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The Politics of a Portrait: Biopics, Slavery and Contemporary Racial Politics in the United States

Abstract

The article examines the connection between the past and the present, and between the personal and the political, in three recent biographical pictures directed by filmmakers of color: *The Birth of a Nation* (2016, dir. Nate Parker), *Harriet* (2018, dir. Kasi Lemmons), and *Emancipation* (2022, dir. Antoine Fuqua). By addressing the history of American slavery, the films not only come into a dialogue with the preexisting representations of slavery in music, photography and cinema, but also reflect on current racial politics and antiracist activism in the United States. They offer a commentary on changing attitudes towards the issue of race in America, and engage with the collective memory of slavery - a past trauma, which has shaped the African American identity.

Keywords

African American cinema, slavery, racism, minority representation

> The past depends less on "what happened then" than on the desires and discontents of the present. Strivings and failures shape the stories we tell. What we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn.
>
> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007, 100)

As recent years have shown, Hollywood is becoming more diverse and exhibits greater interest in broadcasting minority voices and stories. Filmmakers of color now have the unique opportunity to challenge existing racial bias and established modes of minority representation in American cinema. When minorities get to create their own image through film, they often address issues that have been overlooked or misrepresented in the past, which can now reach mainstream audiences. Black filmmakers have eagerly revisited the topic of slavery and focused on the lives and achievements of Black historical figures in a number of recent biopics. Their films question previous depictions of slavery and highlight the connection between new cultural production and historically established tropes and discursive practices. They offer a commentary on changing attitudes towards the issue of race and engage with the collective memory of slavery - a past trauma, which has shaped the African American identity.

I examine three films by Black directors that touch upon the history and memory of slavery: *The Birth of a Nation* (2016, dir. Nate Parker), *Harriet* (2018, dir. Kasi Lemmons) and *Emancipation* (2022, dir. Antoine Fuqua). Although each takes a different approach to its depiction, they all come into dialogue with preexisting representations of slavery in American photography, cinema and music, while also addressing the current dominant racial rhetoric in the United States. The stories of Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman and the slave Peter, whose suffering was immortalized in *The Scourged Back* photograph, have been circulated in American culture for decades, as part of various literary and visual narratives. The biopics show just a sliver of their lives, and create a cinematic portrait that is "one painting out of many that could have been drawn over the years" (Fleming Jr., 2012) of their subjects' activity. Historically, African Americans had limited access to the tools of mainstream cultural production and had little opportunity to tell their own stories. The lives of Turner, Tubman and Peter were mediated by others, in accordance with the dominant, racist discourse of their era. Contemporary Black filmmakers turn to the biopic genre to reclaim their stories, and give a proper account of their achievements and legacy. Due to their focus on the lives of real Black abolitionists and revolutionaries, these biopics partake in a "cinema of historical revision" (Smoliński, 2015) by offering a nuanced

portrayal of events and historical figures previously omitted by the mainstream media. They face the difficult task of "reconcil[ing] the divergent imperatives of commercial feature film and the complex politics of slave autobiography" (Kelley, 2019, 172-173). The resulting vision of the past is a product of the filmmakers' distinct formal and ideological choices. Their own experiences have been shaped by the realities of contemporary racial relations in the United States, and the still-ongoing public debate about systemic racism, police brutality, and the repercussions of slavery, in "the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (Sharpe, 2016, n.p.).

The article highlights how the three films refer to early visual politics and narratives of slavery, and to Hollywood's own racist history. The analytical framework draws from trauma and memory studies - two fields uniquely suited to address the question of slavery and its remembrance - to examine how cinematic reconstructions of historical events participate in the current sociopolitical discourse and are used to facilitate the process of collective identity-formation.

Remembering Slavery: Cultural Trauma, Prosthetic Memory and Cinema

Slavery had been initially documented through oral tradition, in stories passed on between generations, and later through literary slave narratives. Its legacy remains one of the central issues in understanding American racism, while the continued circulation of images and stories about slavery may amount to a transgenerational transfer of trauma. Ron Eyerman observes that "slavery has meant different things for different generations of black Americans, but it was always there as a referent" (Eyerman, 2003, 18) and forms the foundation of the collective African American identity. Slavery has to be understood as a cultural trauma, which "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander et al., 2004, 1). For trauma to be processed and recognized as a formative experience by the whole community, it must be communicated through a new master narrative. Eyerman points to the "intellectuals" as the ones with sufficient cultural capital to create it. Professionals, such as filmmakers or community organizers, "mediate between the cultural and political spheres that characterize modern societies, not so much representing and giving voice to their own ideas and interests, but rather articulating ideas to and for others" (Eyerman, 2003, 3). Individuals behind the mediation of collective trauma have relative influence over the process of identity-formation for the

community, although they too can be subject to external ideological influences. Those who have been overlooked in, or actively prohibited from, narrating their own traumas, are now gaining access to media production tools. The purpose of historical revision in cinema is to offer a new perspective on historical figures and events, and to revisit and challenge previous standards of their representation. Few filmmakers are as bold as Quentin Tarantino, who asserted that his film, *Django Unchained* (2012), was "responsible for people talking about slavery in America in a way they have not in 30 years" (Bates, 2014), but they are nonetheless very conscious of their position in shaping and renewing the discourse.

Films about slavery can also be understood through the framework of prosthetic memory, which "emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum" (Landsberg, 2004, 2). It allows individuals to build a deep connection to a larger historical narrative, especially when the continuance between generations has been damaged due to external factors, and when a community has been forcibly prohibited from establishing frameworks for remembering traumatic events. In such circumstances, the descendants have to rely on media narratives to forge a connection with the past and to "suture" themselves back into their community's history. When Black filmmakers set out to depict the times of slavery, they reach a new generation of viewers, who get to build that connection with the past. The continued mediated circulation of these events contributes to their remembrance, shapes the way we think about the past, and, in turn, how we understand the present social and political condition.

Both frameworks point to the crucial role of cultural production in establishing an identification with the past, and the formation of a collective identity on the basis of traumatic experience. They also highlight the importance of challenging stereotypical, definitive portrayals of the past, especially in relation to minority groups who have been unable to share in their creation. The way slavery is depicted in American culture has significantly changed over time, but for the most part it has privileged the white perspective of events, from Southern apologism of slavery in the late 19th century to the popularity of the "white savior" trope in the 20th (Jordan and Brooms, 2018). Due to Hollywood's long history of racism and prejudice against various minorities, mainstream cinema's attempts to comment on the work of systemic racism and slavery should raise "questions about the longstanding relationship between cinema and history, and the former's capacity to relate African American stories within a medium that has its own troubled representational past as a birthright" (Massood, 2017, 19). Although the American film industry has been complicit in upholding the social

status quo for most of its history, Ed Guerrero saw an alternative path forward in "the production of black and other independent features that artfully historicize and politicize the issue in a way that not only reveals slavery's past but at the same time, by allegory, allusion, or otherwise, communicates its relevance to all Americans today." (1993, 35) There has been no shortage of films that address the issue of slavery in the years since Guerrero's suggestion, but only a handful, such as *12 Years a Slave* (dir. Steven McQueen, 2013) and *Nightjohn* (dir. Charles Burnett, 1996), have been crafted by Black directors. Other films set in the antebellum period have often distanced themselves from the horrors of slavery by favoring an outsider perspective. Although often sympathetic to the struggle of the enslaved, the central white characters in films like Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) and *Lincoln* (2012) are the ones who shape the historical record and social understanding of slavery in their era by speaking for and over its actual victims.

In the past two decades, the topic of slavery has remained popular in American cinema, leading writer Kara Brown to state that she was "so damn tired of slave movies" (2016). She voiced her disenchantment with the state of depictions of slavery in American cinema, observing that "it's clear by 2016 that films about slavery do not help us become a more tolerant or understanding society" (Brown, 2016). The publication of Brown's widely shared opinion piece coincided with the Sundance premiere of Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation*, after which she suggested retiring the genre. Instead of fading into obscurity, it continues to garner attention and critical acclaim. The most recent "slave movies" differ from some of the older works on the subject in their unflinching focus on Black characters, and their critical approach to the politics and memory of slavery. *The Birth of a Nation*, *Harriet*, and *Emancipation* belong to the current trend of exploring Black history, concerned with uncovering events and figures, whose influence on American history has thus far been downplayed or omitted. The three films are based on limited source material and focus on individual stories, emblematic of the African American experience under slavery. As biopics, they draw from the "minority appropriation" stage of the genre's development, identified by Dennis Bingham as the moment when minorities got to "own the conventional mythologizing form that once would have been used to marginalize or stigmatize them" (2010, 18). In the hands of minority filmmakers, unlike in classic Hollywood, the biopic genre is no longer "a vehicle for a pre-determined vision of history" (Vidal, 2014, 5), but rather a tool for interrogation of the hegemonic historical narrative.

Harriet: A Sorrow Song

Before Kasi Lemmons' *Harriet* eventually premiered in 2019, a Harriet Tubman biopic had been long in the making. Gregory Allen Howard, the screenwriter behind *Remember the Titans* (dir. Boaz Yakin, 2000), had been fighting to bring her story to the screen since the 1990s. He recalls that at the time, a studio executive suggested casting Julia Roberts as the Black abolitionist, saying: "It was so long ago. No one is going to know the difference" (Focus News, 2019). Howards credits *12 Years a Slave* and *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2018) with paving the way for Tubman's biopic by proving that audiences are interested in seeing Black heroes on the screen. The biopic genre has historically centered on stories of great (usually white) men, and as Dennis Bingham argues "naturally [wouldn't] have much use for the half of the population that traditionally has been discouraged, when not outright barred, from playing significant roles in public lives" (2013, 237). Biopics credit their male subjects with driving historical and social change, while relegating women to the background, limiting their activity to the personal and emotional sphere, or casting them as supporting characters in men's stories. Nonetheless, Belén Vidal observes that within the American context, women's biopics have recently become more diverse, as "they open up to subjects bearing specific markers of class, ethnicity and sexual orientation" (2021, 21). The achievements of third wave Black feminism, and in particular of the intersectional framework, have impacted American cultural consciousness and set the scene for a Black biopic heroine like Tubman to appear on the big screen.

The first narrative of Tubman's life, *Scenes from the Life of Harriet Tubman*[1], was published by Sarah Hopkins Bradford in 1868. The author stated that she aimed to "give a plain and unvarnished account of some scenes and adventures in the life of a woman who, though one of earth's lowly ones, and of dark-hued skin, has shown an amount of heroism in her character rarely possessed by those of any station in life" (Bradford, 1869, 1). Bradford's book, although criticized since its publication, provided the earliest account of Tubman's life, and collected written proof of her activities in the 1860s. Since then, Tubman's character has continued to inspire writers and filmmakers. She has been portrayed in a TV film (*The Quest for Freedom*, dir. Fred Holmes, 1992) and a miniseries (*A Woman Called Moses*, dir. Paul Wendkos, 1978), but prior to 2019 she had never been the subject of a high-profile feature film, centered entirely on her achievements. Dennis Bingham observes that very often "biopics of women (…) are weighted down by myths of suffering, victimization, and

[1] A revised version was published in 1886 as *Harriet, the Moses of her People*

failure perpetuated by a culture whose films reveal an acute fear of women in the public realm" (2010, 10). In a reversal of this trope, although set against a tragic historical backdrop, *Harriet* is not a story of degradation, but of remarkable tenacity and success. By giving the creative reins of Tubman's story to a Black woman, the film manages to avoid many of the pitfalls of the "typical" women's biopic. The film challenges the white-, male-centric genre formula, and uncovers a Black female folk hero for a new generation of viewers, building a renewed cultural awareness of Tubman's story. The film is a part of a broader turn in American mainstream cinema: as Hollywood strives for diversity, it often revisits Black American history, particularly its episodes related to anti-racist action, and introduces them to the screen.

Lemmons' film follows Tubman's (Cynthia Erivo) escape from slavery, her life in Philadelphia and the subsequent return South to rescue her family from slavery. She becomes a conductor for the Underground Railroad, and is surrounded by Northern abolitionists - mostly based on historical figures, such as Frederick Douglass and William Still. The film briefly mentions Tubman's involvement in the Civil War as a spy for the Union forces, and shows her leading the Combahee River Raid, but entirely omits her later participation in the suffrage movement. Andrea Schmidt rightly calls *Harriet* "a fantastic genre-mash up of biographical, super-hero, action, and dramatic film that remains hauntingly relevant to today's political climate in the States" (Schmidt and Fucile, 2019, 58). The character emerges as a spirited, courageous all-American hero who retains her humanity and faith throughout the most challenging of circumstances, and her biopic does not bend to the "patriarchal culture's discomfort with the presence of women in the public realm" (Bingham 2014, 238). The multifaceted portrayal of Tubman in Lemmons' film offers "a counternarrative to the simplistic, distorted visions of nineteenth-century black womanhood provided in previous screen portraits" (Clinton, 2020, 256), present even in such lauded films as *12 Years a Slave* (see Stevenson, 2014).

Harriet revisits the life of a Black historical figure, and uses elements of genre cinema to make her story appealing to the modern audience, which results in the creation of a cinematic site for remembrance about slavery and those who fought against it. The film itself comments on the value of archive-keeping. William Still (Leslie Odom Jr.), one of the Underground Railroad conductors, meticulously records facts about each slave who makes it to Philadelphia: he catalogues all signs of physical abuse, writes down oral narratives of slavery, and takes Tubman to have her photograph taken. In doing so, he creates invaluable resources for future generations.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Lemmons' depiction of Tubman is the role music and religion play in her life, and in the wider abolitionist effort. Throughout her life, Tubman had suffered "spells", during which she lost consciousness and had visions. She believed them to be a sign from God, showing her the path to freedom. The film shows her seeing brief flashes of future events. In one of the final scenes, she is shown to have anticipated the events of the Civil War - she hears the sounds of a battlefield and shouts to her former master: "God has shown me the future, and my people are free. My people are free!". In another reference to Christian religious imagery, her experience is linked to that of Joan of Arc, in a nod to Bradford's early narrative that also makes such a comparison. Tubman's former owner tries to convince a mob of aggravated slaveholders to burn her like Joan of Arc, inadvertently suggesting making Tubman a martyr for the abolitionist cause.

Tubman's daring slave rescues gained her the "Moses" moniker, which related not only to the Biblical leader, but also to one of the most popular African American spirituals. The song *Go Down Moses* was a plea for deliverance from tyrannical rule and slavery, and linked African American suffering to that of the Jews in Egypt. During slavery, music has been an important tool of community building and communication for the enslaved, and features prominently in Bradford's narrative of Tubman's life. Termed "sorrow songs" by W.E.B. du Bois, they were "the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they [told] of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways" (du Bois, 2007 [1903], 169). *Go Down Moses* was also one of the code songs used by the Underground Railroad conductors to inconspicuously reach out to the slaves. A choice on Lemmons' part that helps to bridge the past and the present is the decision to use Nina Simone's version of one of the spirituals, *Sinnerman*. All other songs are performed by Cynthia Erivo, the Broadway star cast as Tubman, which makes Simone's cover stand out even more and makes it instantly recognizable. By using this version of the song, Lemmons links Tubman's struggle against the inhumane institution of slavery to more recent instances of anti-Black racism in the United States. Simone's voice, linked so heavily with protest songs of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, signifies a struggle against the oppressive system. Lemmons' choice of soundtrack suggests a connection between different historical periods and events, and reaches beyond the times of slavery.

Tubman's biopic does not seek to shock viewers, and when compared to other films set in the slavery era, it seems tame in its depictions of violence. In its most explicit display, Marie Buchanon, a Black abolitionist, is beaten to death

by a slavecatcher, who comes to her looking for Tubman. The audience observes the scene from Tubman's point of view - blurred, from a distance, and partially obscured by a doorframe. The scene focuses on defiance in the face of violence, not on the brutality itself. Throughout the film, Lemmons is not after a vicarious traumatization of the viewer, but instead contributes to the memory of an exceptional Black woman, whose achievements should still be celebrated today. Tubman has been at the center of a petty scuffle over remembrance for over a decade now - her likeness is supposed to replace Andrew Jackson on the 20 dollar bill, but the effort has been stalled by the Trump administration's "petty, crassly partisan, and blatantly racist decision" (Schmidt and Fucile, 2019, 60). Lemmons' film shows that Tubman deserves better, and that her work towards building a just, equal American society matters, although it is still a work in progress.

Emancipation: Visual Testimony of Slavery

Antoine Fuqua's *Emancipation* tells a very different story of fleeing to freedom. The film is based on the experiences of an escaped slave, immortalized in an early photograph that would become one of the most damning pieces of evidence against slavery. The film utilizes a muted, desaturated color palette, similar to that of 19th-century photography, to further signify its concern with the medium. Peter (Will Smith) is an enslaved Black man who labors at a Southern plantation with his wife and children. When the Civil War breaks out, he is taken away by Confederate soldiers and forced to build a railroad to aid their war effort. He remains distanced and determined through degradation and abuse, insisting that it is "just work", but when an opportunity presents itself, he orchestrates an escape from the camp. For most of its run, the film focuses on Peter's escape, giving a graphic account of the many dangers people fleeing slavery had to face. He follows the sound of Lincoln's cannons, driven by the knowledge that the president has signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which should grant him freedom once he reaches the frontline. Upon his arrival at the Union encampment near Baton Rouge, he is faced with the stark reality of wartime failure to secure the safety of runaway slaves - he is treated as "contraband" and "stolen property". The film comments on how legislative action does not always produce an immediate effect, even in such dire circumstances.

Peter is encouraged to join the U.S. Colored Troops, but before he dons the Union uniform, he has his photo taken. As the photographers explain when they position him facing away from the camera, its purpose is "to make sure every person in the world knows exactly what slavery truly looks like". When photography became a readily available medium, both slaveholders and abolitionists

alike began to rely on it to further their political goals. Depending on the buyer, these early pictures would either show that slaves were treated well, or that they were brutalized. Matthew Fox-Amato explains that "as photography sparked and shaped debates over racial identity and community, slavery generated a modern form of social struggle with photography at the center: it gave rise to a modern visual politics" (2019, 10). He outlines various uses of photography in the antebellum South and during the Civil War, highlighting how slaves, abolitionists, and proslavery advocates understood the new visual medium and exploited it to suit their needs. The photographs taken during that period ranged from "black Madonnas", dehumanizing and emasculating army camp photos, to "atrocity" photography, depicting bodily harm done to the slaves.

The photograph that *Emancipation* carefully reconstructs falls into the latter category and is known as *The Scourged Back*. It depicts a man's back, marred by clearly visible, deep scars - the effect of repeated, brutal whippings. It is a direct visual testimony of the inhumane treatment enslaved people received at the hands of slaveholders. The photographers in the film are a stand-in for the many abolitionists who "gave rise to the capacity of the photograph to publicize violations of the body and to serve as a social witness" (Fox-Amato, 2019, 11). Frederick Douglass advocated for using photography to aid the abolitionist cause, noticing its considerable social and political potential, and pictures' ability of "reaching and swaying the heart by the eye" (Douglass, 2015 [1861], n.p.). When *The Scourged Back* was published as a part of the *Typical Negro* triptych in "Harper's Weekly" in 1863, its purpose was to attest to the brutality of slavery by providing photographic evidence. This particularly graphic depiction was showcased as representative of African Americans' daily treatment. Scholars have since challenged the circulation of such graphic images of anti-Black violence. As Saidiya Hartman explains, "only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible" (Hartman, 2022, 2). Nevertheless, when contemporary directors depict the times of slavery, they often include scenes of extreme violence - beatings, whippings, and lynchings - that border on gratuitous. Filmmakers should question the necessity of such depictions, because "in using graphic violence to illuminate the realities of plantation slavery, they risk blurring the lines between authenticity and spectacle" (Plath, 2019, 72).

In a different form, atrocity photography exists to this day - we see examples of it every time the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter inevitably begins to trend on social media. Although today's visual testimonies of anti-Black violence are re-

corded on smartphones, they echo the sentiment from the earlier era. Witnesses of racist abuse record videos and take photos, as proof and insurance, and share them online. They serve a political purpose, just as they did in the early days of the medium, and their consumption should not be mindless. Alissa Richardson echoes Hartman's earlier statement by suggesting that "cellphone videos of vigilante violence and fatal police encounters should be viewed like lynching photographs - with solemn reserve and careful circulation" (2020). Fuqua's film shows a "typical" story of a fugitive slave, but in doing so, it also comments on the shortcomings of the legislative protections of minority groups, and shows how visual testimony aids our remembrance of traumatic events.

The Birth of a Nation: Challenging Hollywood's Racist Past

Nat Turner, the man behind the deadliest slave revolt in American history, is an elusive character. A documentary about his life, *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (dir. Charles Burnett, 2003), observes that "each author possesses Nat Turner, transforming his identity and the meaning of his revolt". Although Turner was literate, he never got to write his own story. William Styron attempted to deal with Turner's legacy in his contentious novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), based on Thomas R. Gray's account of Turner's life, recorded while the latter was imprisoned in the aftermath of the revolt. Styron's book proved highly controversial for its depiction of Turner and prompted a critical response from a group of Black writers (Clarke, 1968). Nate Parker admitted that he wanted his own take on Turner to "create inside all of us a desire to heal through honest conversation" (Kinser, 2016), particularly needed in the United States at a time of high racial tensions.

The film takes inspiration from Gray's narrative and immediately establishes Turner (Nate Parker) as an exceptional man, "intended for some great purpose" (Gray, 1832, 5). In the opening scene, a spiritual leader conducts a traditional African ritual, explaining that despite his young age, Turner possesses wisdom, courage and vision, and proclaims: "He is a leader. He is a prophet. We should listen to him." Later, when Turner learns how to read and write, he becomes a preacher. His master, Samuel Turner (Armie Hammer), orders him to visit nearby plantations and preach to the enslaved, using the scripture to convince them that no matter how frightful the conditions and how brutal the abuse, they should remain obedient to their masters. Turner witnesses unspeakable violence and deplorable conditions, and lets it radicalize him. It is an outcome unforeseen by his master, who believes himself to be a "good" slaveholder - yet, his wealth and social standing are entirely dependent on the number of people he "owns".

The Birth of a Nation offers not only a rich portrayal of the slaves' experience, but also shows entire generations of slaveholders as complicit in and benefiting from their inhumane treatment under a racist system. The other factor that contributes to Turner's radicalization is the repeated sexual abuse of enslaved women; Turner's own wife becomes a victim of violent gang rape. He seeks guidance in the Bible, and finds passages that inspire him and others to take a stand against slavery.

The aftermath of the short-lived revolt is bloody, and white supremacy is restored through disproportionate, indiscriminate violence. In one of the most haunting scenes of the film, Parker shows bodies of lynched rebels, many of them kids, hanging from the trees and swinging in the wind. The image is accompanied by Nina Simone's 1965 rendition of *Strange Fruit*, a song originally recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939. The lyrics document instances of lynching that continued in the South long after slavery was abolished. Lynchings "became public theater, a participatory ritual of torture and death, a voyeuristic spectacle" (Litwack, 2023, 13), with images of mob violence and brutalized Black bodies produced and circulated as late as the 1930s. Ersula Ore links the historical practice of lynching with contemporary anti-Black violence and police brutality, observing that "lynching as both a material practice and a rhetorical performance has exhibited an ideological belief regarding black inferiority, white superiority, and the need to keep blacks in their racially prescribed place" (2019, n.p.). Parker's choice of song for the poignant scene is far from accidental - Holiday's anthem was used in staging an anti-lynching exhibition, *Without Sanctuary*, where it "invoked a sense of impending doom that followed visitors", and helped to establish the exhibition as "a site of mourning and remembrance" (Ore, 2019, n.p.). The song describes the "pastoral scene of the gallant South", where the smell of magnolias combines with that of burnt flesh, and creates a multisensory depiction of lynching - Parker adds the visual layer to make an impactful statement about anti-Black violence across the centuries.

The title of Parker's film also invokes the history of American cinema, and is a "cinematic riposte" (Sinha, 2017, 17) to its namesake, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Over the past century, the 1915 epic has become the epitome of Hollywood's complicity in racism. The film is not remembered for its factual quality, or for capturing the *zeitgeist* of a post-war reckoning, but rather for being an "egregious distortion of history whose purpose is (…) to socially, culturally, ideologically and historically legitimize and valorize a racial hierarchy rooted in the presumption of white superiority" (Martin and Wall, 2013, 446). Instead of a nuanced portrayal of a historical period fraught with

tension, Griffith chose a binary approach and focused on the internal, allegedly irreconcilable, differences that ran along “the color line”. The inflammatory piece invoked nostalgia for the Old South, criticized the Reconstruction as a failed attempt at national reconciliation and strengthened racial animosities, playing into the racist ideology behind segregation laws in force at the time. *The Birth of a Nation* had measurable political outcomes, including the reemergence of the modern Ku Klux Klan (see Simcovitch, 1972). By referencing Griffith’s film, Parker challenges the vision of America it presented, and shows the strength and persistence of the oppressed.

Parker looks at the events that led up to the outbreak of the Civil War, which were the ideological foundation for Griffith’s film: the institution of slavery, the violence and disenfranchisement of African Americans, the harmful stereotypes. Although the events of Parker’s film play out almost entirely in the 1830s, it still references the Civil War as a moment of self-determination for African Americans. A young boy, who had previously betrayed the rebels, witnesses Turner’s execution and joins the Union forces as an adult. In the final scene, he fights the war alongside white soldiers, with the express purpose of gaining personal freedom and bringing about the end of slavery. Parker explained that he wanted his film “to create a strong sense of identity of who we were and what we were and why that has implications that are still affecting us today” (Kinser, 2016). The film highlights how the enslaved fought against their condition, and reaches out to the contemporary viewer, to inspire a similar attitude in the continued struggle against racism.

Conclusions

The three films discussed in this article share a number of similarities in how they portray the era of slavery. They all point to religion as an important space for preservation of the slaves’ identity and community. The films review events from a bygone era from a new perspective, shedding light on historical figures, whose lives have been devoted to fighting for their communities’ freedom, and who can inspire a new generation in facing systemic racism. Slavery remains a central issue in the discussion on American racism, and emerges “as the past that is not past”, which “reappears, always, to rupture the present” (Sharpe, 2016, n.p.). By referencing songs, photographs and films from later decades, the analyzed films highlight the continuity of the anti-racist struggle and build a connection between the past and the present. In addressing the lasting effects of the trauma of slavery, they contribute to the current understanding and formation of a common African American identity.

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