, 5 June 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2020/jun/05/get-your-knee-off-our-necks-al-sharpton-delivers-eulogy-at-floyd-memorial-video>> [accessed 10 January 2021].

In *Birth*, a slave patrol – the forerunners to the present day police force in America – use spurious arguments to accost Nat’s wife Cherry when she’s drawing water from the well near the road. Their leader Cobb argues that she is in a spot that conflicts with “State law”:

Anybody that knows nothing knows that State law says that if a n\_\_\_\_’s less than 10 paces from a tree line, that n\_\_\_\_ need a pass.” (52:55)

Cobb asks Cherry for her pass, and when she replies that she’s on her master’s property, he accuses her of “sassing” him; when she offers to fetch a pass, he tells her she’s “going nowhere”, removing his hat and, together with the other men, closes in towards her. The conversation boxes Cherry in psychologically, and the physical movement of the men towards her echoes the same with their circling and enclosing action. While we cut away from what happens next, we later see the savagery that has been wreaked upon Cherry, who is unrecognizable from the beating and sexual assault she has endured.

McQueen shows the lives of the enslaved in *12 Years* as relentlessly subject to mechanisms of surveillance and control, their movements either physically, mentally or even spiritually circumscribed. He draws the distinction between the freedom Northup enjoys in the North before his kidnapping, and the moment he wakes up in chains in the illegal slave pen in Washington (t.c. 11:11). While scholarship reveals that life in the antebellum North was usually far from equal for many Black Americans (in many places they did not have the vote, for example), McQueen here is less focused on this broader issue of racial disparity across the US. Here he is interested primarily on excavating the meanings and experiences of slavery legitimized within a conceptually ‘free world’, nineteenth century America.<sup>481</sup> As discussed in interview, from early in the project he wanted to explore slavery through the idea of a man who is taken from freedom into bondage. This instinct would seem to mirror McQueen’s own desire to go on an investigative journey, from 21<sup>st</sup> century freedom to the period when Black people (including his own ancestors in the Caribbean) were enslaved – and he seeks to take present-day audiences on the journey alongside him, with Northup as the guide.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> The historiography on the lives of antebellum Northern free Black people is far smaller than for the enslaved in the South. According to scholars like Patrick Rael and Van Gosse, this is changing. For recent work reappraising the activism of Northern African Americans, see: Patrick Rael, ‘Free Black Activism in the Antebellum North’, *The History Teacher*, 39.2 (2006), 215-253. Van Gosse, *The first Reconstruction: Black Politics in America from the First Reconstruction to the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

<sup>482</sup> Mark Brown, ‘Steve McQueen: I’m here because my family went through slavery’, *The Guardian*, 18 October 2013.

This notion of one's sudden loss of liberty also dialogues with contemporary ruptures of community and family life for African American communities. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor describes the shocking numbers of men in Ferguson who are "missing" from the community because they've been swallowed up by a criminal justice system disproportionately keen to inter Black bodies: "more than 40 percent of Black men in both the 20-24 and 35-54 age groups are missing," she writes.<sup>483</sup> She adds that in the wider United States, "a million African Americans incarcerated... one in four Black men (in the age group twenty to twenty-nine) are under control of the criminal justice system".<sup>484</sup> And "1.5 million Black men are "missing" – snatched from society by imprisonment or premature death."<sup>485</sup> This has a hugely destabilizing effect on communities, and as Taylor points out, Obama prompted particular anger at his occasional chiding of "absentee fathers" in the Black community, without addressing one of the key, racially-inflected causes for their absence.<sup>486</sup>

The juxtaposition and cognitive dissonance for Northrup (and for the film audience) of his waking up in the cell is all the more of a rupture because the cross-cutting sequence that precedes it, where we see his companions drug him, but we also see him in warmly lit, fine-dining surroundings with them, a scene of warmth, conviviality and equality. The contrast with the next scene is then brutal. Movingly shot to spotlight Northrup's sudden isolation and suffering, the basement cell is completely dark except for a square shaft of light from a window high on the wall, which spotlights for Northrup that his hands and feet are in iron chains, the light literally highlighting his new reality. Even the light itself echoes the sense of being circumscribed, illuminating only a restricted portion of the cell. When his jailers (slavers) arrive soon after, they brush aside his protestations that he is a free man, and viciously beat him, literally pounding a new identity – a "Georgia runaway" – into him. Again, the violence of the scenes serves to shock us out of complacency; the atmosphere of civility and racial harmony we had been lulled into is seen to be merely veneer, deception, when set within an overarching system which designated Black people as units of labour. When the slavers leave him, he cries in the direction of the window for help, but the camera pans up to reveal that he

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< <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/oct/18/steve-mcqueen-12-years-a-slave>> [accessed: 1 December 2021]

<sup>483</sup> Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor, as above, pp.165-6.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., p.143.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid., p.143.

is still in Washington, with the distant White House bathed in sunlight – the state at once prevailing over the brutal system of slavery by supporting it, and deaf to the plight of Black people subject to its savage inhumanity. For the disproportionate numbers of African Americans ensnared within the criminal justice system in what Michelle Alexander terms ‘the New Jim Crow’, this is highly resonant - given a pernicious system of bail bonds, plea deals and uncompromising mandatory sentencing, making it especially difficult to escape for Black Americans in low income households. Given that almost a third of Black households earn less than \$25,000 (a little over £20,000), Northup’s enraging confinement, with no help from the state, connects it to the present day as a historical precedent.<sup>487</sup>

Thereafter Northup’s movements are largely curtailed, circumscribed, or need to be sanctioned by whites. At one point Northup is consumed by the idea of running away as he travels on an errand for his owner’s wife Mrs Epps, running blindly through the trees as he flees from the road – only to come across the execution of two slaves by a slave patrol, a scene horrifying in its quotidian nature (t.c.1:03:30). Luckily for Northup he has a pass to show the patrolmen, but the terrifying scene he witnesses reinforces the deep psychological stranglehold created and enforced by the whites. Northup will not try to run away again.

This process of restricting enslaved people’s mental and physical freedom, enforced by physical violence, is everywhere in the film. It conveys very well that slavery society relied on what amounts to a conspiratorial approach among whites, to assert control at all times – which speaks to their anxiety, given they were living in environments where they were often largely outnumbered by the people they were holding in bondage. Northup is inaugurated into this system from the moment he wakes in the Washington slave pen, and subsequently transported in a goods cart under the cover of both night and a tarpaulin, to a river dock for the trip South. When they arrive, in a startling overhead shot, McQueen shows the tarpaulin rolled back by the slavers to reveal that the men and women who have been illegally taken are arranged in the cart in semi-foetal positions. And indeed, this is where they are to be reborn into a hellish new existence, with new identities and stripped of their status as human beings. The river journey is thus a perverse baptism, a River Styx-like passage traversing the boundary between the earth and the underworld. The trip also echoes the treatment of African forefathers as it gestures to the experience of the Middle Passage, including the rape of one of

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<sup>487</sup> Christine Tamir, Abby Budiman, Luis Noe-Bustamante and Lauren Mora, ‘Facts About the U.S. Black Population’, *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project* <<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/facts-about-the-us-black-population/>> [accessed 18 April 2022].

Northup's fellow female passengers, and the murder of an enslaved man who tries to protect her.

When they arrive at the docks in Louisiana, having witnessed brutality and murder en route, Northup (now renamed Platt) and the others are deeply dejected. Witnessing the scenes of other Black enslaved people at the bustling dockside, with multiple marks of torture, the commerciality of the scene reminds Northup of an earlier experience, shopping for goods in his hometown Saratoga Springs. In flashback to the scene, Northup and his family wonder freely along a shopping street, entering into a shop and being treated with respect by the white owner. An astonished Black man follows them inside, and is mistaken for a customer until the man's white owner comes to retrieve him (t.c. 27:30). As the latter leaves, he parts with "forgive the intrusion sir", towards the shopkeeper. It is Northup who replies, however, locking eyes with the white man as he steadfastly answers "no intrusion", asserting his equality with the white man, who flashes an irritated look. This scene both makes reference to slavery existing in the North (the master is clearly a Northerner), and reinforces the idea that Black people everywhere were [are] vulnerable to systems of white supremacy – something that present-day audiences, along with Northup in short order, also understand.

This moment also alludes to an awakening to the principles of anti-racist ideology embodied in collective civil rights activism. It is reasserted in the demands of Black Lives Matter and similar activist organisations: no one is free until all are free.<sup>488</sup> This scene recalls the different contours of the Black experience in America – but all underlined by vulnerability to white supremacy. Over a hundred years after Northup's experiences, when lynchings had long replaced the violence against the enslaved, this was perhaps most powerfully expressed by Mamie Till-Mobley, whose son Emmet Till also made a journey to the South from a northern state (Chicago), where African Americans could experience relative equality, to visit family in Mississippi. When Emmet Till metaphorically strayed outside the prescribed parameters by speaking gaily to a white woman, he was later kidnapped, horribly tortured and murdered by white men.<sup>489</sup> In response Mamie Till-Mobley became an activist, and noted that previously – as is hinted is the case for Northup, in the flashback scene – she had not much concerned

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<sup>488</sup> This is an echo of famous sentiments expressed by Fannie Lou Hamer at the University of Mississippi, in a speech to a mainly white audience: "Until I am free, you are not either". Hamer was a working class activist of the civil rights era, often overlooked in the story of the movement. For recent scholarship highlighting her activist and intellectual importance to the struggle for genuine equality, see: Keisha N. Blain, *Until I Am Free: Fanny Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021).

<sup>489</sup> E.J. Gorn, *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

herself with what was happening to Black people in the South. Emmet's murder had taught her, she said, "the murder of my son has shown me what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of all of us."<sup>490</sup>

Northup is soon purchased and begins his life as a slave in Louisiana. The spectre of menace and violence hangs heavy in the landscape, the generations of previous enslaved haunting the environment, adding to the feeling of being trapped. McQueen has remarked that when they arrived to film in Louisiana, they were so struck by how the landscape haunted the atmosphere, engendering a feeling of the antebellum past and the experiences of the enslaved, that it made them revise the script. Although visually the landscape in the film is profoundly beautiful, it is nevertheless menacing for this reason, and the sense of haunting is emphasized by long shots of Spanish moss hanging from the Southern trees, wraith-like in the languid breeze.

The second plantation Northup is sold to belongs to the cruel and sadistic Edwin Epps and his wife. At one point, Mistress Epps ominously asks Northup if he can read, noticing him momentarily check a shopping list (t.c.1:02:45). As part of the overarching infrastructure of control over Black minds and bodies, amid fear of uprisings, enslaved people had been prohibited from reading and writing in many slave states from the 1700s.<sup>491</sup> Northup is aware he must feign ignorance as the penalties could be severe, when the suspicious Mistress Epps quizzes him on whether he can read. When he says no, she tells him:

Don't trouble yourself with it. Same as the rest, master brought you here to work, that's all. Any more 'll earn you a hundred lashes.

The warning is clear. Northup cannot escape: his inner, mental sovereignty is also surveilled; his faculties are to be subordinated to the task of being a slave within a system designed to terrorize and break the spirits of the enslaved.

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<sup>490</sup> Rebekah Buchanen, 'The Heroism and Activism of Maimie Till-Mobley, *Tri States Public Radio* [web site], 3 September 2015, < <https://www.tspr.org/post/heroism-and-activism-maimie-till-mobley>>.

<sup>491</sup> This prohibition varied from state to state. Georgia, for example, introduced slave codes in 1755 which banned slaves from reading and writing – with heavy financial penalties for those that taught them. See A. Leon Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color: Race & The American Legal Process - The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.258.

Some enslaved people did learn how to read, and to write. See: Janet Cornelius, ' "We Slipped and Learned to Read": Slave Accounts of the Literary Process', *Phylon*, 44.3 (1983), 171-186.

Some scholars look to the early days of slavery to better understand America's relationship with such ready violence. In their analysis Christopher Waldrep and Michael Bellesiles start with the early decades of slavery in the Constitutional United States, when enslaved people were established in law as property.<sup>492</sup> Permission was early granted to whites to inflict serious violence on them, and their rights to protect themselves against white people were essentially removed, in a series of acts. In 1669 for example, the Virginia colony passed 'An Act About the Casuall Killing of Slaves', making it legal for a master, mistress, or overseer to kill their 'property'. By 1680, severe violence was deemed appropriate for controlling the movement of enslaved people, amid fears of uprisings, and 'Act X For Preventing Negroes Insurrections' was passed which decreed that an enslaved Black person was not allowed to leave the owner's land without certificated permission from the "master, mistris or overseer" – and even then, only when completely necessary. Anyone caught without a certificate must be sent to "the next constable, who is hereby **enjoyed and required** to give said negro twenty lashes on his bare back well layd on". [my **emphasis**]

Resistance was brutality shut down – any enslaved person "lifting his hand" against "any Christian" was to get thirty lashes. Further, anyone caught trying to escape from "his masters service and lye hid and lurking in obscure places, committing injuries to the inhabitants" and resisting arrest, could be lawfully killed.<sup>493</sup> These and later laws increased the levels of brutality and control exercised over those in bondage. Further, as Janice Gump notes the psychological violence of slavery was an important part of the strategy: "to the escalating beatings, maimings and brandings, acts of humiliation were added", and "subjugation was [slavery's] most heinous aspect, as it sought nothing less than annihilation of that which is uniquely human – the self."<sup>494</sup>

In these examples we see how, from near the beginnings of colonial America, white paranoia translated into harsher and harsher punishments and attitudes, something reflected in both *Birth* and *12 Years*. Paranoia such as this, and the instinct to resort to physical punishment to satisfy it, is shown to be bound up with the psychological turmoil that comes with enslaving

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<sup>492</sup> Christopher Waldrep and Michael A. Bellesiles, *Documenting American Violence : A Sourcebook* (Oxford University Press, 2006), p.115.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, p.115.

<sup>494</sup> Janice P. Gump, 'Reality Matters: The shadow of trauma on African American subjectivity', *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 27.1, pp.42-54. Quoted in Graff, as above, pp.184-5.

one's fellow human beings, however much slavers and other whites told themselves that Black people were a sub-species of humans.<sup>495</sup> Northup's encounter with the carpenter Tibeats at Ford's, his first plantation, demonstrates whites' absolute need for subservience of slave society. Tibeats cannot tolerate Northup being smarter or than him, and grows increasingly destabilized by the demonstration of his intellect with each encounter. Finally he sets up a pretext to accuse Northup of not following his orders, using it as an excuse to be able to beat him. When Northup resists and beats his aggressor instead, the psychological shock seems to completely unhinge Tibeats – resulting in an instinct for the annihilation that Gump described – when the spat finishes, Tibeats slinks away, warning Northup, “I will have flesh – and I will have all of it.”

The visceral nature of Tibeats' threat, and the conceptualization of the paranoia he feels, is striking. While it may (or may not) be a figure of speech, it brings to mind the idea of both flaying and devouring – and indeed, both ante and post bellum, unspeakable acts of violence were enacted upon Black bodies.<sup>496</sup> Tibeats returns with two henchmen, and they drag Northup to a nearby tree, to hang him – noticeably in full view of the enslaved quarters, ensuring the horror Northup faces acts as a warning to all. When the overseer intervenes, the astonished Tibeats screams in protest: “You got no cause – Platt is mine, and mine to do with as I please.” He assumes an absolute sovereignty over Northup's body, because of the psychological and legal white supremacist codes he has grown up with.

Later, for the Epps' plantation part of the film, is noticeable that McQueen resists the temptation to have the sadistic and cruel Epps depicted as a one-dimensional villain. Instead, McQueen and frequent collaborator Michael Fassbender, who plays Epps, seeks to try and understand the contortions of mind and spirit of the slaveholder, which manifest themselves through Epps' paranoia, and make him capable of the acts of brutality and rape. This is not to excuse Epps' behaviour, but to excavate the conditions and the psyche which allow it. As the scholar Henry Louis Gates remarked, Fassbender's performance was “a revelation”, adding:

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<sup>495</sup> For more on such claims by Victorian-era ethnologists, see:

Brian Wallis, 'Black Bodies, White Science: The Slave Daguerrotypes of Louis Agassiz', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 12 (1996), pp.102-106.

I discuss how such scientific claims worked alongside cultural representation, to bolster white supremacy, in:

Teresa Hagan, 'Don't Wait for Permission': Ava DuVernay as a Black Female Intellectual and Political Artist', *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, 19.1 (2022), pp.43-62.

<sup>496</sup> Northup refers to such acts in his account of cruelties he witnessed during slavery.

There has never been a slave master in the history of Hollywood portrayed with more depth. He comes off as a man inexplicably in love with a slave [Patsey]...and he can't figure out why. He almost beats her to death and rapes her. He is insanely jealous. I think these are the contradictions at the heart of owning another human being.<sup>497</sup>

As is the case for *Birth* as I have discussed, *12 Years* suggest that the system of human bondage is one that corrodes the psyche of the individuals who carry it out – and are also ensnared within it. For the enslaved, it involves a violent attack on their spirit and dignity, as well as their physical autonomy. For the whites who must maintain the system, the accommodation of slavery as a system leads to mental, emotional and spiritual contortions to suppress its inherent amorality. As with *Birth*, in *12 Years* several of the white characters manifest this inner turmoil by alcoholism. Sam Turner is frequently seen drinking spirits, especially when he takes Nat to the more disturbing plantations, in what appears to be a kind of anaesthetic effort. Most interesting in this respect is the character Armsby, the overseer who ends up working in the fields on Epps' plantation for a spell, due to losing his job and becoming a drunkard. Armsby explains that this was as a result of his work as an overseer, something which is “no easy chore on the spirit”, and that “no man of conscience can take the lash to another human being, day in day out, without shredding at his own self.” The visual image speaks to a visceral metaphor; meting out cruelty, the flaying of human being with a whip, is mirrored in the ripping at of one's own sense of psychological wholeness as a human being within a community of humanity, one's sense of self even. Nevertheless, Armsby betrays Northup's confidence and efforts to restore his liberty, telling Epps of his plan to write to friends in the North. In a frightening scene, McQueen skilfully conveys the terror Northup must have felt when confronted by Epp, knowing that he is completely at the power of his paranoid owner.

As discussed, the film stresses the paranoia of whites, reflecting Northup's narrative and the wider history of Southern fears of insurrection, and loss of power. Later, in the pivotal scene where the Canadian tradesman Bass comes to do some building work on Epps' estate, Northup is present when Bass challenges Epps about slavery, telling him, “It must be said, there is no justice nor no righteousness in this slavery” (T.C: 2:14) Epps is perplexed by Bass' arguments that Black people are humans with the same rights, and insists that they merely have the wit of animals. Bass argues that not only are they the same, and no different under God, but that

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<sup>497</sup> Andrew Anthony, '12 Years a Slave and the roots of America's shameful past', *The Observer* (5 January 2015) < <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/05/12-years-a-slave-america-shameful-past>>.

there will be a reckoning. Epps' convivial attitude vanishes as he reminds Bass that, while such sentiments may appeal if he lived "amongst the Yankees of New England", that is not where Bass resides – "You most assuredly do not", Epps tells him, chillingly. Soon after, when Bass agrees to help Northup, he refers to the risk he also takes.

White supremacy, the film suggests, exists and flourishes both through the enthusiastic assent of white proponents; but also through those proponents' intimidation of other whites, some of whom capitulate to self-interest. Bass helps Northup, but Armsby betrays him, probably to hoist himself out of his demoted situation. At Northup's first plantation, Ford's, Northup is treated relatively kindly. But when he fights with Tibeats, breaking edicts which dictate that the enslaved have no right to defend themselves against the vagaries of white behaviour, Ford saves him from execution – but complies with the overall system and sells Northup to Epps, known for his harsh treatment. Further, Northup tells Ford the truth about who he is and, damningly, Ford refuses to hear it, so that he can press on with his course of action. He refuses because of the economic imperative to satisfy a debt to Epps. But it is also because an entrenched belief in white supremacy allows him to subordinate his humanity.

This scene echoes Martin Luther King's rebuke to the moderate whites who appeared to sympathize with the civil rights activists, but did not want significant change to the established order. Ford's prior kindness counts for nothing in the face of his self-interested cowardice. In some respects, as McQueen has noted in interview, he is the worst of them all. In 21<sup>st</sup> century America, some might argue a similar critique could apply to whites who voted for Obama in 2008, and congratulated themselves on their liberalism – while deserting him at the mid-terms and objecting to the radical reform needed to bring about genuine equality in America. Thus in such respects, could be appraised as Ford's inheritors.

## **CONCLUSION**

I began this chapter with an analysis of how Black filmmakers of the renaissance use the American flag as a mechanism to expose the hypocrisy in the overarching national narrative of American exceptionalism; particularly how they emphasize the brutal racism and white supremacy that has formed an integral part of the nation's history, and remains a potent part of its present. The urgency and subversiveness of these filmmakers' strategy should not be underestimated, in a country where schoolchildren are daily expected to affirm their fidelity to America, by reciting the pledge of allegiance to the Star Spangled Banner.

I also examine how the films explore what Toni Morrison calls the “profound neurosis” of racism, for both the state and individuals, a product of what she calls a “distorted...psyche” in those who “practise it”.<sup>498</sup> The verb may have been a figure of speech, but Morrison’s use of it here is insightful because it draws attention to racism not just a descriptor or state of being, but a deliberate action. I argue that the filmmakers of the Black renaissance are artists who, as Morrison remarks elsewhere of artists, seek to grapple with the “real record” of life, beyond the data, and distance which that affords from the everyday horrors of racism. The renaissance filmmakers who turn to the antebellum period explore how white supremacy, and racist attitudes more generally became embedded in core parts of the nation’s psyche. They offer dramas which show its utilitarian, political purposes (American capitalism; the attempt to assign African Americans to the periphery of national identity and, therefore, power; the criminalization of Blackness). Moreover, they examine racism as a psychological process – an active, self-perpetuating cognitive practice which seeks to override any emotional dissonance or instinctive sense of horror at one’s actions. Particularly noticeable in *12 Years*, this is shown as an internal psychological process aimed at dealing with one’s own personal debasement, even derangement, that comes with subordinating other human beings on the basis of race – but that inner turbulence is expressed through violence directed at the subordinated. Further, I posit that ideologies such as white supremacy serve as narrative fiction, to mask a fear of that debasement being exposed – to others, but also to having to confront it in oneself. White supremacy, as excavated by these films, thus had always served to obscure the issue of recognizing Black enslaved people as human beings, while at the same time treating them as a sub species.<sup>499</sup> This ‘distorted psyche’ as Morrison put it, is a mechanism passed down through generations, the films suggest, and I posit it is present in all kinds of national narratives – fictions of Southern honour and the entire Lost Cause narrative itself, for example. The films also illustrate that white supremacy relies on joint enterprise. By willing agreement, coercion, or threat, white communities in the nation’s history bound themselves together through their commonality with being ‘not Black’, these dramas show.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> Toni Morrison, *What Racism Is*, The Charlie Rose Show, [shown on 12 Gates YouTube Channel], c.1992  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EQcy361vB8>> [accessed 12 November 2021].

<sup>499</sup> Brian Wallis, ‘Black Bodies, White Science: The Slave Daguerreotypes of Louis Agassiz’, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 12 (1996), 102–6.

<sup>500</sup> See: The Charlie Rose Show, above. Morrison describes how, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, immigrants from Europe became American by bonding with other European immigrants, through the “unifying stroke” of not being Black – even if they had not been considered White in Europe. As I mentioned earlier, being American was thus, to a degree, synonymous with the idea of

These films then coalesce around exploring white supremacy, and white supremacist violence. That violence is demonstrated to span American society, ever mutable and expressed in different ways – through physical, psychological, and, in terms of delegitimizing and criminalizing Blackness, political violence. They argue that such processes were honed and habituated through the slavery system of antebellum America, and they suggest that they persist through the continuum of American history, highlighting how white supremacy underpins national identity myths. But they also persist in contemporary social and political attitudes. As the scholar Michael Eric Dyson points out, “no single person better embodied black progress, and therefore scared white terrorists more, than Barack Obama.”<sup>501</sup> Slaveholders in the ante-bellum era expressed their anxiety at being overwhelmed by Black people with white supremacist violence, something repurposed 50 years after slavery ended by the white supremacist vision of DW Griffith, and the primer it provided for a resurgent Klan. A hundred years later, white nationalist anxiety at being ‘overrun’ by African Americans in the Obama era, is horrifyingly expressed by the multiple number of racial hate incidents, and the mass murder of churchgoers in Charlottesville by white nationalist Dylann Roof. If there were any doubts about the endurance and danger of the persistence of racist tropes about Black Americans, the Lost Cause myth, or the white supremacist narrative which relegates Blackness to the periphery (if not outside) what it means to be an American, we need look no further than Roof’s ‘manifesto’.<sup>502</sup>

Despite the relentless endurance of white supremacy, these films – together with all the films of the Black filmmaking renaissance – demonstrate a confidence amongst Black filmmakers that their critiques of such ideologies will be heard, and prompt a legacy in contemporary discourse. It is during Obama’s era that we get the first major feature films about slavery which examine both the interior lives of the enslaved as well as interrogating white supremacy and America identity formation. This is activist cinema. It mirrors Black protest movements under the Black Lives Matter/Movement for Black Lives banners, movements which challenge accepted notions of American exceptionalism; and argues that White America must confront

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being white – and I posit Morrison’s argument works just as well for disparate groups of whites already within America.

<sup>501</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), p.256.

<sup>502</sup> For one of many scholarly analyses of Roof and his ‘manifesto’ (from where the quote is drawn), see: E. Chebrolu, ‘The Racial Lens of Dylann Roof: Racial Anxiety and White Nationalist Rhetoric on New Media’, *Review of Communication*, 20.1. (2020), 47-68.

the influence of its anti-Black past in its present, if there is to be any hope for such a thing as a post-racial future. The last word perhaps best belongs to Solomon Northup's great-great-great-granddaughter, interviewed after watching the film with fellow Northup descendants:

“Slavery helped to create the infrastructure of this great country that we live in – and I would like to see the history books documented, showing that fact...

“I hope there comes a point in time when it comes that we don't have Black History Month and we just have American history – because this is all of our history, it's not just my history, it's not just my family's history, it's the American story. It's a part of our history.”<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>503</sup> The Hollywood Reporter, *The Descendants of '12 Years a Slave's' Solomon Northup*, 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYjOiCk1U9M>> [accessed 27 April 2022].

## CONCLUSION

The opening sequence of *Get Out*, Jordan Peele's 2017 film, shows Dre (Lakeith Stanfield) walking through an affluent neighbourhood at night, on the phone to, one concludes from the tone, his girlfriend. From the conversation he's clearly lost, and a little perturbed to be in this "creepy ass suburb", as he continues to walk along the pavement, separated from the road by a neat grass verge. "I feel like a sore thumb out here," says Dre, who is right to feel anxious as a white car soon pulls up beside him on the deserted street. The car kerb-crawls as Dre tries to ignore it. Deciding to abort the mission of his visit altogether given this development, Dre turns and walks in the other direction to escape. But to the car's stereo accompaniment of a 1930s British ditty, *Run Rabbit Run*, the jaunty tune a deeply unsettling soundtrack in this alarming context, Dre is attacked, incapacitated and his body folded into the boot.

We later meet Dre again, and come to learn his fate at the hands of the vampiric white people into whose community he unfortunately stumbled, in this satirical horror film – a metaphor-microcosm for larger White America on several levels. *Get Out* is an extremely rich text for analysis, a virtuoso piece of satirical horror written by Peele as a commentary on race relations in Obama's America and the experience of racism itself, as well as a film tapping into Black historical memory, African American history, and themes of resistance.<sup>504</sup> The opening sequence alone works as a springboard to consider some of the major questions and themes raised in this thesis.

Dre's disquiet, as a Black man walking in what is likely to be a predominantly white neighbourhood, exemplifies the circumscribed strictures on African Americans in what the Star Spangled Banner tells us is the "Land of the Free". While the tone of the film is comedy-horror, in a more sober analysis the opening scene immediately recalls the death of Trayvon Martin, the killing that led to the resurgence of Black protest movements in the Obama years, under the banner Black Lives Matter. As discussed in this thesis, Martin was killed after he was singled out by a neighbourhood watch volunteer in Florida, who deemed him to be an alien presence in his gated community.

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<sup>504</sup> For an interview with Jordan Peele where he discusses some of the reasons for making the film, see: Jen Yamato, 'Jordan Peele on *Get Out*, the Horror Film about Racism That Obama Would Love', *Los Angeles Times*, 25 February 2017 <<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-get-out-jordan-peeel-racism-horror-america-20170224-story.html>> [accessed 20 May 2022].

The tragedy of Martin's killing, and the regulation and policing of Black bodies that would also often seem to feed into law enforcement decisions to stop, arrest, and incarcerate Black citizens at disproportionate rates to whites is, as I argue in Chapter Four, one of the ongoing legacies of slavery in the United States. A close reading reveals that motifs in *Get Out's* opening sequence overlap with a key scene in Nate Parker's *Birth of a Nation*, which also speak to tropes of curtailment and control. In the scene where Nat Turner's wife Cherry is brutally raped, she is stopped by a local slave patrol under the pretext that she should not be "more than ten paces from the treeline", a slave code arbitrarily limiting the movement of the enslaved – part of a larger system designed to enforce psychological terror as well as physical and psychological control in the slavery era. In *Get Out*, Dre is lost as he searches for *Edgewood Way* (not least because the streets seem to have been designed illogically, to confuse outsiders). It is while he walks along the treeline by the grass verge that he feels uneasy, and expects to be stopped – just because he is in an area where his Blackness in this white community is seen as transgressive and even dangerous. The anxiety is a product of collective memory for African Americans, an echo of the control of spaces into permissible and impermissible for Black entry which was so blithely executed by slave patrols, as we see in the incident with Cherry.

As the film progresses, the historical memory of slavery and its parasitic underpinning is explored through the actions of the wealthy white community. Snatching or otherwise finding ways to entrap young healthy Black people, the community has perfected a system to utilise their bodies, stripping them of their brains (their identities) and using them as corporeal vessels. They transplant their own brains, from their diseased or otherwise deficient bodies, and extend their own lives at the cost of Black people. The metaphoric and literal exploitation of African Americans through slavery is very much a part of the historical memory employed in the film. As we saw in Chapter Two, historical memory has been an important part of the work of Black artists since the New Negro movement of the early twentieth century, and remains a key engine of the Black filmmaking renaissance.

Further reflecting the harms which are part of the legacies of slavery, Peele's film depicts the sometimes profound psychological dissonance which he describes as part of being Black in America, when he shows that the film's main character Chris constantly feels something is amiss in his girlfriend's family home (the epicentre of the ghastly extraction of Black bodies), but dare not trust his instincts. Peele deliberately sought to reflect this bedrock experience in the film, and explained it in interview:

Part of being black in this country, or being a minority in this country, is about feeling like we're perceiving things that we're told we're *not* perceiving... It's a state of mind. It's a piece of the condition of being African American, certainly, that people may not know. They may not realize the toll that it does take – even if the toll is making us doubt ourselves.<sup>505</sup>

One of Peele's great achievements here is to use the film artform to *render* the Black American experience for a wide audience in a radical way. As his star actor Daniel Kaluuya declared: "this film is how racism feels." Peele had specifically set out to expose the persistent and more sinister effects of racism in America, especially after an election win that was accompanied by talk of 'post-racism'. As he has explained in interview, he felt that for all the polite talk in liberal circles about Obama's election, racism still lurked there – and still persisted in America, but was now being "neglected".<sup>506</sup>

While the work is outside the parameters of this thesis, appearing after Obama had left office, as indicated in this very brief analysis it nevertheless draws together several of the themes that I have identified and explored across the Black filmmaking renaissance.

In this thesis I have grouped, characterized and contextualized the films of the Black filmmaking renaissance. This has enabled me to fully explore the meanings and significance of an upsurge in filmmaking by Black directors in the mainstream arena, in the wake of President Obama's historic election victory in 2008, as Black filmmakers responded in a dynamic way to Obama's historic success. This research has demonstrated key ways in which the films of the Black filmmaking renaissance worked to intervene in contemporary discourses during the Obama years, commenting on structural racism and the iniquities of the criminal justice system, and the legacies of slavery more widely. They intersected with contemporary Black protest activism, thematically through their exploration of civil rights protest and struggle against slavery; and by repeatedly, and in different contexts, reflecting resistance to oppressive forces, macro or micro. Further, this research shows that several of the filmmakers were explicit about using their films to spark public debate about racism, and the racial histories and ideologies which underpin systems of bias and racial hatred in America, thus intending their films to be activist cinema. In using mainstream film in this way, they are also seeking to subvert power relations over who gets to control cultural and political messaging

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<sup>505</sup> See above, Jen Yamato, *Los Angeles Times*, 25 February 2017.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*

through film, a medium which is still one of the key vectors for delivering social messaging, as I argue in Chapter One.

Through my analysis of the films, this research elucidates how these filmmakers have been seeking to expose racism and racist practices through a Black gaze. They centre the Black experience in America, and assert it firmly in the public domain through mainstream film, refusing normative Whiteness, or to accept Blackness as a peripheral status (in the narrative or behind the lens) in the service of satisfying Whiteness and a larger audience.

These filmmakers have also celebrated and utilized Black historical memory as I explore in Chapter Two. I posit that this is partly in evocation of collective memory, and partly as a weapon to resist convenient but false narratives that Obama's election had ushered in a 'post-racial' America. As Peele points out above, African Americans are used to the disorientation of being Black in America; a rising narrative that racism had faded with Obama's election – when, as I outline in Chapter Four, this is far from true – creates yet more psychological dissonance for African Americans. The use of historical memory in these films thus performs both a nurturing and a resistant function, and an awareness of the high stakes involved in competing national narratives. The very act of insisting on one's own historical narrative as James Baldwin identified, as we saw in Chapter One, is an act of defiance against the entire power structure of a white hegemony, whose white-centred vision has been the dominant cultural lens in Hollywood since its earliest days.<sup>507</sup>

This thesis also explored how filmmakers of the renaissance embraced the 'queering of politics' during the Obama years.<sup>508</sup> In Chapter Three I considered how Obama's win, as a man whose identity was endlessly questioned from different perspectives, also made the way open to the idea of a queering of politics, something which scholar Eddie Glaude suggested was further ushered in by Black Lives Matter and its upending of hierarchical norms. This in turn seemed to prompt wider change, not just through ground-breaking activist work to legalize gay marriage, but through cultural embrace of viewpoints hitherto ignored or rejected. It is in this arena that Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*, the first major film to explore experiences through

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<sup>507</sup> The reference to James Baldwin's speech comes from a film made by Horae Ov , in 1960s London, when Baldwin was addressing students and activists about imperialism and race. Horace Ov , *Baldwin's N \_\_\_\_\_*, 1969 <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/480522/index.html>>.

<sup>508</sup> For more on this idea of a queering of politics during this period, see Eddie Glaude, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America And Its Urgent Lessons For Our Own* (New York: PenguinRandomHouse, 2020).

the lens of a Black queer man growing up in a domineering patriarchal hierarchy, achieved huge success.

### ***The Black filmmaking renaissance as a vital step***

I argue that the Black filmmaking renaissance I have explored is a hugely important development for the progress of Black mainstream film, as well as demonstrating that mainstream film activism is perfectly possible. Against the momentous backdrop of the first Black presidency, Black filmmakers in the Obama years began producing film cultural products which were resolutely centred on Black lives and in a variety of genres, for a mainstream audience – a renaissance that has now emerged into a flowering not seen since the early days of film. The popular Blaxploitation wave of the 1970s is a rich tapestry to consider in the history of Black film waves, and has generated a great deal of scholarly attention; but it was nevertheless a narrow genre, depicting a narrow range of Black representational tropes. Moreover, as S Craig Watkins notes, Blaxploitation movies came to be mainly produced and directed by white filmmakers.<sup>509</sup> The UCLA movement, sometimes called the LA Rebellion, stretched through the 1970s, 80s, and even into the early 1990s with Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) (a film which takes Black historical memory as a central theme). The movement sought to challenge the conventions of Hollywood film in craft and narrative, and several of the directors became respected filmmakers producing highly-regarded works, who still exercise influence among filmmakers. Aside from Dash, the group included Charles Burnett, who received an honorary Oscar in 2017; and Haile Gerima, whose 1993 film *Sankofa* (a film explicitly centred on African Americans connecting with the past and their ancestral history of slavery), has recently had a 4k restoration and been re-released on Netflix.<sup>510</sup> Dash's *Daughters* was also a key inspiration for the singer Beyoncé's recent visual album *Lemonade*, resulting in a revival of Dash's film.<sup>511</sup> All of these filmmakers however were working in the independent sphere, even if some of their work is now being given airtime in larger arenas.

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<sup>509</sup> For more on Blaxploitation, see: Samuel Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp.93-96.

<sup>510</sup> Mark Olsen, 'Haile Gerima Rejected Racist Hollywood. How Ava DuVernay Is Helping Pay Tribute', *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2021  
<<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-09-24/haile-gerima-ava-duvernay-academy-museum-array>> [accessed 26 May 2022].

<sup>511</sup> See: Terri Francis, 'Julie Dash: Challenging the Paradigm', *Post Script*, 39.2/3 (2020), pp.50-65,  
<<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2616590007/abstract/948D5CA9356545E2PQ/1>> [accessed 26 May 2022].

Finally, the Black movie boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s is the closest to the Black filmmaking renaissance of the Obama years with regard to its success in getting a range of Black centred films to the big screen. It includes Spike Lee's biopic *Malcolm X* (1992), the coming of age drama *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) from John Singleton, and Bill Duke's *A Rage in Harlem* (1991), among others. *Boyz* also crosses into what are sometimes termed 'hood or ghetto movies, and indeed this period increasingly became known for action movies set in impoverished Black neighbourhoods, what Watkins terms the "ghetto action film cycle".<sup>512</sup> Aside from this narrowing focus of the film wave, its status as a wave rather than a renaissance became clear as time progressed, as it eventually fizzled from view as fewer and fewer Black filmmakers were able to transport their visions of Black America to mainstream audiences.

I argue that the Black filmmaking renaissance of the Obama years has been sustained, and in latter years is continuing to grow across various platforms, making it new and different to these previous waves of Black filmmaking. While Peele's *Get Out* came just after Obama had moved on from the presidency, and thus the film sits just outside the parameters I set for this thesis, it nevertheless represented a comma, rather than a full-stop, for the Black filmmaking renaissance.

The day after Donald Trump was inaugurated as 45<sup>th</sup> president, Ava DuVernay addressed a crowd of fellow filmmakers at Sundance. She reminded them of Toni Morrison's warning that racism was a "distraction", a "monumental fraud", designed above all to divert its victims from a focus on their own lives. She further quoted Morrison's suggestion that "it may very well be left to artists to grapple with this fact.. for art focuses on ... the names of people enslaved on ships, and not only the number".<sup>513</sup> I argue that DuVernay's speech, at the very moment that so many progressives were in shock that a man endorsed by the former KKK leader David Duke could be elected president, was a call to cinematic arms. Indeed, DuVernay prefaced her Morrison quotes with the exhortation, "Maybe it'll inspire you like it inspires me."

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<sup>512</sup> Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple university Press, 1993), for more on the "movie boom" of the 80s/90s.

See Watkins, as above: 'Chapter 7: The Ghetto-centric Imagination', for more on these and other films in the cycle he refers to.

<sup>513</sup> reelblack.com, *Ava DuVernay - Reads Toni Morrison, 2017*  
<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhAyJQvoPhM&list=LLPDU6cDy5XpfZ4ejy0eCT2w&index=1045&ab\\_channel=reelblack](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhAyJQvoPhM&list=LLPDU6cDy5XpfZ4ejy0eCT2w&index=1045&ab_channel=reelblack)> [accessed 31 October 2020].  
This is taken from my article, Teresa Hagan, 'Don't Wait for Permission': Ava DuVernay as a Black Female Intellectual and Political Artist', *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, 19.1 (2022), pp.43-62 (p.43).

I posit that the true significance of the Black filmmaking renaissance only came into view in the years that followed. The reaction to Trump's presidency turbo-charged the Black filmmaking renaissance with works such as Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*, both 2018, Jenkins *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), DuVernay's *When They See Us* (2019), Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019), Lee's *Da Five Bloods* (2020), DuVernay's *Colin in Black & White* (2021), Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021), and more.

Many of these projects continue to reflect themes of resistance, and several take on institutional racism and white supremacy head-on. Perhaps the most significant of these is Coogler's *Black Panther*, the first Black focused and Black directed film to become a successful example of a key Hollywood tentpole film. The film has been an international smash hit – a poignant irony given Hollywood's excuse for not supporting Black film has often been that it won't play well in international markets. *Black Panther* made over \$200 million in its domestic opening, and has made an incredible \$1.35 billion worldwide. *Black Panther 2* is now well into production.

While this is a tremendous step forward for Black agency in improving representation and recentring a historic white-centred narrative in America, the top executives in Hollywood, those who decide which films get made, are still overwhelmingly white and male.<sup>514</sup> More soberingly, the insurrection at the nation's capital on 6 January 2021, by a crowd chanting that they wanted to 'take the country back', several carrying Confederate flags, showed that the battle over national narratives of history and identity are far from over. The establishment of the Black filmmaking renaissance, however, means that Black filmmakers will at least have a chance to help influence those narratives. Future research on the Black filmmaking response to the Trump presidency would be another step forward in determining how Black filmmakers reflect – and potentially influence – discourses within and outwith the Black community, and continue to stake their claim for a truer version of the American national narrative.

## ENDS

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<sup>514</sup> See: Nancy Wang Yuen, *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

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### **Primary film texts**

*12 Years a Slave*, dir. by Steve McQueen (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013)

*13<sup>th</sup>*, dir. by Ava DuVernay (Netflix, 2016)

*The Birth of a Nation*, dir. by D.W. Griffith (Epoch Producing Corporation, 1915)

*The Birth of a Nation*, dir. by Nate Parker (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2016)

*Chi-Raq*, dir. by Spike Lee (Amazon Studios, 2015)

*Get Out*, dir. by Jordan Peele (Universal Pictures, 2017)

*Malcolm X*, dir. by Spike Lee (Warner Bros, 1992)

*Moonlight*, dir. by Barry Jenkins (A24, 2016)

*Selma*, dir. by Ava DuVernay (Paramount Pictures, 2014)

*Straight Outta Compton*, dir. by F Gary Gray (Universal Pictures, 2017)

### **Secondary film texts**

Within Obama years: *Fruitvale Station*, dir. by Ryan Coogler (The Weinstein Company, 2013)

*Dear White People*, dir. by Justin Simien (Lionsgate, 2014)

Beyond Obama era: *American Skin*, dir. by Nate Parker (Vertical Entertainment, 2019)

*BlackKkKlansman*, dir. by Spike Lee (Focus Features [Universal], 2018)

*Black Panther*, dir. by Ryan Coogler (Walt Disney Studios, 2018)

*Colin in Black & White*, created by Ava DuVernay (Netflix, 2021)

*Judas and the Black Messiah*, dir. by Shaka King (Warner Bros., 2021)

*Sorry to Bother You*, dir. by Boots Riley (Mirror Releasing, 2018)

*Us*, dir. by Jordan Peele (Universal Pictures, 2019)

*When They See Us*, dir. by Ava DuVernay (Netflix, 2019)

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