



Cinematic Blackness in the Age of Obama and #BlackLivesMatter

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Cinematic Blackness in the Age of Obama and #BlackLivesMatter

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A Thesis in the Field of Visual Arts
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

This thesis examines representation of Black protagonists in Hollywood films during Barack Obama's presidency and the ways in which those representations change and evolve concurrently with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. In creating a framework to investigate the relationship between commercial film and social activism, I adopt an approach that is able to accommodate an array of determining factors while situating the Black Lives Matter movement as an important potential determinant. I focus on five films—*The Blind Side* (2009), *Lee Daniels' The Butler* (2013), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Fruitvale Station* (2013), and *Selma* (2014)—that serve as representative examples of broader filmic trends. I provide a textual analysis of each film, evaluating the ways it utilizes or rejects common cinematic racial tropes, approaches issues of systemic racism, and works to generate empathy within the viewer. I also review the origins and evolution of the Black Lives Matter movement, paying particular attention to the ways in which it effectively influenced the national dialogue generally and the rhetoric of Barack Obama specifically.

I conclude that the representations of Black protagonists evolve during the course of Obama's presidency. The Black protagonists in early Obama era films are generally reliant on white saviors and white benevolence, while the protagonists of the later films gain greater personal agency, possess more accessible inner lives, and more readily become vehicles for the audience's empathy. I illustrate the ways Black Lives Matter successfully shifted public attitudes regarding race and racism by giving voice to the

Black experience in America, and how that shift exposed a market for films with more diverse perspectives.

I was having a conversation with a couple of actors who were insisting that what they do is different from what I do. No doubt, it's different. But never underrate the power of stories. Lyndon Johnson got the Civil Rights Act done because of the stories he told and the ones [Martin Luther] King told. When L.B.J. says, "We shall overcome" in the chamber of the House of Representatives, he is telling the nation who we are. Culture is vital in shaping our politics. Part of what I've always been interested in as president, and what I will continue to be interested in as an ex-president, is telling better stories about how we can work together. (qtd. in Galanes)

-Barack Obama

We are all born with a certain package. We are who we are: where we were born, who we were born as, how we were raised. We are kind of stuck inside that person, and the purpose of civilization and growth is to be able to reach out and empathize a little bit with other people, find out what makes them tick, what they care about. For me, the movies are like a machine that generates empathy. If it's a great movie, it lets you understand a little bit more about what it's like to be a different gender, a different race, a different age, a different economic class, a different nationality, a different profession, different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us. And that, to me, is the most noble thing that good movies can do and it's a reason to encourage them and to support them and to go to them. ("Ebert on Empathy")

-Roger Ebert

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the memories of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Jr., Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, John Crawford III, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Laquan McDonald, Donte Hamilton, Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, Tanisha Anderson, Akai Gurley, Romain Brisbon, Jerame Reid, Tony Robinson, Phillip White, Eric Harris, Jonathan Ferrell, Samuel DuBose, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Korryn Gaines, Amber Monroe, Islan Nettles, Aiyana Stanley Jones, Mya Hall, DeeNiquia Dodds, Tyre King, Terence Crutcher, Keith Scott, Jordan Edwards, Richard Collins III, Charleena Lyles, Rekia Boyd, Sean Bell, Danroy Henry, Jr., Oscar Grant III, Kendrec McDade, Ramarley Graham, Amadou Diallo, Anthony Lamar Smith, Susie Jackson, Clementa Pinkney, Cynthia Hurd, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Myra Thompson, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Daniel L. Simmons Sr., Ethel Lee Lance, Stephon Clark, Saheed Vassell, Antwon Rose II, Nia Wilson, Frederick Taft, MeShon Cooper, Botham Jean, and the countless others who were killed by acts of state-sanctioned violence.

Your lives mattered.

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My sincere gratitude goes to Professor Michael Bronski for his insight and guidance throughout this process. I feel incredibly fortunate to have had such an insightful thinker and writer take a sincere interest in my own scholarly development; our discussions helped me hone my own thinking and writing, and this thesis is immeasurably better as a result.

And special thanks to Reed, for reminding me to take a break and play Star Wars every once in a while. Love you, monkey.

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Introduction

The election of the first Black president was hailed by many in the mainstream media as the dawning of a new “post-racial” age in American life. The “old politics of race,” with its focus on Black grievance and victimhood, would no longer serve as a viable political strategy, they claimed: America was finally fulfilling the promise of Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream, and the “divisive” tactics of Black leaders like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were now obsolete (Logan 208). This utopian dream of a post-racial America, where people of all colors would be judged solely on the content of their character, proved, predictably, to be short lived. Systemic racism—or the system of structural advantages afforded to white people across a broad array of institutions and social settings, regardless of the presence or absence of individual racial animus (Henry and Tator 352)—is tightly woven into the fabric of American society, and the pundits and commentators unabashedly heralding America’s post-racial future lacked the basic conceptual and rhetorical frameworks to address or even acknowledge systemic racism in any meaningful way. Despite the very real symbolic importance of a Black head of state, systemic racism was too deeply ingrained in American culture for Barack Obama’s election to truly be a meaningful signifier of progress.

Rather than serving as a harbinger of a new post-racial utopia, Obama’s presidency instead saw issues of race and racism become near-permanent fixtures of the national discourse, as every move he made was met with thinly-veiled racial hostility from certain quarters of the electorate (Coates, “My President”). By his second term this

discourse on race was fueled by a succession of high-profile killings of young unarmed Black men and women. These extrajudicial killings, often at the hands of law enforcement officers and often with excessive and unnecessary force, sparked massive protests across the country. Activists used the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” to coordinate the protests on social media, and the phrase soon became the movement’s rallying cry.

Yet even before the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement, the presence of a Black man in the White House was forcing the country to contend with its long and complicated history with race. Evidence of this national self-examination could be found in all corners of the culture, most visibly in mass market cultural products such as television, music video, and film. The increase in the number of mainstream, Black-themed films during Obama’s tenure did not go unnoticed by critics and scholars, and the phenomenon gave rise to a wellspring of critical analysis—including such essay collections as *Movies in the Age of Obama*, which gathered or conscripted scholarly essays on various Hollywood films and organized them thematically, and prominent think-pieces in newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The New Yorker*, among others.¹ Most of these essays analyze specific films or make general note of the increase in mainstream Hollywood films that deal, either subtly or overtly, with themes of race in America, but I have yet to encounter a study on the ways in which the tone and quality of these films operated as signifiers of the changing political and cultural climate regarding race during Obama’s presidency. The initial wave of Black-themed films released during Obama’s first term—which were likely the result of the studios’ eagerness to capitalize on what they saw as

¹ See Scott and Dargis, Sharkey, and Hornaday for representative examples.

the hot and trending topic of race in America—largely relied on “post-racial” perspectives to tell their stories. A second wave of Black-themed films followed, which eschewed the conventional racial tropes of Hollywood—the “master’s tools,” if you will—and instead centered Black experiences and Black perspectives. Putting these two waves of film releases in dialogue with each other can be an instructive way to look at the evolution of racial dynamics in the American collective consciousness.

In this thesis, I will analyze five major studio films that were released during the presidency of Barack Obama—*The Blind Side* (2009), *Lee Daniels’ The Butler* (2013), *Fruitvale Station* (2013), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and *Selma* (2014)—that deal explicitly with issues of racism and white supremacy and were produced and released concurrently with or immediately prior to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.² Using these films as illustrative examples of broader filmic trends, I will track the shifting Black image in commercial narrative cinema through the Obama years, with a particular focus on the ways these films attend to the dialectic between white privilege/supremacy and Black agency. As the Black Lives Matter movement is the most visible and urgent manifestation of the shifting cultural attitudes toward race—and as the movement has worked to articulate the current state of racism in America—I will interrogate these films through the lens of the movement, evaluating the extent to which they successfully identify and confront issues of privilege, systemic racism, and institutional and state

² Although in common usage the phrase “white supremacy” refers to the racial philosophies of white hate groups, in the context of this thesis I will use the phrase as it is defined by Frances Lee Ansley. She describes white supremacy as:

a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (592)

violence. Although the subjects of these films are all historical in nature, I will situate their themes in the context of the Obama era and analyze them as contemporary cultural artifacts.

Each of the films I will examine was considered a contender for the Academy Award for Best Picture by their studios, although two (*Lee Daniels' The Butler* and *Fruitvale Station*) failed to garner any Oscar nominations despite high critical expectations (Setoodeh). As major studio films released with the hope of appealing to Academy voters, they contain themes that their studios believed would speak to and resonate with the political and cultural climate of the time. Despite being products of a formula-bound, risk-averse industry, their status as awards season “prestige pictures” gave these films greater leeway to present Black issues and Black protagonists in ways that other studio films might not, while still aiming to appeal to a broad commercial market. Because these films aim to address racial issues in an open and straightforward manner, they can serve as a representative sample of the ways in which the mainstream filmic depiction of “blackness” evolved over the years of Obama’s presidency and of how the issues raised by Black Lives Matter have inflected Hollywood cinema.

In order to effectively evaluate these cinematic representations of race and racial issues, it is important to recognize these films as commercial products of an industry with a long history of privileging white stories and white perspectives while creating marginalized and subordinated representations of “blackness.” Even so, Hollywood’s approach to race is not simply dictated by the fantasies and desires of the dominant social order, but rather, as Ed Guerrero argues, is a “site of perpetual contestation” as it is “constantly challenged by the cultural and political self-definitions of African-

Americans” (3). The “toms,” “coons,” “mammies,” “bucks,” and other reductive types that liberally populate America’s century-long cinematic history have been consistently met with resistance by Black audiences, with the resulting dialectic between the white-centric film industry and Black social activism creating a dynamic, shifting cinematic portrayal of “blackness.” While the unrest that followed the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and others was not directed at the film industry and so likely did not have a direct impact on the creative output of the studios, I will demonstrate that their legacy extends through political activism into the broader fabric of our cultural production.

By the summer of 2014 it was impossible for the nation to ignore the protests erupting in communities like Ferguson, New York City, and Baltimore, nor the subsequent militarized response by the police. The value of Black lives became a topic of national discussion, and, while the protests served as a catalyst for these discussions, the tensions that shaped the movement had been simmering for a long time. In this thesis, I will argue that we can witness the evolution and momentum of this social struggle playing out across these five films. As the “cultural and political self-definitions” of Black communities coalesced around the principle that Black lives matter, that renewed political energy and social consciousness became increasingly conspicuous in the films of the Obama era.

Chapter I.

“Honey, You’re Changing That Boy’s Life!”: White Saviors and *The Blind Side*

Adapted from Michael Lewis’ 2006 book of the same name, 2009’s *The Blind Side* is based on the true story of former NFL offensive tackle Michael Oher. Despite being the life story of a popular, contemporary Black athlete, the film was not targeted to a Black audience: Oher’s story merely serves as the catalyst for a conventional Hollywood white savior film.

The film begins with sixteen-year-old Michael (Quinton Aaron) living on a friend’s couch in Hurt Village, a run-down west Memphis housing project. Hurt Village is overrun with gangs, and since his mother Dee Dee is a drug addict without a permanent address Michael is often left to fend for himself. His friend’s father is trying to find a way to get his son into a private Christian school, and when he takes him to visit the coach at Westgate Christian Academy he brings Michael along with him. Both boys are good basketball players and the father suspects “Big Mike” would be a good football player, too. Although the coach is initially dismissive and says there are no athletic scholarships available at the school, his entire demeanor changes when he glances out his office window and sees the two boys playing a pick-up game of basketball. Michael is massive: large and muscular, yet surprisingly quick and agile. Despite Michael’s abysmal grades, the coach is able to appeal to the administration’s Christian philosophy to secure Michael a spot at the school, arguing that it would be uncharitable to turn away someone so obviously in need who is seeking their help. When Michael’s friend’s family eventually

kick him out a few weeks later, he is taken in by Leigh Anne and Sean Tuohy (Sandra Bullock and Tim McGraw), a wealthy white couple who notice Michael aimlessly hanging around the school gymnasium late at night during their daughter's volleyball game and realize he may be homeless. Although originally meant as a short-term arrangement, Michael gradually becomes a part of the family, and, with the encouragement of their daughter Collins (Lily Collins) and their son S.J. (Jae Head), Leigh Anne and Sean decide to legally adopt him. As Michael tentatively learns to navigate the white world of Westgate, Leigh Anne finds herself confronting casual racism from friends, family members, and the community at large. As a result of having a stable home life and the constant support of Leigh Anne and Sean, his academic performance improves, and he becomes a star athlete, attracting the attention of the top collegiate football programs in the country. As the closing credits roll, we see actual footage of Michael Oher being selected by the Baltimore Ravens in the first round of the 2009 NFL draft.

While Oher's extraordinary rags-to-riches transformation is ostensibly the subject of the film, so much attention is given to Leigh Anne's role in shaping him that Michael is relegated to a supporting character in his own story. At every turn the film works to create greater emotional engagement with Leigh Anne, centering her own transformative journey as Michael's presence changes her and her family's life. As Michael gradually reveals painful details of his impoverished past—such as the fact that he's never slept in an actual bed before—the focus is always on the way this information affects Leigh Anne. The centering of Leigh Anne is emphasized by her unique way of dealing with her emotions: she refuses to cry in front of anyone, so these reveals are always followed by

Leigh Anne abruptly leaving the room to lock herself in her bedroom, where the viewer can experience her emotional reaction more intimately. Michael is left behind: it is Leigh Anne who holds our interest. The film makes its thesis explicit during one of Leigh Anne's country club luncheons with three nameless female friends. "Honey, you're changing that boy's life!" remarks one friend as they discuss Michael. "No," Leigh Anne responds, pausing to reflect. "He's changing mine." This is not a film about Michael: it is a film about Leigh Anne.

Even scenes early in the film that are designed to elicit the audience's sympathy for Michael falter as they try to hit their mark. After he is kicked out of his friend's home, Michael spends the night sitting up in a dark and dingy all-night laundromat. The camera pans across the front windows of the empty building before stopping on Michael, holding him in a medium-long shot while he tentatively pulls his Biology textbook out of a plastic bag and, after a long moment, slowly opens the cover. The dirty glass of the laundromat windows creates a barrier between Michael and the audience: he remains distant and unknowable. There are no close-ups to allow us to read his face or to encourage emotional connection. It's not clear if Michael even possesses any real interest in bettering his situation, much less the agency to do so (fig. 1).

Even when outright racism is directed toward Michael, it is largely filtered through Leigh Anne's experience and presented as her burden to bear. During Michael's first football game at Wingate, the Tuohys sit several rows in front of a group of parents from the visiting team, one of whom makes loud comments to his group about Michael throughout the game. "That ain't fair, they got a big ol' black bear playin' for 'em!" he laughs with a thick Southern accent as the teams take the field. "What is this, the circus?"

Although Leigh Anne urges Sean and S.J. to ignore him—“Sticks and stones, boys, sticks and stones...”—she bristles when he crows about his son slipping past Michael’s defense to tackle the Westgate quarterback. When Michael tackles his son in a particularly dramatic fashion one play later, Leigh Anne turns around to calmly address the boy’s father. “Yo, Deliverance, you see number 74? Well, that’s *my* son.” The man is left speechless. It’s an emotionally satisfying moment for the audience and makes clear that Leigh Anne holds the moral high ground.

Remarkably, this is the only scene in the film in which Michael actually experiences any racism directly, yet it has no discernable effect on him. The man’s son taunts him on the field, calling him “boy” and “big Black buck,” even kicking him violently in the helmet as he gets up off the ground, but Michael, incredibly, seems entirely unperturbed by these attacks. He is instead more concerned about protecting his coach from being thrown out of the game as he angrily complains to the referees about Michael’s treatment. In a moment of particularly heavy-handed symbolism, Michael even offers a hand up to an opposing player after tackling him (fig. 2). Unlike Jackie Robinson, who, as a condition of signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, famously agreed to swallow his pride and bite his tongue while enduring racism on the field, Michael is preternaturally unaffected by these affronts to his dignity. Robinson’s hard-earned equanimity in the face of racism—which he and Dodgers’ president Branch Rickey deemed critical to his success as a Black player in the all-white world of segregated, postwar baseball—came at a high personal price: his hair turned prematurely gray and he suffered constant stomach pains, often unable to eat or sleep from the stress (Robinson 49). That same equanimity comes without any cost to Michael, which denies

both the character and the audience a satisfying moment of drama and character development. If the viewer is seeking any vicarious catharsis for the gross displays of racism, it is fulfilled through Leigh Anne's interaction in the stands.

Leigh Anne cements her status as the moral center of the film during another luncheon with her friends, when one of them asks Leigh Anne if she is at all worried about Collins' safety now that she has a "large Black boy" sleeping under the same roof. "Shame on you," Leigh Anne utters in disgust as she picks up the check and walks away. Leigh Anne maintains the moral high ground, but Michael is presented as passive, sexless, two-dimensional; throughout the film Leigh Anne repeatedly compares him to Ferdinand the Bull (the protagonist of Munro Leaf's 1936 children's book *The Story of Ferdinand*) who, unlike the other rough and rowdy young bulls, only desires to sit quietly in the shade of his favorite cork tree and smell the flowers. In Leigh Anne's view—which, due to Leigh Anne's status as protagonist of the film, is also the audience's view—only a racist could look at Michael and see a threat.

With Leigh Anne serving as both the moral center and interest center of the film, Michael is consigned to the role of "Magical Negro" in her life. His personal journey is always secondary, always a vehicle for the growth of others. The white world Michael moves through is strange and foreign to him, but the viewer is rarely afforded the opportunity to experience this world from Michael's perspective. Rather, the audience experiences Michael the same way the white characters experience Michael: from a distance, as an object of white gaze. Quiet and removed, he serves as a blank slate for the white characters around him, who are able to project their thoughts and desires onto the canvas of his Black body. The coach, watching Michael through a window as he plays a

pick-up game of basketball, sees a ringer he can use to improve his teams. Sean, watching Michael scavenge for half-empty popcorn bags among the bleachers after Collins' volleyball game, sees a poor, hungry boy in need of Christian charity. Leigh Anne, watching Michael sit alone at the dining room table while her family takes their Thanksgiving dinners into the living room to watch football, sees someone with an innate sense of familial propriety and is shamed into turning off the TV and insisting that they join Michael at the table. It is not until the final five minutes, while Michael is deciding which college offer to accept, that Leigh Anne first asks him if he even wants to play football: the question, until this moment, was not important. Even then, the question serves only as a demonstration of Leigh Anne's personal growth and integrity: she is demonstrating that she is committed to Michael as a person, not solely as a football player. Michael could have admitted that he never wanted to play football again and the film would not have substantially changed in any way.

The stable home life provided by the Tuohys was undoubtedly an important, life-changing experience for Michael, but the film presents his integration into the wealthy white family as a complete rebirth. Despite being nearly an adult, Michael is infantilized in scene after scene. On his first day at Wingate, he turns in an unanswered quiz with a child-like drawing of a sailboat scrawled on the back (fig. 3). Later, Leigh Anne reads *The Story of Ferdinand* as a bedtime story to Michael and S.J. as they lay together in Michael's bed (fig. 4). Even in this moment, which is ostensibly intended to demonstrate how the Tuohys are filling a void in Michael's life by giving him the experiences of a "normal" childhood, the spotlight is taken away from Michael as the camera slowly pans across the scene to stop on a close up of Collins, who is sitting on the floor just outside

the room listening along to the story. The camera lingers on her face as it wells with emotion: this was one of her favorite stories when she was younger. Ever the Magical Negro, Michael's child-like innocence allows the Tuohy children to recapture and rediscover the innocent joys of their own childhood (fig. 5).

The film proved to be incredibly popular with audiences, finishing 2009 as one of the top ten highest grossing films of the year despite opening at the end of November (“2009 Yearly Box Office”). Anchored by a charismatic, Oscar-winning performance by Bullock, the film clearly resonated with theater-going audiences. Yet the reflections of white American anxiety in *The Blind Side* are easy to spot. As the white community of Wingate Christian School cautiously welcomes an imposing (yet gentle and harmless) Black student into their midst, the film provides the audience with a means of displacing and assuaging the nagging anxieties about a Black man intruding into the historically white world of the American presidency.

Obama, too, entered American politics as a blank slate. He had a limited track record as a politician, serving only seven years in the Illinois Senate and less than four years as a U.S. Senator, and his positions on the campaign trail were sufficiently vague enough that progressives could see him as progressive while moderates could see him as moderate: supporters across a relatively broad range of left-of-center ideologies could read cues that reinforced their predispositions. He admits as much in his autobiography *The Audacity of Hope*, in which he acknowledges that, as a new face on the national political scene, he “serve(s) as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views” (10). One nearly universal element of his appeal, however, was his race, which many of his detractors were quick to point out. “Obama's

special charisma . . . always came much more from the racial idealism he embodied than from his political ideas,” observed conservative commentator Shelby Steele, noting that Obama provided white voters an opportunity to rid themselves of racial guilt (qtd. in Kelly). To these voters Obama’s actual policy positions became a secondary consideration, and he was a savvy enough political operator to successfully present himself as a political chimera, grounding his appeal in inspirational concepts rather than concrete positions. Like Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, the historical baggage surrounding his race rendered the “real” Obama invisible to the white electorate, allowing him to be whatever the voter needed him to be. His supporters were not necessarily casting their vote for Barack Obama, they were voting for “The Black Man Running for President” and all of the various implications and associations that concept carried for them. But while Obama was able to strategically leverage his Ellisonian “invisibility” to his advantage, Michael enjoys no such luxury. His invisibility affords his character no benefits. He is first and foremost “The Black Kid from The Projects Who Is Good at Football,” and as such he remains a blank slate throughout the entire film; we scarcely scratch the surface of his inner life. While his characterization as a blank slate roughly correlates with the public perception of Obama at this time—who, even as President, was aloof enough to still be widely seen an unknown and unknowable quantity during his first year in office (Kelly)—those qualities render a film character incapable of independent agency. Michael’s desires, intelligence, and ambition are all invisible, and as a result his successes are shown to be a product of Leigh Anne’s effort, not his own.

The similarities between Michael and Obama do not end there. As a candidate and then later as a President, Obama was seen by many as an extraordinary, one-on-a-kind

figure. The political press was quick to recognize and point out the parallels between Obama and Jackie Robinson: both men, in order to successfully break the color barrier in their professions, had to rise above and endure an unprecedented amount of hate and vitriol (M. Jones; Leon; Martin). Jesse Jackson, Jr. observed the way Obama suffered through racism on the campaign trail without responding, noting that “he has to keep smiling, because no one wants an angry African-American man in the White House” (qtd. in Martin). But Obama, like Robinson, had to be more than just an imperturbable punching bag: he had to perform flawlessly. Like Hattie McDaniel, he had to be the ultimate credit to his race. “There are no more,” joked the comedian Sinbad in 2010. “There are no more Black men raised in Kansas and Hawaii. That’s the last one. Y’all better treat this one right. The next one gonna be from Cleveland. He gonna wear a perm. Then you gonna see what it’s really like” (qtd. in Coates, *Eight Years* 295).

Michael, like Obama, is also shown to be exceptional and unique in contrast to the Black characters that surround him. There are very few Black supporting characters of any significance in the film, and the few that do exist are characters from Hurt Village that represent thinly drawn types of poor Black ghetto life. Michael’s mother Dee Dee is a lifelong addict who has had so many children by so many different men that she cannot even remember who Michael’s father is. Alton, described in the script as the obvious leader of a group of “gang-bangers” (33), is a brutal black buck who, true to type, loudly expresses his interest in having sex with the white women in the film (Leigh Anne and Collins) in each of the few scenes he is in.

Michael, with his imposing stature and gentle demeanor, stands out as exceptional against this harsh and deprived background. He, Leigh Anne reminds us, is Ferdinand the

Bull; he belongs in the shade of the cork tree, not in the field with the other rough and rowdy young bulls. Leaving aside the clearly problematic issue of comparing Black men to animals, this analogy reveals the underlying trouble with the film’s basic racial thesis: in order for Leigh Anne’s Ferdinand characterization to work, it must assume the natural state of young Black men and boys is violent and aggressive. If this were not the case, the film would have allowed us to see Michael angry during his first football game, struggling against his teenage impulses as he endured racist taunts and physical violence. Yet he had to remain equanimous in the face of these indignities for the same reason Jackie Robinson did: the film does not trust its audience to see an angry Black man as a rooting interest. In order to highlight the fact that Michael is a rare exception to the norm, the film presents him against a backdrop of caricaturized Black savagery. While people like Dee Dee and Alton certainly do exist in American society, their presence as the standout Black background characters in a film with the nominal theme of racial acceptance actively undermines that message.

And chances are this unintended subtext found some traction within its audience: a 2016 study found that thirty-eight percent of white Americans surveyed held a dehumanizing view of Blacks, believing that Black people are “less evolved” than whites and using descriptive terms like “savage,” “barbaric,” and “animalistic” when asked to justify this view (Jardina). Michael’s escape from poverty is a critical element of the plot, but by creating a narrow and segregated filmic world—with the whites attending luncheons at country clubs and the Blacks living in squalor in Hurt Village—the film blindly reinforces existing stereotypes at best and at worst intentionally taps into latent

racial fears within its white audience in order to provide a more dramatic emotional backdrop to Leigh Anne's narrative arc.

When viewed through the lens of displaced white anxieties around a Black president, the popularity of *The Blind Side* takes on new meaning. It is a film in which the white person can triumphantly assume the mantle of "Least Racist" without having to actually care too deeply about the lives of Black people. By magnanimously helping one extraordinary Black person achieve their dreams, the white benefactor becomes a better person in the process. The Black person succeeds, the white person is redeemed. Conservatives such as Rush Limbaugh and 2008 RNC Chairman candidate Chip Saltsman notably came under fire for referring to Obama as a "Magical Negro," but they were not wrong (Sinderbrand). Electing Barack Obama helped relieve white voters of the guilt (or, perhaps more accurately, the minimal discomfort) they felt over America's history of slavery and segregation. By elevating him, they elevated themselves. When understood in this way, it is completely understandable how *The Blind Side* garnered an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture. This was a story that America—and white America in particular—wanted to see rewarded.

Ultimately, *The Blind Side* proved to be a paean to the ideology of racial colorblindness, and a close study of the film's racial dynamics can capture a snapshot of the prevailing racial attitudes of white America during the beginning years of Obama's presidency (Bonilla-Silva 255). Colorblind racial ideology has two main, interconnecting dimensions: color-evasion, or the claim that one does not "see color," and power-evasion, or the denial of racism by emphasizing equal opportunities. The purpose of this ideology is to minimize, deny, and make invisible the systemic racism of America society in favor

of victim-blaming rationalizations that explain away racial inequalities (Neville 460). As a result of adopting this ideology, most white people believe that minorities (in particular Black people) are themselves responsible for any “race problems” plaguing the country and believe minorities unfairly “play the race card” and “cry racism” when they draw attention to racial injustice (Bonilla-Silva 1). Leigh Anne is almost aggressively “colorblind” in her interactions with Michael (as evidenced by the “that’s *my* son” scene), judging him on the content of his character and not on the color of his skin, yet the film does not trust the audience to approach Michael in the same manner. In order to be palatable to white audiences, Michael must be saintly: he must never get angry, he must always be grateful, and he must always be there to offer a helping hand up to his white brethren. The result, while positive for Michael, is disastrous for Hurt Village. The natural conclusion of colorblind racial ideology is that the Black citizens in Hurt Village—and by extension, all Black Americans disadvantaged by systemic racism—owe their situation to a deficiency of character and are therefore getting what they deserve. This worldview will ultimately inform the white “All Lives Matter” response to the Black Lives Matter movement in three years’ time.



Figure 1. Michael Oher spends the night in a laundromat.
From *The Blind Side*, 2009.



Figure 2. Michael's helping hand.
From *The Blind Side*, 2009.

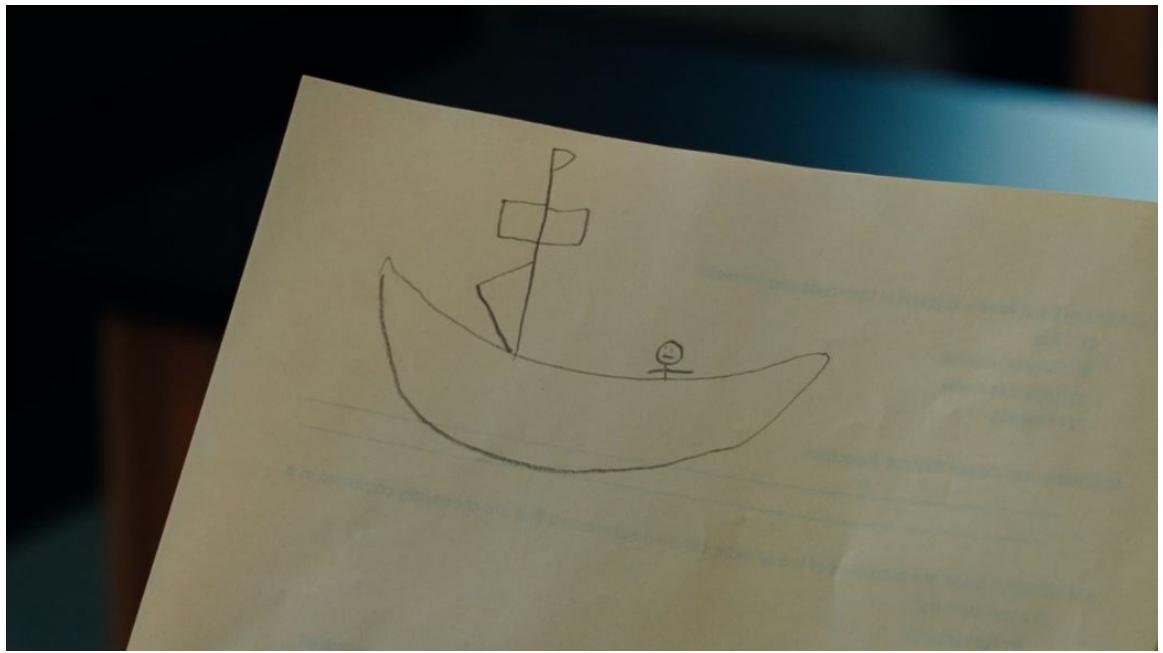


Figure 3. Michael's drawing on the back of his blank quiz.
From *The Blind Side*, 2009.



Figure 4. Bedtime stories: Leigh Anne reads *The Story of Ferdinand* to Michael and S.J.
From *The Blind Side*, 2009.



Figure 5. Pan to: the inexplicable focus on Collins and her emotional reaction.
From *The Blind Side*, 2009.

Chapter II.

“The Butler Stands for Everyone Who Serves America”: Colorblind Racial Ideology and

Lee Daniels’ The Butler

Lee Daniels’ The Butler (2013) is based loosely on the career of Eugene Allen, a butler who served in the White House through eight presidential administrations, from Harry Truman to Ronald Regan. Allen was the subject of a *Washington Post* article by Wil Haygood that appeared three days after Obama’s election: Haygood’s intent was to profile a Black employee who had worked in the White House during the Jim Crow years and had experienced the advancement of the civil rights movement from that unique vantage point. Using Haygood’s *Post* story as inspiration, Daniels presents the story of Cecil Gaines (Forest Whitaker), a butler who served in the White House from Eisenhower to Reagan, and his tumultuous relationship with his son Louis (David Oyelowo), who fought on the front lines of the civil rights movement during the 1960s despite his father’s objections. With a Black director and a largely-Black cast, the film is, in part, a highlight reel of the racial advancements made during the twentieth century. The story, however, is presented through the lens of colorblind racial ideology. This choice ultimately—and, I will argue, intentionally—obscures the issue of continued systemic racism that persisted at the time and continues to persist today.

The film—framed as a flashback by an elderly Cecil, reflecting on his life as he sits in a chair in an empty White House vestibule—opens with the jarring image of two lynched boys dangling from nooses at night. The image is shot from a low angle and the

bodies appear as they would to spectators and passers-by below. An American flag, lit by an out-of-frame spotlight, flaps in the breeze behind them on an impossibly tall flagpole as a Martin Luther King, Jr. quote appears on screen: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that.” The scene is too artificially constructed and heavy-handed to have much emotional impact and accurately anticipates the tone of the rest of the film (fig. 6). The next shot is Cecil as a boy in the 1920s on a Georgia cotton plantation, an image which reads as indistinguishable from slavery. When he is eight years old he witnesses the plantation owner take his mother into a shed to rape her and then, as he comes out of the shed, casually murder his father for daring to look him in the eye and address him directly. With his father gone and his mother catatonic after the rape, he is brought into the big house and trained as a house servant. He is taught to be invisible: “The room should feel empty when you’re in it,” instructs the matron of the house.

Years later, knowing he has to leave before the plantation owner kills him too, the young teenager sets out on his own. His journey through the south is presented in a harrowing montage: he sleeps in ditches, navigates public streets under the cover of night, and looks over his shoulder constantly. It is during this journey that he sees the hanged boys as he ruminates in voiceover about how a white man could kill him at any time and face no consequences—a point previously made with the murder of his father. He travels as far as North Carolina, where an elderly Black hotel porter catches him punching through a window in the hotel to steal some food. As he bandages Cecil’s bloody hand, Cecil convinces him to talk to his boss to hire him on as additional help. He excels at the hotel and is soon hired as a butler for a high-end hotel in Washington D.C.

Several years later Cecil is thriving in his position and has a family: wife Gloria (Oprah Winfrey) and sons Louis (David Oyelowo) and Charlie (Isaac White and later Elijah Kelley). He is eventually offered a position as a butler at the White House by the White House Chief Usher, who saw Cecil in action at the hotel and was impressed by his professionalism and ability to deflect when drawn into political conversations.

As a White House butler, Cecil has a front row seat to history. While bringing in trays of food, serving drinks, or standing silently and impassively against a wall in the Oval Office, Cecil hears Eisenhower contemplate sending federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, sees Kennedy being deeply affected by news footage of the violent crackdown on demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama before calling for civil rights legislation, watches Johnson wrestle with his approach to that legislation, hears Nixon plot to neutralize the black power movement and “gut those sons of bitches” in the Black Panther Party, and witnesses Reagan negotiate with Republicans in Congress on South African sanctions. Privy to the intimate moments in which these men struggle with these issues, Cecil occasionally becomes a sounding board for their thoughts. He ultimately helps bring about a small measure of equality himself, lobbying for equal pay for the Black staff at the White House.

Weaving through Cecil’s story is the story of his son, Louis, who, as a high school student, is inspired to a life of activism after attending a speech by Mamie Till, Emmett Till’s mother. Father and son strongly disagree about his activism, which leaves them estranged for most of Louis’ adult life. After high school he chooses to go to Fisk University specifically so he can attend James Lawson’s workshops on nonviolent direct action. Through those workshops Louis becomes involved in the Nashville lunch counter

sit-ins in 1960. He joins the Freedom Riders in 1961 to protest the segregated bus terminals throughout the south, and, in a historically inaccurate but dramatically compelling turn, the bus he is on is attacked and firebombed by the Ku Klux Klan. During the Johnson administration he attends, and is not impressed by, a speech by Malcolm X, and he joins the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in their protest in Selma, Alabama, at which point he is so involved in the inner workings of the movement that he watches Johnson's famous "We Shall Overcome" speech a week later in an intimate gathering that includes Martin Luther King, Jr. (fig. 7). Shortly after King's assassination he becomes involved with the Black Panther Party, but he quickly grows disillusioned with their militant image. During the Reagan administration he unsuccessfully runs for Congress and continues his activism by protesting the United States' support of South African apartheid.

Cecil retires during the Reagan administration. He reconnects with Louis, having gained a better understanding of the ways his activism inspired the actions of the presidents he served. The film quickly jumps to present day: Louis, now a congressman, sits with the recently-widowed Cecil to tearfully watch the election returns come in as Barack Obama is elected President of the United States. After the inauguration Cecil is invited to the White House to meet with the president, choosing his "LBJ for the USA" tie clip for the occasion. Returning to the film's opening, we see that this meeting is the reason he has been sitting in the White House vestibule. As he slowly walks toward the Oval Office, the music swells dramatically, and we hear inspirational snippets of speeches by Kennedy, Johnson, and Obama as they speak about dignity, progress, and hope.

Perhaps counterintuitively, the film, told from the perspective of a Black family and focused on the advancements made during the civil rights era, ultimately defends and bolsters colorblind racial ideology. It does so in part through system justification, which is “the process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interest” (Jost and Banaji 2). There are a variety of ways in which *Lee Daniels’ The Butler* works to make the structures of systemic racism invisible, which is the primary purpose of colorblind racial ideology.

One of the main ways the film accomplishes this is by disconnecting and juxtaposing the past and the present. The road to racial equality is presented as a fully-realized journey with a clear beginning (slavery, as represented by Cecil’s origins on a cotton plantation) and a clear end (the election of Barack Obama). The battles that were fought by civil rights activists and American politicians were harrowing and difficult, but, most importantly, they are complete. Louis, whose character represents the activist on the front lines of the fight for racial justice, is given very little to do after King’s assassination beyond rejecting the Black Panthers. As a failed political candidate in the early 1980s we briefly see him talking to a reporter about Black and Latino unemployment rates, but this iteration of Louis’ activism is very difficult for the viewer to connect to. He rattles off statistics in a flat, uninspiring politician’s drone, and the issues he speaks about do not feel real in the same way the subjects of his earlier protests did. The film, through its activist character, is *telling* us about a problem instead of *showing* us a problem, breaking a cardinal storytelling rule in order to deemphasize the more contemporary issues. After tendering his resignation at the White House, Cecil finds his son at a protest and, for the first time, joins him. It is a tender moment and a critical

development in the two men's relationship—after not speaking for over a decade Cecil is finally acknowledging the importance of the work Louis has devoted his life to—but the protest is not related to any of the Reagan administration's policies. Cecil finds Louis outside the South African embassy, leading the crowd in a "Free Mandela" chant. "Twenty years ago we marched in this country for our rights," he shouts into his megaphone. "Today, we march to free the people of South Africa." Louis' energy and attention are no longer directed toward solving problems in America: the real work is now abroad. The implications are clear.

The film also legitimizes colorblind racial ideology through its representations of racism. The depiction of the attack on Louis and the Freedom Riders provides an illuminating example: although a bus carrying Freedom Riders was firebombed in Alabama in 1961, the circumstances were dramatically different from the scene that is portrayed on the screen. In the film, the attack occurs at night after the bus is diverted onto a side road by a burning cross in the middle of the street. The side street is blocked by a crowd of white-robed Klansmen and angry white citizens (including, implausibly, a few men in Nazi uniforms) who terrorize the riders and break the windows until one Klansman tosses a Molotov cocktail into the bus (fig. 8). In reality, the firebombing occurred on a sunny Sunday afternoon, with many attackers still wearing their Sunday church clothes—a few even had children with them. Although several of the instigators were members of the KKK, no one was wearing Klan robes and there were no burning crosses. Nazis were not involved (Arsenault 140-148). Daniels' decision to take dramatic license with this historical incident is questionable: not only would a more realistic portrayal of this event still have had the power to instill shock and fear in the viewer—the

details of the firebombing are objectively terrifying—but, stripped of all the obvious and clichéd visual signifiers of a racist mob, the scene would have taken on a more unsettling tone. The added details, while visually compelling and certain to provoke a strong visceral reaction in the viewer, also have the ulterior consequence of providing comfort to contemporary white audiences. White families in their Sunday best with their children in tow, set against a bright spring day: that image would have been far more relatable for white audiences. By choosing to outfit the scene’s villains in Klan robes and Nazi uniforms—*accoutrements* that were practically unthinkable to Americans in 2013—the film creates a comfortable distance between the white audience and the white characters on screen while reinforcing the popular contemporary fiction that racism is an individual issue rather than a structural one. The film implies that racists are people who wear white hoods or don swastikas, and the staging of this scene allows the white viewer to maintain the belief that racism is exclusively the domain of bad people who consciously believe minorities to be inferior. Since such extreme expressions of personal bigotry are now rare and taboo, racism is therefore a relic of the past: an ill that was solved during the civil rights movement.

At two points the film narrowly touches on systemic racism only to obfuscate or minimize the larger issue. The first occurrence happens during the Johnson administration, when Cecil approaches R.D. Warner (Jim Gleason), the White House Chief Usher who oversees the entire service and operations staff, to discuss the disparity in pay between the white staff and the Black staff and the lack of career advancement opportunities for Black staff members. Warner is seated at his desk, barely looking up from his magazine as Cecil nervously makes his case. “You’re very well liked here,

Cecil,” Warner responds, “But if you’re unhappy with your salary or position then I suggest you seek employment elsewhere.” As Cecil begins to stammer out a response Warner brusquely interrupts him. “Don’t let that Martin Luther King shit fill your britches out. Just remember where I found you.” He returns to his magazine: the meeting is over. Cecil stands awkwardly in place for a moment before letting himself out.

This scene is an example of what became known during the studio era as “Burbanking,”¹ in which systemic injustices are resituated within an individual “bad apple,” thereby making them vulnerable to feats of individual heroism (Binggeli 475). While Cecil identifies and articulates institutional inequalities in his work place, Warner’s dismissive and disrespectful treatment of Cecil causes the situation to read less as a systemic issue and more as an example of Warner’s individual prejudice and his intentionally racist actions. More importantly for the film’s defense of colorblind racial ideology, however, is the fact the situation is resolved. Nearly twenty years later, during the Reagan administration, the scene is repeated: a much older Cecil slowly walks into the room and asks if he may sit down; Warner looks up but does not respond, so Cecil remains standing. He repeats his grievances more confidently, and this time makes a demand: if he is not paid fairly, he will have to move on from the position. “I’ll guess you’ll be moving on, then,” Warner replies. “I told the president that you’d say that,” Cecil responds calmly. “He told me to tell you to take this up with him, personally.” Warner is speechless. Cecil, with the aid of Ronald Reagan’s benevolent intervention, secures a fair and equitable workplace for himself and his Black colleagues.

¹ As Binggneli explains, the term “Burbanking” was coined by *Variety* in the 1930s because Warner Brothers studios—which was located in Burbank, California—was particularly fond of this narrative technique.

The second time the film addresses systemic racism occurs during the brief scene in which Louis, as a congressional candidate, rattles off statistics on the racial disparities in unemployment to a reporter. These statistics cannot be resolved as easily as Cecil's grievances, but the statistics themselves are unimportant, forgettable, and only serve as verbal props to make Louis sound less like an activist and more like the politician he is becoming. At the film's end there are no apparent vestiges of racism extant: the combined efforts of civil rights activists and politicians have effectively dismantled them. This holds neatly with the view held by the majority of white Americans, fifty-eight percent of whom, according to a recent survey, disagree with the proposition that "generations of slavery and discrimination have created the conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class" (Parker). This attitude bolsters and maintains colorblind racial ideology, which relies on emphasizing equal opportunity (Neville 460), and the film is happy to reinforce that view.

For those who ascribe to the ideology of racial colorblindness, there was no greater indicator of equal opportunity than the election of Barack Obama, which was held up as definitive evidence that America's racial trajectory had lead us to a post-racial society. Pundits across the political spectrum made pronouncements declaring the end of "the old politics of race;" Obama's own lofty campaign rhetoric, which promised a transcendent leader who could unite a divided country, reinforced this idea ("Canton, Ohio"). In the wake of the election many pundits, politicians, and celebrities—including Bill Cosby, Bill Bennett, Wanda Sykes, Will Smith, John Lewis, and even Barack Obama himself—trotted out the tired, outdated, and conservative claim that this election was proof that Blacks "have no more excuses" (Reed and Bertin 97-109).

The film's approach to Obama and his election supports a post-racial reading consistent with this view. Although every other president Cecil has interacted with has been shown on screen, Obama remains the lone off-screen presidential presence, imbuing him with mystery and import. The film's framing device, which has Cecil reflecting on the progress that has been achieved during his lifetime, further emphasizes the importance and significance of this moment. After waiting long enough to complete his exhaustive reminiscence, Cecil is greeted by the current Chief Usher, Admiral Stephen Rochon, who is the first Black man to ever serve in this role (Stolberg). Rochon courteously offers to show Cecil the way the Oval Office, but Cecil cuts him off, defiantly declaring that he knows the way. Rochon stops and watches Cecil with admiration as he walks on alone (fig. 9). The music swells triumphantly and the shot cuts to a behind-the-back shot of Cecil's slow, halting walk. Cecil has known many presidents, but this one is different: as he walks forward we hear key snippets of civil rights speeches by Kennedy and Johnson, as well as an excerpt from Obama's "Yes We Can" campaign speech. Cecil approaches a doorway in a shot reminiscent of John Ford's iconic doorway shot from *The Searchers* (fig. 10). While Ford used the doorway in this film as a symbolic barrier that John Wayne's Ethan could not cross, Daniels uses this shot to symbolize barriers being broken: Cecil walks slowly but confidently through the doorway as the music crescendos, and, as he reaches the end of the hallway the scene fades to black (fig. 11). The framing of this shot is intentional: there is no rational reason for Rochon to allow a guest with no security clearance to walk unaccompanied into the Oval Office. As he crosses the threshold Cecil's Black body becomes a proxy for Obama himself, his life story symbolic of racial progress. This momentous occasion is the

culminating experience of Cecil's life and the culminating moment of the film. There are no white saviors in this film: Obama, unseen, is the savior. The implicit message is that Obama's election relegated racism to the dustbin of history.

The film's representation of the civil rights movement also serves to legitimize the status quo and bolster colorblind racial ideology. As Louis moves among the various groups fighting for civil rights, the film reinforces the common misconception that the only effective approach to fighting racial oppression is committed nonviolence. In reality the movement was far from homogenous in its tactics. There were a wide variety of active groups employing a wide variety of effective approaches, with more militant activists such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party enjoying significant levels of popular support, especially among poor Blacks (Gelderloos 11). A 1970 Harris poll showed that sixty-six percent of Black people felt that the activities of the Black Panther Party gave them pride, while forty-three percent said the party represented their own views (Forbes 237). The revolutionary elements of the movement cannot be separated from the nonviolent elements, particularly since the pacifists got much of their power from the specter of armed Black revolutionaries. Martin Luther King, Jr. often strategically leveraged the threat of Black revolutionary violence to put his own movement in a more favorable light, saying in 1964:

It is not a threat but a fact of history that if an oppressed people's pent-up emotions are not nonviolently released, they will be violently released. So let the Negro march . . . For if his frustrations and despair are allowed to continue piling up, millions of Negroes will seek solace and security in Black nationalist ideologies. (qtd. in Tani and Sera 107)

On-screen dramatic potential is lost as the film actively avoids depicting the complicated symbiotic relationship between the pacifist and revolutionary arms of the

movement, choosing instead to portray any position that is not one hundred percent rooted in pacifism and nonviolence as ineffective and counterproductive. The positions of both Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party are reduced to simplistic caricatures of disproportionate violent retaliation. Malcolm X is only touched on briefly: Louis and a group of friends leave a speech by Malcolm (which the onscreen text identifies as his “1965 Speaking Tour”), and Louis expresses his reservations about his message, which he sums up as, “if someone puts their hands on you, put them in a cemetery.”² They are walking through a dark, rundown neighborhood, and, as if to punctuate the danger of this message, shots ring out off-screen, causing them to duck into an alley for safety.

A few years later, after the assassination of Dr. King, Louis and his girlfriend show up unannounced at his parents’ home dressed in over-the-top Black Panther drag (fig. 12). They are rude and confrontational, and although they list off many positive community projects the Black Panthers have spearheaded—free breakfasts for children, free community health clinics, etc.—the mention of self-defense classes brings the conversation to a screeching halt. The very idea of using physical force, even in self-defense, coupled with their offensive and objectionable appearance and manners, effectively negates all the positive benefits their group is bringing to their community.

A few scenes later Louis attends a meeting at the Black Panther Party Headquarters in Oakland, California. The space is dark, grimy, and littered with trash, and “Black Power” graffiti adorns the black walls, which are full of holes and covered in graphic posters of naked Black women (fig. 13—see fig. 14 for the real world

² El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, as he was by that time known, was assassinated on February 21, 1965, so this speech would have been one of his last, given well after he had repudiated the Nation of Islam and their message. Louis’ characterization of the speech is incongruous with what he likely would have been speaking about at that time in his life.

counterpoint). An intense young man leads the meeting, which he opens by acknowledging that they are described by the “pigs in the media” as a terrorist group. But they are the ones being terrorized, he claims. “It’s time we take a stand against the injustices that plague our community,” he shouts. “They take one of ours, we takin’ two of theirs,” noting that the police will always think twice about messing with an armed Black man. When he abruptly pivots to ask how many children will be attending that morning’s free breakfast, it reads less like the administration of a beneficial public service and more like a man baiting a trap, recruiting hungry young people into a terrorist organization with the promise of free food.

Louis walks out of the meeting, effectively abandoning the Panthers while struggling with the false choice of whether or not he is willing to kill for his beliefs. This is consistent with the prevailing pop culture portrayal of the Black Panther Party (see *Forrest Gump* for a prominent example); here, the Panthers have been reduced to their most inflammatory and objectionable behaviors, creating a caricature of a dangerous criminal group that no upstanding viewer would want any part of. The scene is designed to make the audience uncomfortable, and colorblind racial ideology has no place for discomfort, particularly white discomfort. It is a worldview anchored by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream of a nation of individuals judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, and the film makes clear that violence in any form, for any reason, is a sign of deficient character.

Lee Daniels himself made efforts to discourage any interpretations of his film that might disrupt its colorblind message. In an interview with MSNBC’s Martin Bashir, Daniels insisted that the character of the butler symbolizes “everyone who serves in

America” and that Americans should be thankful for those who “died for our country” (qtd. in Grossman 73). This assertion is baffling, as it elides the themes of racial and class injustice the film is ostensibly built upon in favor of a colorblind “everyman” reading. Rather than offering up an analysis of the ways his film grapples with our country’s racist past—which would likely have been well received by MSNBC’s left-leaning audience—Daniels instead responds in bad faith, white-washing his creative efforts while making an irrelevant and safely uncontroversial gesture to the military.

Throughout the interview Daniels practically trips over himself in his attempts to erase race from his film about race. Bashir continually pushes Daniels to address how his film sits in the context of current events, citing the Supreme Court’s recent decision overturning vital parts of the Voting Rights Act (the passage of which is depicted in the film), the efforts by Republicans to suppress voter turnout, the constant racial animus directed toward the president, and the death of Trayvon Martin as evidence that we, as a society, might not have come as far as we would like to believe. “I think we’ve come enormously far,” Daniels replies, “But my son doesn’t seem to think so. It’s generational.” He argues that the issues in his film transcend race. “I didn’t start out to make an ‘important civil rights movie,’” he claims, clarifying that his intention was to make a film about the dynamic between fathers and sons and the different ways generational differences and conflicts play out. When Bashir questions why the film is so sympathetic to Cecil’s opposition to his son’s fight against institutional racism, Daniels is quick to reply. “There’s no right,” he says. “There’s no wrong. It’s generational” (Daniels).

This odd response directly contradicts the pivotal moment in the film in which Cecil comes to realize that he was, in fact, wrong to oppose Louis' activism. It would perhaps have made more sense for Daniels to say that the film creates empathy for Cecil in order to give this moment greater emotional heft, but Daniels' discomfort with addressing race and racism directly makes perfect sense when viewed through the lens of colorblindness. Colorblind racial ideology provides a framework in which racism can be safely ignored, in part by making the very discussion of race a taboo topic—to the point that doing so, even in an historical context, is often interpreted as an overtly racist act (Neville 458). Daniels, whose film clearly ascribes to this ideology, is therefore constrained in his answers by the “post-racial” implications of a Black president. A colorblind, post-racial society is an equal and unified society, and any deviation from that unity—such as acknowledging inequality and discussing solutions—must be suppressed for the sake of the greater, deracialized good. Daniels’ responses reflect and anticipate some of Obama’s own early rhetoric around race (see Chapter III.), and, perhaps more tellingly, highlighted why Black Lives Matter would be considered so threatening to so many white people in a few years’ time.

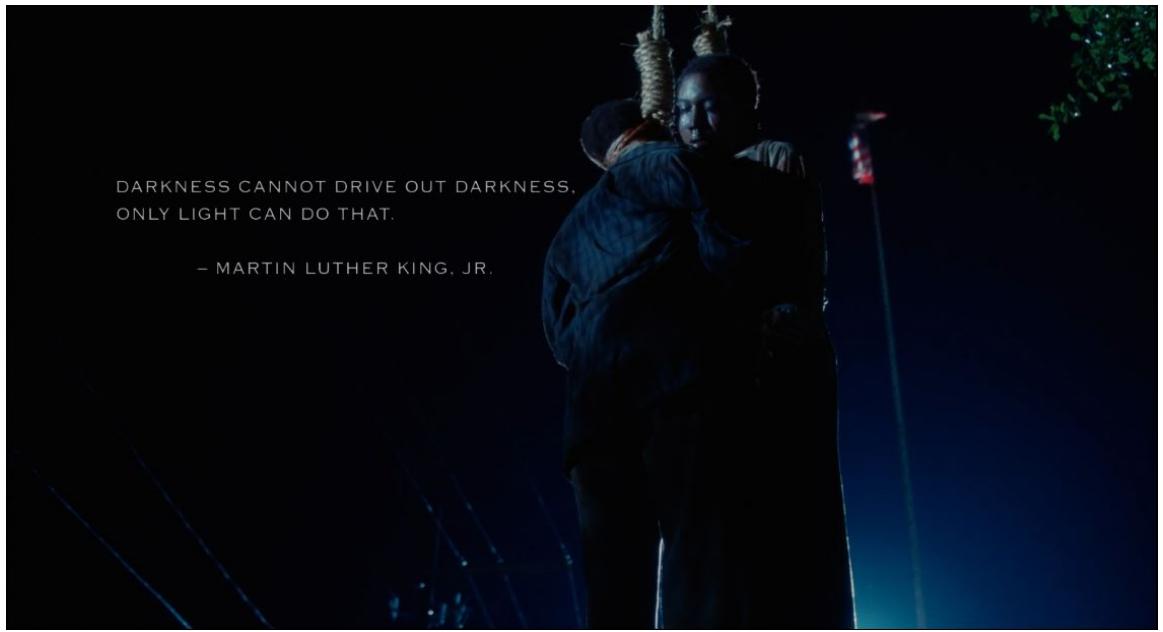


Figure 6. Opening shot of two lynched boys.
From *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, 2013.



Figure 7. Louis (standing on the right) watches Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" speech with Martin Luther King, Jr. (seated in front of him).
From *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, 2013.



Figure 8. Nazis and the KKK attack a bus of Freedom Riders.
From *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, 2013.



Figure 9. Admiral Rochon watches Cecil walk on with admiration.
From *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, 2013.



Figure 10. John Ford's famous doorway shot.
From *The Searchers*, 1956.



Figure 11. Cecil crosses the threshold, symbolically breaking barriers.
From *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, 2013.



Figure 12. Louis in Black Panther drag: leather/mesh shirt and black beret.
From *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, 2013.



Figure 13. Louis walks through the Black Panther Headquarters in Oakland, CA.
From *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, 2013.

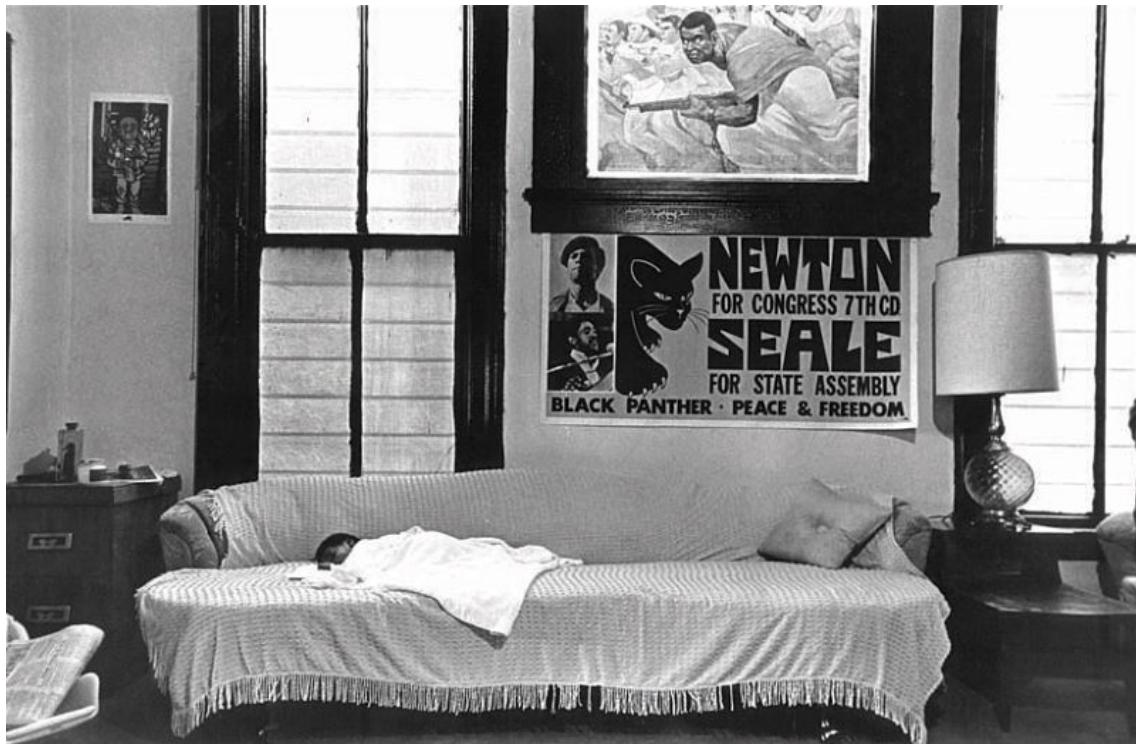


Figure 14. The actual Black Panther Party Headquarters in Oakland, 1970.
Bill Wingell, *Black Panther Oakland Headquarters*, 1970, Photo.net,
<https://www.photo.net/photo/7560476>, Accessed 13 June 2018.

Chapter III.

#BlackLivesMatter: The Birth of a Movement

Trayvon Martin was killed on February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida. He was walking home alone through a residential neighborhood with a bag of Skittles and a bottle of Arizona iced tea when George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, decided the seventeen-year-old looked suspicious and confronted him. After a brief altercation between the two Zimmerman fatally shot Martin in the chest. The police accepted Zimmerman's account that Martin was the aggressor and did not initially arrest him, citing Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law, which allows a person to legally use force in self-defense even if retreat is an option (Weinstein). Nor did they make any effort to identify Martin or determine if he lived in the area, tagging him as "John Doe" (Taylor 147). On April 11, 2012, after six weeks of public outcry, Zimmerman was arrested and charged with second-degree murder. His trial began on June 10, 2013, and, after a highly publicized court case, he was found not guilty on July 13, 2013 (Campo-Flores and Waddell).

Eric Garner was killed on July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, New York. New York City police officers approached him on suspicion of selling loose cigarettes and, when he became angry and claimed that he was constantly targeted and harassed by police, five officers tackled him and tried to get him in handcuffs. One officer, Daniel Pantaleo, put Garner in an illegal chokehold as he forced him to the ground. Several of the officers held Garner down with their knees, and, in a widely circulated cellphone video of the arrest, Garner is heard to say "I can't breathe" eleven times while lying face down on the

sidewalk (Orta). Garner lay unresponsive on the ground for seven minutes while the officers stood nearby waiting for EMTs to arrive; none of them performed CPR. On August 1, 2014 the New York City Medical Examiner's Office determined the cause of death to be a result of "compression of neck (choke hold), compression of chest and prone positioning during physical restraint by police" (Goldstein and Santora). On December 3, 2014 a grand jury decided not to indict Pantaleo (Eversley and James).

Michael Brown, Jr. was killed a few weeks later on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. He was walking down the middle of the road with a friend when Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson Police Department drove up and ordered them off the street. Reports differ widely as to what happened next, but ninety seconds later Brown was dead, shot six times. His body lay in the street for four and a half hours before it was taken away. Even his parents were not permitted to approach their son's body: they were kept away at gunpoint and with dogs (Taylor 153). The city became the site of sustained protests and vigils, prompting a disproportionately militarized response from the Ferguson police. After two weeks of protests a grand jury was called and, in a highly atypical move, was given extensive evidence from the St. Louis County Prosecutor Robert McCullough. On November 24, 2014, they elected not to indict Wilson (Toobin).

For reasons that may never be clear, it was Brown's death that mobilized the movement, bringing it into the national spotlight. Perhaps it was the result of the careless and inhumane way Brown's body was treated, or how his parents and community were traumatized in the hours after his death, or the extreme, dehumanizing militarized response to the initial protests, or perhaps it was simply the result of people's exhaustion, frustration, sadness, and anger finally reaching a breaking point. Black Lives Matter,

which originated as a social media hashtag after George Zimmerman's acquittal, rapidly developed into a robust activist movement that staged protests and demonstrations in response to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Activists coordinated "freedom rides" to Ferguson, bussing in people from New York, Chicago, Portland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Boston, many of whom had never before participated in an organized protest (Cobb 36). Images of armored vehicles rolling down the streets of Ferguson and officers in full body armor brandishing loaded assault weapons and sniper's rifles at unarmed civilians saturated the daily news coverage of the protests (fig. 15 and fig. 16). Young Black people, protesting peacefully, were routinely confronted with tear gas and rubber bullets. As the spotlight on the city exposed the realities of contemporary systemic racism in America and "Black Lives Matter" became the unifying rallying cry in the streets, Ferguson became the cradle of the fledgling movement for Black lives.

The urgency of the movement was bolstered by law enforcement's inability to stop the incessant—and now increasingly documented—killing of Black people. Two days after Brown was killed two officers with the Los Angeles Police Department killed Ezell Ford, a twenty-five-year-old intellectually disabled Black man, after shooting him multiple times—including once in the back—while he was lying on the ground (Taylor 14). Police officers in a suburb of Dayton, Ohio shot and killed twenty-two-year-old John Crawford III while he was walking through the aisles of a Walmart on his cell phone, holding a BB-gun he planned to purchase from the store (Izadi). As the nation awaited the grand jury's decision in Ferguson, a police officer in Cleveland, Ohio killed thirty-seven-year-old Tanisha Anderson while she was in police custody, slamming her facedown onto concrete and pinning her with his knee until her body went limp

(Dean). A week later another Cleveland police officer shot and killed twelve-year-old Tamir Rice less than two seconds after arriving at the playground where Rice was playing alone with a toy cap gun. The two officers stood idly by as Rice bled to death: when his fourteen-year-old sister tried to rush to help him they tackled her to the ground (Taylor 14). “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise,” wrote Alicia Garza, one of the movement’s founders. “It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (qtd. in Lowery 87).

Until this point Obama’s contribution to healing the nation’s racial wounds was largely symbolic. His 2008 candidacy and election felt, for many, like a sea change in the racial politics of the country, but, in reality, his policies largely represented a continuation of the status quo. Obama’s hesitancy to deal directly and substantially with issues of systemic racism was apparent early in his campaign, as evidenced by his widely-praised March 2008 campaign speech on race. The speech was precipitated by weeks of pressure from both sides of the aisle for Obama to rebuke his pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who had delivered a sermon that became known in the media as the “God Damn America” sermon—a repeated refrain that referenced the United States’ history of using violent and oppressive tactics to achieve its goals, both domestically and abroad. Obama’s political opponents had been largely successful in linking Wright and Obama in the public’s mind. Obama used the speech as an opportunity to distance himself from Wright, describing him as “divisive” and possessing a “profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic.” He went on to provide context for

Wright's statements, explaining that they were a product of his coming of age in the late '50s and early '60s, a time when:

legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions or the police force or the fire department—meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. (“Speech on Race”)

The speech maintained an adroit balance between addressing the concerns of the Black community while also assuaging the fears of white voters. Obama spoke eloquently about the nation's “dark history” and “original sin” while repeatedly stopping short of connecting this dark history to the systemic racism of the present. That he was speaking openly about race at all felt unprecedented in American presidential politics. This caused many in the mainstream media to view the speech as far more leftist and radical than it actually was. “Obama was not playing the race card,” David Corn wrote in *Mother Jones*. “He was shooting the moon.” MSNBC's Chris Matthews declared it to be “what many of us think is one of the great speeches in American history, and we watch a lot of them,” while his guest Michelle Bernard opined that it was “the best speech and most important speech on race that we have heard as a nation since Martin Luther King's ‘I Have a Dream’ speech” (*Hardball with Chris Matthews*).

What few acknowledged was that Obama leaned heavily on many conservative talking points, urging Black Americans to avoid “becoming victims of our past” and suggesting they begin “taking full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism.” The path to full racial justice, he

suggested, begins with “binding our particular grievances—for better health care and better schools and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans: the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who has been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family” (“Speech on Race”). He effectively positioned himself as an informed and interested observer, identifying and articulating certain racial issues without acknowledging that he, as a US senator and presidential-hopeful, possessed considerable political influence and could act to address these ills.

This became his approach to race matters as President, as well. He took pains to not be seen as the “President of Black America.” When asked in an interview if he has any special responsibility to the Black community, he deflected, responding, “I have a special responsibility to look out for the interests of every American. That's my job as president of the United States. And I wake up every morning trying to promote the kinds of policies that are going to make the biggest difference for the most number of people so that they can live out their American dream” (Condon and O’Sullivan). He would treat both sides with a dubious evenhandedness, identifying issues affecting the Black community, while at the same time publicly chastising Black Americans for stereotypical behaviors as far-ranging as their parenting skills, dietary choices, sexual morals, and television-watching habits (Taylor 142). When speaking to issues affecting the Black community he avoided acknowledging the systemic racism that underpinned them. He spoke of the problem of absentee Black fathers, for example, without addressing the racial disparities in mass incarceration and the ways in which the criminal justice system has targeted Black men, “disappearing” them from their families (Alexander 173-174). In the words of one frustrated supporter, “President Obama gives opinions on everything

that's safe and what he thinks America wants to hear, but he straddles the fence on issues important to African Americans" (Freeman-Coulbary).

But Obama's safe approach gradually shifted due to the political pressure exerted by Black Lives Matter. His initial response to the extrajudicial killings of Black men and women was tepid at best: after Trayvon Martin's death his administration declined to open a federal investigation into the shooting, calling it a "local" matter. More than a month passed before Obama spoke publicly about the case, and even then he carefully avoided discussing it in concrete political terms. "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon," he said. "When I think about this boy, I think about my own kids" (qtd. in Taylor 148). It was a poignant and widely lauded response, but framing his remarks in personal terms signaled to the state and local officials that the executive branch would not be intervening in the matter.

Although his administration's response in the wake of Michael Brown's death was swifter, it was rhetorically problematic. Nine days after Brown was killed Obama held a press conference to announce that the Department of Justice would be opening an independent federal civil rights investigation into his death, but when asked if Brown's case would prompt him to pursue criminal justice reform he replied:

There are young black men that commit crime. [And] we can argue about why that happens because of the poverty they were born into or the lack of opportunity or the school systems that failed them or what have you, but if they commit a crime, then they need to be prosecuted because every community has an interest in public safety. ("Remarks on Ferguson")

These comments caused an immediate backlash among prominent members of the Black community. Some took umbrage at his focus on Black criminality when it was not clear if Brown had committed any crime. Others argued that these were the same types of

arguments people were making to defend Darren Wilson's shooting of an unarmed teenager (Henderson).

The sustained protests and actions in Ferguson shifted Obama's rhetoric even further from a nearly non-committal middle ground. After the grand jury decided not to indict Wilson, Obama convened a series of high-level White House meetings with various leaders in the Black Lives Matter movement. His past rhetoric regarding Black behavior and criminality was noticeably absent from his comments following these meetings. "When I hear the young people around this table talk about their experiences," he said, "it violates my belief in what America can be to hear young people feeling marginalized and distrustful, even after they've done everything right. That's not who we are. And I don't think that's who the overwhelming majority of Americans want us to be" (qtd. in Henderson). By legitimizing Black concerns of unfair treatment and identifying the problem of Ferguson as an American one, Obama was now framing violence against Black men and women as a systemic issue, in which the behavior of the victims was irrelevant.

While many activists found Obama's reticence to give voice to Black pain and suffering frustrating, it was not inconsistent with his style of leadership. At a fundraising dinner during his 2008 presidential campaign Obama offered up a famous (and likely apocryphal) anecdote about a meeting between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the prominent civil rights leader and union organizer A. Philip Randolph. After listening intently to Randolph's arguments about racial injustice in the country, Roosevelt announced that he was convinced but would only take action when he was forced to do so by a popular movement. "Go out and make me do it," he told Randolph (Goodman).

Obama's biographer David Remnick argues that this became the president's approach to many hot-button social issues; he was often reluctant to get too far ahead of the majority of the country for fear of prompting a conservative backlash that would undo any progress he achieved ("Obama and Gay Marriage"). Obama's shift in rhetoric was not necessarily indicative of changes in his personal views, but rather the result of—and response to—a shift in mass consciousness. Changing how the president approached the issue of systemic racism was the result of the work of countless activists, artists, academics, writers, and protestors who created a movement that could not be ignored. Americans were thinking about race and race relations differently: the post-racial American society many believed the 2008 election portended simply did not exist. This broader shift in the public perception of racial issues was influenced and echoed through popular culture: television, music videos, and films now depicted more complex and nuanced representations of the Black experience. Several films in particular made substantial contributions to the national dialogue on race, anticipating and reflecting the changing cultural climate of the post-Black Lives Matter world.



Figure 15. A man holds his hands up as he's confronted by police in Ferguson.
Scott Olson, 11 Aug. 2014, *Getty Images*, www.gettyimages.com/license/453505316



Figure 16. Police stand watch as protestors demonstrate in Ferguson, MO.
Scott Olson, 13 Aug. 2014, *Getty Images*, www.gettyimages.com/license/453583706

Chapter IV.

The Empathy Machine: *Fruitvale Station* and the American Dream Reconsidered

Ryan Coogler's film *Fruitvale Station* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 19, 2013, earning early Oscar buzz after winning both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award (John). The Weinstein Company, which acquired and aggressively promoted festival films it saw as Best Picture contenders, outbid numerous competitors to secure the distribution rights. The film was released in theaters on July 12th of that year (Fleming). Based on a true story, *Fruitvale Station* depicts the last twenty-four hours in the life of Oscar Grant III, a Black twenty-two-year-old from Oakland, California who was shot and killed by a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) officer in the early hours of New Year's Day in 2009. The officer's legal defense was built on the claim that he thought he had reached for his taser, not his gun. He would eventually serve a two-year sentence on a conviction of involuntary manslaughter.

Coogler, a Bay Area native, had been a graduate student at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts and was home for the holidays when Grant was killed. Within weeks he began developing his concept for the film, meeting with the Grant family lawyer and eventually with Grant's family and friends. His goal was to try to assemble as complete a portrait as possible of Grant, his personality, and the timeline of his final day (Rhodes). The finished film is largely accurate in its portrayal of the events of Grant's last day; minor creative liberties were taken, and some names of key players were changed. While the film highlights Grant's many good qualities, it does not

shy away from revealing his flaws; Coogler warned Grant's family that some scenes might be difficult for them to watch. This nuance and complexity, however, is what gives the film its power. "The people that know somebody the best, they know the good and the bad about that person," Coogler explains. "They know the truth, which is complicated. And that gray area is where the tragedy lies. That's why I wanted to make a film where you spent the day with this guy, just spend time with him in a way that you can only do in a film" (qtd. in Rhodes). By allowing the viewer to live an unvarnished day with Oscar Grant, *Fruitvale Station* succeeds in centering a Black perspective in ways *The Blind Side* and *Lee Daniels' The Butler* could not. Coogler's film is an empathy machine—a vehicle for a deeply visceral experience that allows, even forces, the audience to feel the emotional beats of Oscar's day and the full weight of his death. By the end of the film the key takeaway is undeniable: Oscar Grant's life mattered.

The film opens with documentary camera phone footage of the shooting taken by one of the passengers on the waiting train who witnessed the episode. BART officers had detained a small group, including Grant, along a wall in Fruitvale station. The footage is grainy and shaky, and the person filming drops their arm and misses the moment Grant is shot, but the sound of the gunshot is unmistakable, and the stunned reaction from the people on the train is immediate. There is no ambiguity about what has just occurred. The film then jumps back to the night before to Oscar (Michael B. Jordan) and his girlfriend Sophina (Melonie Diaz) lying in bed, discussing their New Year's resolutions and arguing about Oscar's drug dealing and past infidelity. When he realizes it's after midnight he pauses their conversation to text a birthday message to his mother (Octavia Spencer). When their four-year-old daughter Tatiana (Ariana Neal) comes into the room

after waking from a nightmare, Oscar immediately scoops her up and places her in their bed over Sophina's half-hearted objections. The scene functions well as an introduction to Oscar, establishing his relationships and introducing his biggest strengths and faults: an indulgent father, a caring son, and a man working to rebuild his relationship with his girlfriend after a brief and hurtful affair.

As the film portrays his last day, we get a glimpse into the life of a charming young man working to get his life on track. The details are largely mundane: he drops his daughter off at preschool, shops for his mother's birthday dinner, and tries unsuccessfully to get his job back at "Farmer Joe's" after being fired for chronic lateness. Other events provide insight into his character: he wrestles with whether to continue selling marijuana, and while pumping gas he meets a stray pit bull without a collar, only to watch a car hit the dog and speed off moments later, leaving Oscar to carry the dog out of the street and soothe it as it dies. As he prepares for his mother's birthday he reflects on his relationship with her, including a painful visit she paid him while he was incarcerated for dealing drugs, and she told him she would not visit him in prison again.

As the evening approaches and Oscar solidifies his New Year's Eve plans, his discussions take on an ominous tone for the audience, since Oscar's fate is already known. Oscar wants to stay home and watch the countdown on television, but Sophina insists on going into the city for the fireworks. Oscar was originally planning on driving, but as they are cleaning up from his mother's birthday dinner she suggests they take the BART. They meet up with friends and, in a festive mood, they travel into the city. As they wander the streets Oscar convinces a shop owner who is about to lock his doors for the evening to let Sophina and the pregnant wife of a passing couple use his bathroom.

As the two men wait outside on the sidewalk Oscar and the husband strike up a conversation, and it is revealed that Oscar is thinking about proposing to Sophina but is worried about finding money for the ring. The man gives Oscar his business card, providing Oscar with a potential opportunity we know he will never be able to pursue.

Coogler hews closely to the public records and eyewitness reports when reconstructing the final moments of Oscar's life. While riding the BART back out to Oakland Oscar gets into a scuffle with another passenger, who recognized Oscar from prison and instigates the fight. As a result of the fight the train is held at Fruitvale station and Oscar and his friends get off—including Sophina, who exits the station and waits outside for them. Oscar's group splits up and tries to hide on the train when they see the BART officers approaching, but the officers find Oscar and four of his friends and detain them. The officers are aggressive, the detained men defiant but not combative. The tension here is heightened by the hand-held, shaky camera work and a low, droning string track in the background. The officers have their weapons drawn for most of the scene, and the encounter escalates until Oscar, laying on his back in handcuffs with an officer's knee on his neck, is shot.

The film opened in theaters the day before the jury announced the verdict in the George Zimmerman trial, and reviewers were quick to draw parallels between Grant and Trayvon Martin. The Weinstein Company denied that they were taking advantage of the Zimmerman trial coverage to promote the film (Lee), although their marketing campaign focused on highlighting systemic racism by inviting people to share their own experiences with prejudice and mistreatment. It even occasionally made the connection between Grant and Martin explicit. A promotional image from the film's official website

includes a quote from Coogler discussing the similarities between the two incidents (fig. 17), and the director and stars would often discuss Martin in interviews. Conservative news outlets such as Breitbart and Fox News used these few examples to dismiss the film outright, accusing Coogler and the Weinsteins of cynically exploiting a tragedy for personal gain (Toto, “*Fruitvale*”). The comparison between Grant and Martin, however, was apt and unavoidable.

Coogler could not have anticipated the relevance of his film when he began conceptualizing and developing it in 2009, yet the timing of the release was uncanny. The film arrived during a cultural moment it was uniquely poised to resonate with and reflect, bringing to life the idea that the Black lives so easily dismissed in news reports do have value and importance. “Most people, they walk by someone that looks like Oscar in the street or in the grocery store, and they don’t think twice about it,” Coogler said. “They open up the paper and see people like Oscar dying, and they don’t think twice about it. I want this film to be something that can make those people think twice” (qtd. in Rhodes). Like Martin, Grant’s character and reputation unfairly became a point of contention during the trial that followed the shooting. As Coogler followed the trial, he was troubled to see that “Oscar was either cast as a saint who had never done anything wrong in his life, or he was painted as a monster who got what he deserved that night” (qtd. in Harris). *Fruitvale Station* was Coogler’s attempt to restore Grant’s humanity, and in doing so it also serves to humanize all victims of police brutality who have had their lives reduced to their worst moments, simply for the purposes of political expediency and white comfort.

Coogler explores this theme of devaluation in the pit bull scene. Many critics cite this scene, which has no factual basis, as one of the few creative missteps in an otherwise

well-crafted film. It was an incident that occurred to Coogler's younger brother as Coogler was working on the script, and he decided to use it to fill a gap in the timeline of Grant's day for which he was unable to account (Harris). The main critical complaint was that the scene felt emotionally manipulative. *Variety*'s Justin Chang wrote that "[Coogler is] so determined to show us his hero's heart of gold that he contrives to have Grant tend to a dog injured in a hit-and-run," while *Slant Magazine*'s R. Kurt Osenlund lamented Coogler's "ceaseless, overwrought efforts to make you admire Oscar (dear lord, that pitbull [sic] scene)." These criticisms, however, miss the important underlying symbolism of the pit bull and its death.

The scene opens at a gas station. Oscar is the only person there, and as he starts to pump his gas he spots a dog walking alone along the sidewalk. He approaches it and kneels to pet it, checking to see if it has a collar or an owner nearby. When Oscar is on the dog's level, in a low medium shot, there is an elevated BART train line looming in the background (fig. 18). After petting the dog for a brief moment, he returns to the pump, and while he's focused on his phone, texting Sophina, he hears the squeal of tires, the sound of an impact, and the yelp of the dog. He drops what he's doing to chase after the white sedan as it peels away and flees the scene, and once the car is too far out of range he turns and walks back to the dog. He glances around, aware that people may be watching him and not wanting to appear to lose his cool. As he picks up the bloody animal to move it out of the street, fear, sadness, and panic begin to show on his face and voice. He talks to the dog as he walks—"It's alright, bruh, it's alright. You with me, bruh?"—and as he gently lays it on the sidewalk he gives a panicked shout for help, looking around him for anyone else who might come to his aid. But Oscar and the pit bull

are alone: either no one hears him, or no one cares. He gently strokes the animal as it dies, and at the moment the dog stops moving we hear the loud, whooshing screech of a train. After a close up of Oscar's face, in which we see his sad and broken expression harden, the scene cuts to a long shot of Oscar and the dog with the BART train rumbling by in the background (fig. 19).

The scene establishes Grant as the sort of person who would rush to the aid of others. But Coogler's deeper purpose was to create a metaphor for Black men in America. "You never hear about a pit bull doing anything good in the media," Coogler told an interviewer when challenged on the scene. "In many ways, pit bulls are like young African-American males. Whenever you see us in the news, it's for getting shot and killed or shooting and killing somebody—for being a stereotype" (Ryan). The white car that kills the dog and does not even bother to stop, the dog dying in the street, the calls for help that are unanswered or ignored: each element of the scene is designed to represent an element of the national response to the death of Black men in this country. The ever-present BART tracks, looming in the background, foreshadow Oscar's fate.

Fruitvale Station presaged many of the issues the Black Lives Matter movement would take on. The rise of Black Lives Matter caused a disruption and reassessment of some of the fundamental tenants of the American mythology—particularly that American society experiences continual forward progress and that justice is (color)blind (Loewen 249). That the American Dream is equally accessible to all is an integral part of the American mythos, and Black Lives Matter was the latest movement to challenge and unravel that myth. The film's narrative arc is confined to a single day, but it effectively dramatizes Grant's struggle to pursue the American Dream and the roadblocks he

encounters. Oscar's hopes and dreams—simple, universally relatable goals that characterize the American Dream—are revealed over the course of the film. He wants to get married and settle down with Sophina, he wants to find steady, legal employment, he wants his daughter to go to a good school and get the best possible education. Yet, at every turn, something is standing in his way. Sometimes that something is himself: he was chronically late to his job at Farmer Joe's, which lead to him being fired, and he made the choice to sell marijuana, which landed him in prison. But the viewer also understands how much harder it will be Oscar to overcome these past mistakes.

Unspoken yet ever present here is the looming specter of the War on Drugs, which disproportionately affects people of color (Alexander 106) and which has ensnared Oscar and his family. His time in prison has caused him to miss half of his young daughter's life, and the limited employment opportunities that come with having a criminal record make it harder for Oscar to walk away from selling drugs. He wants to be able to afford an engagement ring and private school tuition, but the impediments before him are immense. Still, the viewer gets the impression that, with the support of his family, he might yet be able to achieve his dreams if he dedicated himself to them. *Fruitvale Station* paints a portrait of a man on the verge of doing just that.

Even if the viewer lacks an understanding of systemic racism or the racial implications of the War on Drugs, they can intuitively understand the ways Oscar is disadvantaged by his race and his position in society. The systemic racism that frames Oscar's life is never addressed directly but is constantly revealed in the way he navigates the world. As he drives around town, he visibly stiffens every time he passes a police car, and the audience intuits that his fear is justified. As he moves through the day we see that

he is a master of code-switching: he is a different man with his mother, a different man with his girlfriend and daughter, a different man with his friends, a different man when he is alone. It is a perfect representation of W.E.B. Du Bois' idea of the double-consciousness: Oscar is constantly aware of the way he is being perceived by those around him and adjusts accordingly. This can be a life-saving skill when confronted with the power structures of a white supremacist society—"Often times you've got to be different people just to stay alive," Coogler notes (qtd. in Gay, "Last Day")—but Oscar's indignation as the BART officers aggressively escalate the situation overrides his attempts at being a peacemaker. The fact that Oscar and his friends were targeted because of their race is highlighted earlier in the scene, when the white man who instigated the fight on the train easily walks past the officers as they focus instead on rounding up Oscar and his friends.

Fruitvale Station's greatest triumph, however, is the way all of these elements of the film come together to create a deep sense of empathy with Oscar and his family. Film, as a medium, has the unique ability to completely subsume the viewer for a few hours, allowing them to become immersed in another world and feel heightened emotions beyond their own lives. This visceral thrill is the reason why film has enjoyed a sustained cultural appeal since its inception. Audiences can share in the experiences projected before them: they can feel the excitement of fighting the bad guys, winning the heart of the love interest, and can walk out of the theater feeling like a hero. Coogler's decision to harness this capability to center Oscar Grant's humanity allowed viewers the opportunity to experience the anger and grief of Grant's senseless death on a deeper level than they would have from a news report. Black viewers may have experienced a sense of

recognition at the circumstances and hurdles in Grant's life, while the film may have been an eye-opening experience for white viewers. Ultimately, it allowed viewers to experience and empathize with the central conceit of the nascent Black Lives Matter movement. Oscar Grant's life, warts and all, mattered.

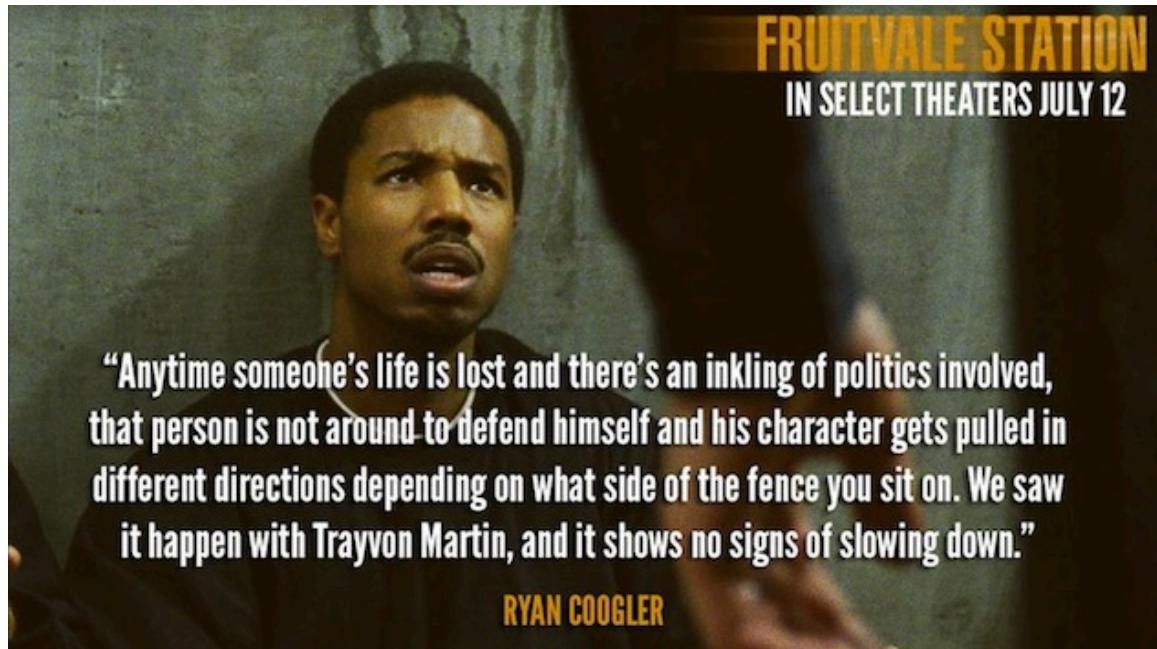


Figure 17. Promotional image for *Fruitvale Station*.
Fruitvale Station, [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/FruitvaleStationMovie), www.facebook.com/FruitvaleStationMovie



Figure 18. Oscar and the pit bull.
From *Fruitvale Station*, 2013.



Figure 19. Oscar with the dead pit bull as the BART train passes by in the background.
From *Fruitvale Station*, 2013.

Chapter V.

Confronting White Supremacy in *12 Years a Slave* and *Selma*

In response to a wave of mainstream films from Black directors with primarily Black content featuring largely-Black casts, critics began calling 2013 the “year of the Black film.”¹ In addition to *Lee Daniels’ The Butler* and *Fruitvale Station*, 2013 also saw prestige biopics (*42*; *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*), dramas (*The Inevitable Defeat of Mister and Pete*; *Blue Caprice*; *LUV*), romantic comedies (*The Best Man Holiday*; *Baggage Claim*; *Peeples*), and a Christmas musical (*Black Nativity*). Despite speculation that Black actors, actresses, directors, and films might dominate that year’s Academy Award nominations (Feinberg), only Steve McQueen’s historical drama *12 Years a Slave*, received any serious acknowledgement from the Academy.

“You Think He Does Not Know That You’re More Than You Suggest?” Whiteness Implicated in *12 Years a Slave*

12 Years a Slave is an adaptation of an 1853 memoir and slave narrative by Solomon Northup, a free Black man from Saratoga, New York, who was kidnapped and sold into slavery. The film saw a limited release in nineteen theaters on October 18, 2013, expanding to a wider commercial release in subsequent weeks. It was an immediate critical and commercial success, pulling in \$187 million at the box office (“12 Years”). This success fueled Oscar speculation, which surprised some as it was an unrelenting

¹ See Cieply, Caffrey, Hammond, and Kohn for representative examples.

interrogation of white supremacy that offered a fresh record of the horrors of America's original sin.

After a brief opening sequence that reveals Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) as a slave, the film flashes back to Saratoga, New York in 1841. Solomon is a skilled carpenter and violinist, and while his wife and children are away for a few weeks he is offered a short-term job playing violin for two circus performers as they travel down to Washington D.C. He accepts the position, but when the trio arrives at their destination Solomon's travelling companions drug him and deliver him to a slave pen. Solomon frantically proclaims himself a free man and is savagely beaten with a wooden paddle. In the slave pen he meets several other slaves, including Eliza (Adepero Oduye), who had been the slave of a rich widower. She and her owner had lived as husband and wife for nine years; he showered her with luxuries and fathered one of her two children. When his health failed, his daughter, under the pretense of granting their freedom, brought Eliza and her children to D.C. to sell them. The group in the slave pen is shipped down to New Orleans, where they are delivered to a slave trader named Freeman (Paul Giamatti), who gives Solomon the new identity of "Platt." Freeman sells Solomon and Eliza to a plantation owner named William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch). Eliza pleads to be sold with her two children, but Freeman refuses to sell either to Ford, forcibly separating the family. As Solomon and Eliza are transported to Ford's plantation Eliza weeps uncontrollably, and she continues to weep for the duration of her time with Ford. Ford finds her constant weeping unbearable, and after a few weeks she is forcibly taken away, crying out for Solomon as he watches on helplessly.

Solomon's skill as a carpenter and musician gain him favor with Ford—who he sees as a kind and godly slave owner—but he runs afoul of Ford's chief carpenter, a white man named Tibeats (Paul Dano), who antagonizes him at every opportunity. After an altercation in which Solomon is forced to fight off Tibeats in self-defense, Tibeats returns with two other men and attempts to lynch Solomon. The overseer arrives in time to stop the lynching, but Solomon remains bound with the noose around his neck for several hours until Ford can return from his business in a neighboring town to free him. That night Ford has Solomon sleep in the entrance hall of the house as he stands guard with a rifle. Ford is agitated, knowing Tibeats and his men are lurking around the grounds, and informs Solomon that he has sold him to a plantation owner named Epps (Michael Fassbender) to keep him safe from Tibeats. Solomon desperately reveals that he is a free man, but Ford shakes him off. “I can’t hear this right now!” Ford cries. “Can’t you see that I’m trying to save your life?”

Epps, unlike Ford, proves to be a sadistic and erratic alcoholic who prides himself on his ability to “break” difficult slaves. His cruelty is disproportionately directed toward a young slave named Patsey (Lupita Nyong’o), whom he regularly rapes and abuses. Solomon spends ten brutal years on Epps’ plantation until he encounters a traveling Canadian carpenter named Samuel Bass (Brad Pitt), who has been hired to build a gazebo on the Epps plantation. Solomon overhears Bass engaging in a debate on the morality of slavery with Epps, which takes a menacing turn as Epps, drunk and hotheaded, defends his rights as a slave owner. Solomon is wary to trust anyone with the truth of his situation, but after witnessing this interaction he decides to confide in Bass. Bass reluctantly agrees to write to Solomon’s family and friends in Saratoga, despite the

personal danger this action would put him in. Some time later the local sheriff arrives at the Epps plantation with one of Solomon's business acquaintances from Saratoga to take him back home.

12 Years a Slave is a difficult film to watch; McQueen offers few respites from the stark, unrelenting brutalities of slavery. Carefully avoiding some of the common missteps made in cinematic representations of slavery—no moments of sentimentality, very few sympathetic white characters, no “Burbanking”—it feels honest and historically accurate. White supremacy, in its purest, undisguised form, is shown to be a systemic tool of social control which implicates all white people, even “good” and “godly” men like William Ford. By refusing to depict the ahistorical white person untainted by white supremacy, the film increases the discomfort of white viewers used to finding and empathizing with heroic—or at least sympathetic—white characters. With the exception of Samuel Bass, *12 Years a Slave* offers white audiences no such release. The empathy machine is reserved for the Black characters, and they provide an uncomfortable, harrowing ride.

While many viewers may have used the discomforting experience of the film as an opportunity to reflect on America's original sin and its legacy, inevitably some resisted the challenge to their internalized white supremacist scripts. Amid the vast sea of laudatory reviews and critical praise appeared tiny archipelagos of white supremacy defiantly reasserting the primacy of white comfort. Reviewing the film for the *American Spectator*, James Bowman argued that the film amounted to little more than “cartoonishly simple-minded” propaganda:

If ever in slavery's 250-year history in North America there were a kind master or a contented slave, as in the nature of things there must have

been, here and there, we may be sure that Mr. McQueen does not want us to hear about it. This, in turn, surely means that his view of the history of the American South is as partial and one-sided as that of the hated *Gone With the Wind*.

Leaving aside the false equivalency between the unreflective, romanticized nostalgia for the antebellum South (which already dominates the popular imagination) and a depiction of slavery that a consensus of historians and scholars praise for its accuracy (Cameron and Belau 227), Bowman's suggestion that a "kind master" can exist within a system designed to traumatize and control successive generations of victims in perpetuity is an extraordinary claim. It lays bare one of the central conceits at the heart of America's dominant racial ideology: that of power-evasion, which is the dimension of colorblind racial ideology that allows for the denial or minimization of systemic racism (Neville 457). Power-evasion bolsters white supremacy by creating a blind spot vis-à-vis contemporary structures of systemic oppression; erasure of slavery's defining racial power dynamic when critiquing a historical drama is merely a perverse extension of this belief.

Bowman's need for a "kind master" character reveals a reflexive desire for a redeeming character that looks like him. White heroes within the system of slavery would indicate that there were some good white people. Bowman had an unlikely ally in this belief in Northup himself, who, in his memoir, describes Ford as just such a man:

It is but simple justice to him when I say, in my opinion, there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford. The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and other influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different. (58)

Northup's characterization of the man who held him in bondage for two years is charitable, but McQueen wisely refuses to portray Ford as the kind master to Solomon's contented slave. Solomon believes Ford to be a decent man, but when he attempts to comfort Eliza with this fact she rejects the thought outright. "You think he does not know you're more than you suggest?" she cries, turning the focus back to Solomon. "But he does nothing for you! Nothing! You are no better than prize livestock!" Later, when Ford is helping Solomon evade Tibbeats, he refuses to hear out Solomon's declarations of freedom, even exclaiming "I have a debt to be mindful of!"—referring to the \$1,000 mortgage he holds on Solomon.

Although the film is a fairly faithful adaptation of Northup's narrative, he did not describe either of these interactions in his memoir. These scenes were written for the film to shine a spotlight on the character contradictions Northup identifies in the previous excerpt. Ford is a devout Baptist minister who abides by Christian ethics and does not abuse his slaves, but the systemic influence of white supremacy creates an ideological blindness that allows him to actively participate in an inhumane and immoral system untroubled. His goodness and kindness only extend as far as the system of white supremacy allows. He is willing to take up arms to protect Solomon's life from a lynch mob, but at that moment the value of Solomon's life is easily translated into monetary terms, as Solomon represents a significant financial investment under threat. More telling is the fear and panic he displays once Solomon starts confessing the truth of his situation. The film repeatedly shows—first with Ford and later with Bass—that opposing the norms of antebellum white supremacy exposes a white person to significant personal risk. When faced with the possibility that his slave is a free man Ford opts to take the path of least

resistance, working within the framework of white supremacy to find a solution to their problem. Ford's "solution" steals an additional ten years from Solomon, which he spends under a cruel and sadistic slave master.

Actively opposing white supremacy still carries personal risk, although today the risk is far less severe than it was in the Deep South during the nineteenth century.¹² *Years a Slave*'s entry into the canon of antebellum-situated films assists in doing this work by helping supplant the older images of Southern nostalgia and pleasure in the shared cultural consciousness. Our collective historical memory of this period has been largely shaped through our consumption of mass market cultural products with a long history of romanticizing Dixie gentility, often made with the explicit purpose of hiding the horrors of slavery. Many of the film's tensest scenes take place against gorgeous plantation backdrops that would be more at home in sweeping historical romances; the scene where Solomon is nearly lynched and must wait for Ford to free him, which lasts an excruciating three-and-a-half minutes, is framed to take in as much of the beauty and splendor of the manor house and plantation grounds as possible (fig. 20). The setting evokes the idyllic backdrops of such films as *Gone with the Wind* and *Song of the South* (fig. 21 and fig. 22). Other scenes, such as Solomon's terrified night of refuge in the "big house" (fig. 23) or Eliza's heartbroken wails drowning out a Sunday sermon by Ford (fig. 24) center the horrors of slavery in a setting usually reserved for antebellum nostalgia.

The power of the performances also challenges the image of the slave in the collective memory. Solomon, Patsey, and Eliza join Butterfly McQueen's Prissy, James Baskett's Uncle Remus, and LeVar Burton's Kunta Kinte in the mixed bag of slave archetypes that our culture can draw upon. Despite the persistence of Black stereotypes

that have roots in the theatrical and cinematic depictions of slaves in the Old South (Bogle 14), *12 Years a Slave*, like *Schindler's List* before it, has the potential to become a film that redefines the archetypes of a historical trauma. Replacing the loyal "toms," lazy "coons," and maternal "mammies" in the collective memory with images of brutality and suffering would go a long way in helping society acknowledge that the wounds of slavery do not heal easily, and that those untended wounds have echoes in modern America.

Dismantling white supremacy requires acknowledging its existence, followed by consistent and deliberate efforts to identify and disrupt its manifestations (D. Jones 255). When a society chooses to avoid collective accountability for past crimes through silence or selective amnesia, art can reestablish connections with those painful truths, create opportunities for empathy with the victims, and open a space for mourning and healing. Art can change the cultural narrative. By crafting a powerful and moving portrayal of the trauma of slavery that lingers in your mind long after the closing credits, McQueen provides a useful bridge back to an era that still needs to be reckoned with if we are to move forward as a more just and equitable society.

Selma and the Propaganda of History

Another era-spanning bridge would be erected one year later, when Ava DuVernay's film *Selma* was released on December 25, 2014. *Selma* was a Martin Luther King, Jr. biopic of sorts, focusing on King's involvement and leadership during the 1965 Selma to Montgomery voting rights marches, which were organized by King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

There were many opportunities for *Selma* to go wrong. In the years since his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s standing in white America has evolved, going from what the FBI once described as “the most dangerous Negro . . . in this nation” to becoming a venerated and revered figure (Blow). According to Gallup, seventy-two percent of white Americans held an unfavorable opinion of King in 1966, but by 1987 those numbers had reversed, with King’s favorability rating among whites at seventy-six percent (Appleton 12). Today King is one of the most admired figures of the twentieth-century (Saad), and conservatives in particular seem keen to appropriate his legacy. Pundits and hosts on Fox News regularly evoke King’s name when denouncing any form of civil disobedience or direct-action protest, claiming King would disapprove of their disruptive tactics (Thrasher). Fox News host Bill O’Reilly asserted that King would never participate in a Black Lives Matter protest (“O’Reilly”), while host Kimberly Guilfoyle imagined his displeasure with NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling during the national anthem. “I think Dr. King, if he were alive today, he wouldn’t disrespect the flag or the anthem,” she opined. “He would use his words and his voice to send a message for positive change” (Feldman). These opinions are based on a superficial reading of the “content of their character” passage of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, which both white liberals and conservatives quote out of context to incorrectly claim King promoted a colorblind racial ideology. Released one year after the celebration of colorblindness that was *Lee Daniels’ The Butler* and sharing several leading cast members in common with that film (most significantly David Oyelowo and Oprah Winfrey), it was not impossible to imagine a King biopic might recast the civil rights leader as the colorblind hero of white fantasy.

Fortunately, *Selma*, which was released during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, was the antithesis of *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, eschewing its safer, colorblind lens and instead telling a tight, focused story about a movement successfully disrupting white supremacy through sustained direct action. The film actively dispels many of the myths that have developed around King and the civil rights movement of the 1960s, presenting him as a disruptive radical while providing lessons for contemporary movements and activists.

The film opens with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (David Oyelowo) in Oslo to receive the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. As he gives his acceptance speech, we see Annie Lee Cooper (Oprah Winfrey) in the courthouse in Selma, Alabama attempting to register to vote. The white registrar asks her a series of difficult civics questions, after which her registration is denied. King meets with President Lyndon B. Johnson (Tom Wilkinson) to ask for federal legislation that will ensure Black citizens have the right to vote unencumbered, but Johnson is focused on other legislation and assures King he will make voting rights a priority in the next legislative session, which prompts King to travel down to Selma with the SCLC leadership to plan their voting rights campaign. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) has been working in Selma on voting rights issues for years, and the SNCC leadership are unhappy to see the SCLC take over their work. In a tense meeting with SNCC leaders John Lewis (Stephan James) and James Foreman (Trai Byers), King outlines their strategy, explaining how it is designed to keep their issues in the news and put pressure on Johnson in Washington. Their first march to the Selma courthouse ends with the police initiating a shoving match with the protestors:

Cooper fights back, and an image of her being tackled by police is on the front page of every major newspaper the next day. King, Cooper, and many others are arrested.

When a night march is organized in support of those arrested, Governor George Wallace (Tim Roth) orders state troopers to attack the march. During the attack troopers beat and shoot a young deacon named Jimmie Lee Jackson (Lakeith Stanfield), killing him. During his eulogy for Jackson, King implicates the entire white power structure in his death. As King and the SCLC plan to escalate their protest by leading a march from Selma to the state capital building in Montgomery, J. Edgar Hoover (Dylan Baker) sends the King family an audio tape of King in bed with another woman, causing a rift between King and his wife Coretta (Carmen Ejogo). King wants to cancel or delay the march so he can stay in Birmingham to work things out with Coretta, but the preparations have already been made. John Lewis and Reverend Hosea Williams (Wendell Pierce) lead the march in King's absence. As they cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, they are met with a line of state troopers in gas masks. When the marchers refuse to disperse they are attacked with clubs, whips, and tear gas. Lewis and activist Amelia Boynton (Lorraine Toussaint) are among those severely injured. The attack is broadcast on national television, and photographs of Boynton, beaten unconscious, appear on the front page of newspapers around the country.

In a statement to the press the next day, King implicates all white people in the violence that has occurred—asserting that “no citizen can call themselves blameless”—and implores “men and women of God and goodwill everywhere” to join them in Selma. Many white Americans, including James Reeb (Jeremy Strong), a white minister from Boston, travel to Selma to join the march. As the marchers cross the Edmund Pettus

Bridge a second time they are again met with a line of state troopers, who step aside to let them pass. After kneeling in prayer, King turns the march around out of fear that they are being drawn into a trap, again drawing sharp criticism from SNCC leadership. That night James Reeb is attacked by a white mob and beaten to death.

The actions in Selma prompt Johnson to put forward voting rights legislation. Before a joint session of Congress Johnson outlines his voting rights bill and demands its passage, praising the courage of the activists in Selma. King leads the third march to Montgomery, and the film closes on his speech on the steps of the State Capitol.

Despite King outpolling both Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa in contemporary favorability ratings (Appleton 11), DuVernay avoids creating an easy hagiography. King is revealed to be a complicated and flawed individual; his extramarital affairs nearly derail his activism and threaten to tear his family apart. He can be secretive and overly cautious, and with Coretta he can become jealous and suspicious. His flaws, which are often glossed over or omitted in accounts of his life, bring him down from the pedestal of myth, making him a more accessible figure.

King's reputation is not the only subject demythologized: the civil rights movement is as well. The movement is not presented as homogenous, but rather as a struggle taking place on multiple fronts with a variety of aligned and unaligned factions, each with different aims, tactics, and egos. The film highlights the tensions between these various factions of the civil rights movement and the way King is able to parlay those tensions to advance his goals. Although both SNCC and SCLC adhered to principles of non-violent resistance, they are shown to have profound strategic differences as they form an uneasy alliance in the Selma campaign. Far more important, however, is the way

DuVernay makes explicit the important role Malcolm X played in elevating King in the eyes of the establishment. During two separate conversations in the film—once with King and again later with J. Edgar Hoover—Johnson states that he wants King to continue leading the civil rights movement, “not one of these militant Malcolm X types.” The repetition of this point is significant: Johnson understands the volatility of the historical moment he finds himself in and knows it is in his best interest to ensure there is a strong, viable, non-violent option where aggrieved Black citizens could channel their energy. When faced with the possibility of dealing with armed Black revolutionaries, the white power structure will always choose to negotiate with and elevate the pacifist alternative. As I outlined in Chapter II, King understood this and used it to his advantage.

Selma also punctures the pervasive myth that King was passive and uncontroversial, relying on “his words and his voice to send a message for positive change.” King’s non-violence is not passive: it is a carefully-considered act of active resistance. The film portrays King as a strategically disruptive activist, who designed the Selma campaign to cause maximum discomfort to the white power establishment. In the meeting between the SCLC and SNCC leadership, he explains that while his broader objective is to raise white consciousness, there is one specific white consciousness he is prioritizing: that of the man in the White House. The pressure he applies on Johnson is unrelenting, and King is clearly aware of just how far he can push his ally and pushes him to that limit. Johnson squirms in their meetings together; his agitation prevents him from sitting still or remaining calm. He questions King’s tactics, angrily proclaiming the Selma to Montgomery march “too damn far and too damn dangerous.” The strategy is ultimately

effective, however, as King is able to pressure Johnson into fast tracking the Voting Rights Act.

This portrayal of Johnson as a grudging ally sparked controversy when the film was first released. The backlash was spearheaded by former Johnson aide Joseph Califano, who felt DuVernay's depiction of Johnson was inaccurate, unfair, and irresponsible. Writing in *The Washington Post*, he aimed to correct the record, painting a picture of a president who was an enthusiastic partner to King throughout his entire career. In Califano's telling, it was Johnson who suggested King focus his energies on voting rights and later urged him to lead a march to Montgomery. Selma, Califano declares, was "LBJ's idea." He provides links to audio recordings of phone conversations between Johnson and King as evidence of his claims and laments that the filmmakers had not consulted them, choosing instead to "fill the screen with falsehoods, immune from any responsibility to the dead." This criticism was picked up and amplified by many other news outlets, creating an aura of controversy around the film.

Califano's article, however, misrepresents both the film and the history. He claims the film portrays Johnson at odds with King and "only reluctantly behind" the Voting Rights Act, which is a misreading of the dynamics at play in the film: Johnson is unambiguously supportive of the Voting Rights Act but disagrees with King on the *timing* of the bill. Other details Califano offers are outright false: the transcript of the phone call which ostensibly proves that Johnson came up with the idea for Selma does nothing of the sort. Johnson interrupts and talks over King throughout the entire conversation, and although Califano claims Johnson "articulate[s] a strategy" for King during this conversation, members of the SCLC leadership were already in Selma at that

time and King was on his way to join them; they already had a strategy for Selma in place (Davidson Sorkin). King did not mention that he had a plan to address voting rights as he knew Johnson would disapprove of his tactics (Branch 14).

DuVernay is fair to Johnson, presenting him as complex character juggling competing priorities while maintaining an undeniable commitment to King's cause. Yet after watching the film in a theater full of Black teenagers, Maureen Dowd lamented that a "generation of young moviegoers would now see L.B.J.'s role in civil rights through DuVernay's lens. And that's a shame." Her complaint echoes Califano's: DuVernay, in essence, is not deferential enough. They were not alone: the fact that so many film critics and journalists uncritically repeated and amplified Califano's criticisms is telling, as there is ample evidence in the historical record to support DuVernay's depiction of Johnson. What the film lacks is a white hero to counterbalance the surfeit of white villains, and Johnson is the most likely candidate for that role. While there are certainly sympathetic white characters that serve as allies in the struggle—Minister James Reeb is perhaps the most notable example—the film is unapologetic in its portrayal of the movement as one led by Black men and women.

This portrayal challenges another myth of the civil rights era: that King led the charge hand in hand with white people and that the fight for civil rights was an achievement that Americans of all colors accomplished together (Joseph). Many of the films that depict this era of history—such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *The Long Walk Home* (1990), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), and *The Help* (2011)—were directed by white directors, written by white writers, and feature colorblind white saviors as protagonists. Even *Lee Daniel's The Butler*, helmed by a Black director, casts Johnson as

the white hero of civil rights who followed the dictates of his own conscience as he enacts the Voting Rights Act; he even earns a moment of tribute when Cecil reverently chooses his “LBJ for the USA” tie clip for his meeting with President Obama (fig. 25). *Selma* centers Black characters as the heroes of their own story, and, given the conventions of past civil rights era films, this has the potential to make white audiences uncomfortable. In what Kristen Warner deems “the plausible deniability of colorblindness” (49), critics were able to use the unsubstantiated charge that the film was historically inaccurate—that there was, in fact, a white hero—to displace their racial discomfort into a more socially-acceptable critique.

In addressing the myths surround Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement, DuVernay does more than simply offer a more accurate, Black-centered account of the Selma marches into our culture’s filmic historical memory. She is fighting the “propaganda of history,” reminding us, as W.E.B. Du Bois did a century ago, that history is not “for our pleasure and amusement, for inflating our national ego, [nor] giving us a false but pleasurable sense of accomplishment” (714). Arriving in theaters during the rise of Black Lives Matter, *Selma* is a reminder that our accomplishments are still a work in progress, and that “no citizen can call themselves blameless” in the face of persistent racial inequality.



Figure 20. The attempted lynching of Solomon.
From *12 Years a Slave*, 2013.



Figure 21. Scarlett O'Hara at Tara.
From *Gone With the Wind*, 1939.



Figure 22. Uncle Remus in cartoon Southern splendor.
From *Song of the South*, 1946.



Figure 23. Solomon's terrifying night in the "big house."
From *12 Years a Slave*, 2013.



Figure 24. An idyllic Sunday sermon, drowned out by Eliza's mourning.
From *12 Years a Slave*, 2013.



Figure 25. Cecil carefully selects his tie clip as he prepares to meet Barack Obama.
From *Lee Daniels' The Butler*, 2013.

Conclusion.

The Tale of Two Academy Award Seasons: The Year of the Black Film vs.

#OscarsSoWhite

12 Years a Slave and *Selma* experienced vastly different receptions with the voting members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, highlighting the ways race and representation have become problematic for the Academy in recent years. The Academy's membership skews old and white (Romano), and the films and actors it rewards often reveal as much about how the American film industry wants to be perceived as it does the quality of the films or performances themselves. The reactions to *12 Years a Slave*'s Oscar campaign and subsequent nominations and wins are illustrative in this regard. The film was nominated for nine Academy Awards—including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Leading Actor (Ejiofor), Best Supporting Actor (Fassbender), and Best Supporting Actress (Nyong'o)—and won Best Picture, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Adapted Screenplay. Shortly after the 2014 ceremony conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh voiced his opinion on the film's achievement, saying, "If it was the only thing that movie won, it was going to be Best Picture. There was no way. It didn't matter if it was good or bad. I haven't seen it. It was going to win. It had the magic word in the title: 'slave'" (qtd. in Murguia 242). The facile absurdity of this claim notwithstanding—no film with the word "slave" in the title has ever been nominated for an Oscar, let alone won one (Linkins)—Limbaugh's critique was not entirely without merit. Fox Searchlight, the film's production company, heavily promoted the film during

Oscar season with the simple tag line “It’s Time,” which some saw as a blatant attempt to game the competition by capitalizing on white guilt (Toto, “*12 Years*”). In fact, there’s evidence the promotion may have done just that. Some members of the Academy voted for the film despite never watching it; John Horn of the *Los Angeles Times* spoke with two Oscar voters who “privately admitted that they didn’t see *12 Years a Slave*, thinking it would be upsetting. But they said they voted for it anyway because, given the film’s social relevance, they felt obligated to do so.” This attitude toward the film was not a secret in the industry: Ellen DeGeneres, in her opening monologue as host of the Academy Awards, joked that the evening could only end one of two ways: “Possibility number one: *12 Years a Slave* wins Best Picture. Possibility number two: you’re all racists!” (qtd. in Murguia 242). The joke was met with a roar of knowing laughter.

One year later *Selma*, which many predicted would make a similarly strong showing during award season, would receive only two nominations: Best Picture and Best Original Song, winning the latter category. Many critics felt Oyelowo’s performance and DuVernay’s direction were locks for Oscar nominations (Walker), and their absences from their respective categories were all the more noticeable in light of the broader trends in the nominations that year. For the first time since 1998 all twenty acting nominations went to white actors and actresses. Some suspected that the lack of diversity in the nominees was a sign that the Academy had “racial fatigue” after the previous year, having already assuaged their “white guilt” with *12 Years a Slave*’s win (Hudlin), while others pointed out that the Academy’s nominees had historically never been a very diverse group to begin with (Berman). Still others, predictably, attempted to explain the issue away; Michael Caine equated the desire for diversity with a desire to elevate

mediocrity, saying: “In the end you can’t vote for an actor because he’s Black. You can’t say, ‘I’m going to vote for him, he’s not very good, but he’s Black, I’ll vote for him’” (qtd. in Gay, “Oscars”). In response to the all-white slate of acting nominees, activist April Reign took to Twitter to mock the lack of diversity (“#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair”), inadvertently launching a trending hashtag movement. #OscarsSoWhite took on a life of its own: people used the hashtag to discuss the importance of representation and the need for diversity both in front of and behind the camera, ultimately laying Hollywood’s broader representation problems at the Academy’s feet.

The issue was compounded when the Academy put forward yet another slate of twenty white acting nominees the following year despite numerous worthy performances by actors of color. The day the nominees were announced Academy President Boone Isaacs released a statement that she was “heartbroken and frustrated about the lack of inclusion,” and later that month she fast-tracked an initiative to diversify the Academy membership quickly and aggressively by recruiting new members and phasing out the voting rights of older voters no longer active in the industry (Schulman). While it might be unfair to call the forty consecutive acting nominations of white actors and actresses a “backlash” to *12 Years a Slave*’s Best Picture win given the frenzy it caused among the Academy’s leadership, those nominees were selected by a group that was ninety-four percent white, seventy-seven percent male, and eighty-six percent over the age of fifty—a demographic which tends to skew conservative (Horn et al.). And while Hollywood may have a liberal reputation, that liberalism is steeped in colorblind racial ideology, which has been universally embraced across the political spectrum and provides plausible deniability for the displaced racial anxieties of white people. It does not matter if any

voters harbored racial animus or intentionally excluded actors of color. The results were no different than if they had.

But as this thesis demonstrates, Hollywood, like America, is undergoing a shift in the way it views race, and the Academy is scrambling to keep pace. Black filmmakers are finding more space to tell their stories, and, more importantly, that work is seen as valuable and important. Audiences are welcoming broader perspectives, and films with more diverse casts are proving to be more profitable than those with less diverse casts (Nevins). Films that might have been “ghettoized” by studios and marketed solely to Black audiences are demonstrating they can be successful in wider release. And Black filmmakers continue to produce compelling work, with such films as *Creed* (2015), *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), *Fences* (2016), *Moonlight* (2016), *Get Out* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018) offering strong Black protagonists and Black perspectives while still appealing to wider audiences.¹

There have been other renaissances of mainstream Black film—most notably the blaxploitation films of the 1970s and the Black movie boom of the 1990s²—but these waves failed to develop any sustained momentum and eventually petered out. It remains to be seen if this current moment in Black popular cinema can persist, but I believe it is possible precisely because this Black film renaissance has emerged concurrently with the rise of Black Lives Matter. The sustained activism of Black Lives Matter, abetted by social media and the ubiquity of cellphone cameras, shows no sign of fading. As long as

¹ Ryan Coogler directed both *Creed* and the incredibly successful *Black Panther*, while Ava DuVernay directed *A Wrinkle in Time*, providing further evidence that commercial Hollywood productions are interested in elevating films and filmmakers willing to question the dominant paradigm.

² See Guerrero (chapters 3 and 5) and Bogle (chapters 8 and 10) for more on the Black film renaissances of the 1970s and 1990s.

the abuses of systemic racism can be easily documented and shared around the world with the click of a button, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag will continue to be relevant, and the movement will continue to challenge white supremacy and shift the cultural perceptions of Blackness. It will undoubtedly still be portrayed as divisive in some corners—there will always be resistance when white supremacy is exposed and the dominant social order is threatened—but the sustained efforts of the movement will continue to give voice to the Black experience and shift public attitudes regarding race and racism. And as more space opens up for other viewpoints and perspectives, so too will the market for more diverse stories.

Empathy here is key, and it is the link that joins Black Lives Matter to the current Black film resurgence. Film is an immersive experience that, when done well, generates empathy; Black Lives Matter reveals systemic racism in part by creating empathy for victims of racism and racial violence (Matthews). As the United States continues to grow more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture, empathy will become an important tool for dismantling white supremacy. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Barack Obama was unique among politicians in regularly speaking about the importance of empathy for a well-functioning society (Tettegah 176):

If we hope to meet the moral test of our times . . . then we need to talk more about the empathy deficit: the ability to put ourselves in somebody else's shoes, to see the world through somebody else's eyes. When we start thinking like this and choose the broaden the ambit of our concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers, it becomes harder not to act, not to help. It is time for a sense of empathy to infuse our politics in America. It is time to stop making excuses for inaction and to start loving thy neighbor as thyself. ("Empathy Deficit")

For the majority of American narrative film history Black characters were relegated to supporting roles in white protagonists' stories, making film's empathy-generating mechanisms unavailable to them. White protagonists experienced growth, overcame adversity, and became better people; Black characters, if they were lucky, might get to be the "Magical Negro" who used their folksy wisdom and insight to guide the white protagonist on their way. But Black Americans are not merely impotent victims of Hollywood's cultural construction: those representations have historically shifted and adapted in response to Black political and cultural self-definitions (Guerrero 3). As audiences demonstrate their desire for more diverse film protagonists with agency and accessible inner lives, the white monopoly on the empathy machine is broken. The financial and critical success of recent films like *Get Out* and *Black Panther* is demonstrating to the industry that Black stories can be profitable without relying on a white lens to get audiences invested and interested, while Black Lives Matter is demonstrating the importance of centering Black perspectives and voices. The convergence of these two movements—one commercial, one cultural—is making it clear that Black stories need to be told by Black storytellers. Ava DuVernay expressed this sentiment while discussing her approach to making *Selma*:

I didn't want to make *Mississippi Burning*. It had its place; it was among the first that dealt with African-American-centered history and the only way to get people into the theaters then was to have a 'white savior.' But we're past that point. If in 2014 we're still making 'white savior movies' then it's just lazy and unfortunate. We've grown up as a country and cinema should be able to reflect what's true. And what's true is that black people are the center of their own lives and should tell their own stories from their own perspectives. (King)

Film and television have become our culture's dominant form of storytelling. They are how we communicate to one another about who we are as a society: American values and

mythology are continually created, perpetuated, and occasionally reformulated on the screen. These two movements, unconnected but working in parallel, have the power to change the cultural narrative. Regardless of whether we are hearing accounts of Black encounters with systemic racism or watching Black superheroes defeating villains on the big screen, Black storytelling matters.

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Filmography

12 Years a Slave. Directed by Steve McQueen, performances by Chiwetel Ejiofor, Lupita Nyong’o, Michael Fassbender, and Benedict Cumberbatch, 20th Century Fox, 2014.

The Blind Side. Directed by John Lee Hancock, performances by Quinton Aaron, Sandra Bullock, and Tim McGraw, Warner Brothers, 2009.

Fruitvale Station. Directed by Ryan Coogler, performances by Michael B. Jordan, Octavia Spencer, and Melonie Diaz, Anchor Bay, 2014.

Lee Daniels’ The Butler. Directed by Lee Daniels, performances by Forest Whitaker, Oprah Winfrey, and David Oyelowo, Weinstein Company/Anchor Bay, 2014.

Selma. Directed by Ava DuVernay, performances by David Oyelowo and Tom Wilkinson, Paramount, 2014.